

The Renegade Enos

Witness to the American West

A novel

The Renegade Enos: Witness to the American West

Horse

The horse came back. The man did not.

Near the second rise the mare stopped and put her ears forward and the mule stopped behind her. Enos felt the lead ropes tighten across his palm. He stood in the wagon cut with water over his boot soles and listened.

There were no birds. The cart had fallen behind somewhere past the willow cutting and he could not hear it yet.

Then a sound came from the brush ahead, low and short.

A horse blowing.

“What is it?” Tomás said, coming up.

“Hold this.”

Enos put the mule rope into the boy’s hand and did not wait to see whether it had been taken properly.

The grass at the road edge was knee high and wet through in three steps. Under the oaks the brush grew thick, willow and poison oak and young laurel gone dark with rain. Stems had been broken at about the height of a man’s belt. Mud had been dragged onto leaves and scraped away again.

The gray stood twenty feet in with one rein down and the saddle hanging under his belly. He had been there long enough to stop moving and not long enough to be quiet. His flanks were going. A raw streak showed along one side where the cinch had worked him.

Enos approached slowly and off the shoulder. The gray rolled an eye but stayed where he was. Some horses ran from everything when they were frightened and some stopped deciding altogether.

This one had stopped deciding.

Enos talked to him. It did not much matter what. He used Spanish, then English, then a low run of sound that was neither.

He caught the bridle and lifted the saddle enough to see beneath it.

The rig was better than the animal carrying it.

Not merely newer. Better. A sound tree under good leather, the skirts properly worked, a breast strap that had been cut from hide worth cutting, stirrup irons heavy enough to last.

Whoever had put the rig together either knew horses or had enough money to hire somebody who did.

On the blanket there was a smear of dark down the near side, no wider than a hand, dried at the edges and tacky at the center.

Enos unbuckled the cinch and took the saddle off.

The gray shuddered once when the weight came away. Enos laid the saddle beneath an oak where the rain had not reached the ground and ran a hand along the horse's back. Nothing broken.

The bridle was good too. Plain, dark leather, no ornament, but the bit had been selected rather than merely purchased and the reins had enough weight in them to fall properly through a man's hands.

Enos left it on the horse.

The tracks came out of the brush toward the road and stopped in a churn of mud where something had happened and it was no longer possible to say exactly what. Boot marks, one set and maybe two, and a place where a knee had gone down.

Tomás had come up behind him, which he had been told not to do.

"Whose horse?"

"His own, at the moment."

"Was there a rider?"

Enos did not answer that.

"Go back and stand with the animals."

"I can come."

"Go back."

The boy went.

The drag mark ran under the oaks along the line of least brush, thirty feet and then forty, through a stand of young laurel where the ground was needles and old leaf and held almost nothing. Enos followed a smear on one stem, then another lower down, and found where a boot had pushed through rotten leaves.

Then the mark stopped.

Whatever had been dragging had either got where it was going or quit.

Baker lay on his side beneath the laurel with his knees drawn up.

He had been shot low and on the left and had been there since sometime in the night. The ground beneath him had gone dark in a wide place and had started drying at the edges. Both hands were down there holding on. His lip was bitten through.

His eyes moved.

Enos went down on one knee.

There was no piece of it that could be carried. A man opened like that did not sit a horse, and the fort was six hours by cart if a man had a cart.

Enos did not.

“How long have you been here.”

Baker’s mouth worked. Nothing came out of it that was a word.

“All right.”

Enos put a hand flat against the man’s side, felt what was happening underneath, and took the hand away.

Baker said something.

It might have been a name. It might have been water. It might have been the sound a body makes on its own account.

He wore a hide coat.

Enos noticed that properly now.

Smoke-tanned deerskin, darkened at the shoulders from weather and use, close sewn without fringe or beads or anything else put on to make a story out of it. The seams were doubled where they ought to be doubled. The cuffs had been turned before they wore through. The coat fit Baker through the shoulders and hung heavy enough to keep weather out.

It was the kind of thing a man bought after learning what a cheap coat cost.

Enos looked down at his own.

The Hudson’s Bay blanket coat had once been good too. Rain had opened the wool at the shoulders and smoke had gone into it so deeply that no weather could take it back out. The Company stripes still showed around the lower body, dulled by use but unmistakable.

They had seemed less important farther north.

The farther south he came, the more they looked like a description.

He looked again at Baker.

Good saddle. Good bridle. Good coat. Boots better than the country required.

Not a rich man.

A supplied one.

Baker opened his eyes wider. For a moment he looked at Enos's face.

Then his eyes went down.

To the coat.

The stripes.

Something changed in them.

Recognition perhaps.

Pain perhaps.

Enos had learned not to build much on what a dying man looked at.

The Company coat had four buttons left. It had started with six. One had been lost somewhere above the Columbia. Another had been replaced with a piece of antler drilled badly enough that it sat crooked when the coat was closed.

The lowest original button remained.

Enos took out his knife and worked the thread behind it until it parted. The button dropped into his palm, bone or horn, and a little of the old thread stayed through the shank.

He put it in his trouser pocket.

"You seem a resourceful type. I will do you the kindness needed here."

Baker watched Enos remove the striped coat.

"And you will do me the kindness of trading coats before it. A kindness between strangers is all a man can ask."

There was no answer.

Enos got Baker's hide coat off carefully. The man made one sound when the left shoulder came up, and Enos stopped until it passed. There was no reason to hurt a dying man for a sleeve.

The coat was heavier than it looked.

Enos put it on.

The shoulders were a little broad and the sleeves came nearly to his knuckles. It smelled of horse, woodsmoke, rain and a man he did not know.

It was warm.

He put the striped Company coat around Baker and worked one arm through, then the other. It did not fit as well as the hide coat had. That was no longer an important consideration.

Baker looked down at the stripes.

One hand came up slowly and caught the wool at the shoulder.

His fingers closed around it.

Enos waited.

After a while the hand loosened.

Then Enos did the thing that wanted doing.

It took longer than a man would think.

Baker's hand came up once during it and caught at the hide coat near Enos's shoulder. He held there for a while.

Then stopped holding.

Enos sat back on his heels afterward and let his breath come.

He remained there until Baker was no longer doing anything that might be mistaken for waiting.

Then he dragged him another twenty feet into the laurels, where the ground was wet, and covered him with brush. Not well. Enough that a man would have to be looking.

The striped coat showed once between two branches.

Enos covered that too.

He went back toward the gray, took the bridle off, and picked up the saddle.

When he came out of the laurels, the saddle was in one hand and the bridle in the other.

Tomás looked at the saddle.

Then at the smoke-tanned hide coat Enos was wearing.

"That is a fine jacket."

"Yes."

Tomás looked toward the laurels.

"Man died?"

"Days from it with no way to it."

Enos set the saddle beside the mule.

"A kindness between strangers is all you can hope for."

Tomás considered this and took the saddle when Enos handed it to him.

They tied it high across the mule's load. Enos coiled Baker's bridle and laid it over the saddle horn.

The gray remained under the oaks.

From the road behind them came the clink of harness.

A cart rounded the bend with two oxen in front of it. The man driving was square through the shoulders and red in the face and wore a hat too good for the work. Beside him rode a second man in a brown coat, beard cut short, boots better than his hands. The square man had a pistol lying across his thigh.

"Horse ours?" he called.

Enos looked toward the gray under the oaks.

"There is a brand on him."

"He was taken last night."

"By who?"

"Thieves."

The brown-coated man got down and went to the gray. The brand showed through the mud on the near hip, an S with a bar cut through it.

He looked at the horse, then the ground, then the brush. He took his time.

His eyes passed once across the saddle tied to Enos's mule.

They did not stop.

"Where is Baker?"

"I came around the rise and the horse was standing there. That is the whole of it."

The square man looked over Tomás, Enos, the mare and mule.

"You see anyone?"

"Two women cutting willow a mile back. Cattle on the flat ahead."

"Indian?"

Enos let the question sit until it had cooled some.

"No."

The brown-coated man crouched near the churned ground and put one hand beside the tracks without touching them.

"Somebody left the road here."

“Looks like it.”

“You read tracks?”

“I read horses.”

“That is not what I asked.”

Enos said nothing.

Far off beyond the oaks somebody was moving cattle and shouting at them in Spanish with no noticeable improvement.

The square man lifted the pistol from his thigh. Not much.

Enough.

Enos watched the barrel and did the arithmetic without meaning to. The wheel. The distance. Tomás behind him. The mare would run. The mule would plant. The brown-coated man was close enough to interfere if he wanted to, and there was no telling whether he wanted to.

The old ache beneath Enos’s ribs came awake and sat there. A stirrup had caught him there two winters before and the place had learned weather since.

“There was a man on this horse,” the square one said.

“You said Baker.”

“A hired man.”

“Then he is still hired.”

“Maybe you helped him off it.”

Tomás made a small sound behind him.

Enos looked toward the gray standing under the oak.

“If I had helped him off it, I would not have left the horse standing in the brush.”

Nobody said anything for a moment. Water came off the leaves in separate drops and struck the mud.

“We want the horse and no quarrel,” the brown-coated man said.

“Take the horse.”

The man brought the gray out.

“You will come to the fort tomorrow. There is work.”

“I have heard there is work.”

“What name do I give them?”

Enos took the mule rope back from Tomás.

“Eneas Walker?”

Tomás looked at him quickly.

That name had been useful once and then expensive and then dangerous. It had signed for whiskey and flour and horses and one other thing.

“No,” Enos said. “Enos.”

“Enos what?”

The mare pulled at the rope. She wanted water and the end of the day.

He could have given them anything. He had slept under names that fit badly and got up before the men who came to collect against them.

“Enos.”

The brown-coated man waited.

Nothing else came.

“How do you spell that?”

“However it is written.”

The square man made a sound through his nose and settled the pistol back across his thigh.

They turned the cart in the road, which took some doing. The brown-coated man tied the gray behind it.

Neither man asked about the saddle.

Neither asked about the bridle.

They went back the way they had come.

Tomás watched until the cart disappeared beyond the rise.

Then he looked at the saddle tied across the mule.

“What about the saddle?”

Enos started walking.

“They did not ask about the saddle.”

Tomás stood there another moment before following.

The hide coat was warm.

That bothered Enos more than it should have.

That morning he had woken to the sound of teeth.

The mare had got hold of a loose bit of iron in the manger and was working it against the rail. She had come in from the north pasture the evening before, sore under the pack mark and hot in the eye, and somebody had tied her short. Enos lay for a while beneath his blanket with one hand inside the striped coat and the damp wool against his face, listening to her go at the iron.

Outside the shed the yard was black except for the ash of the night's fire and a pale line behind the tules. Fog had come up off the low ground and everything was wet with it—the posts, the ropes, the leather hanging on the wall. There was no part of the yard where a man could put down a boot and not take some of the yard away with him.

He got up and went to the mare.

“Bon matin, reine.”

She put her ears back.

Enos set his palm against her neck and left it there. Her hide jumped once beneath his hand and then stopped. Steam came off her where the blanket had slipped. He could smell wet hair, old sweat, tule mud and the meal the vaqueros had boiled the night before and left to sour in the pot.

He found the sore place with his fingers. The pack saddle had been riding crooked, and had been riding crooked for more than a day.

He had told the boy to check it.

Enos let out a foot of rope.

Jacinto came from beneath the hide roof carrying a tin cup. He drank from it and made a face.

“The German's clerk wants the bay counted.”

“He can count her from the house.”

“He says she is not bay.”

Enos looked at the mare. In that light she could have been anything.

“What does he say she is?”

“Missing.”

Jacinto leaned against the rail.

“There is another one missing.”

“Horse or man?”

“Yes.”

He spat into the mud.

“Gray horse. Rider they call Baker. Went up the road after dark. No horse at the rail this morning and no Baker at the pot.”

“Then he is late.”

“His friends are the sort that would rather he was late.”

“Whose friends?”

“Men off the river. One in a brown coat. One with a pistol.”

Enos brushed mud from the mare’s flank.

Jacinto drank again and looked at him over the rim of the cup.

“He was asking yesterday.”

“Who?”

“Baker.”

Enos kept brushing.

“Asking what?”

“For a man come down from the Columbia.”

There were many men who had come down from the Columbia.

Jacinto looked at the stripes around Enos’s coat.

“This one apparently dresses better than most.”

Enos worked the brush through a dried patch of mud.

“What did you tell him?”

“That Frenchmen are everywhere and none of them pay what they owe.”

“That is responsible.”

“I thought so.”

“Did he ask a name?”

“Several.”

That could mean Baker had several.

It could mean Enos did.

Neither possibility improved the morning.

Jacinto pushed off the rail.

“You know him?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“Why?”

“Men you know are more expensive.”

He went back toward the cook fire.

The yard woke badly around them. A boy came through carrying wet wood and dropped a third of it. A woman crossed from the cookhouse with her shawl over her hair and said something that improved his handling. Two vaqueros brought a mule through the gate.

Enos worked.

Cinch, latigo, breast collar, crupper. The leather was cold and swollen from the night. He scraped mud from the buckle tongues with his thumbnail, went through the straps once, then went through them again.

The place belonged to a man who had one name in Spanish, another among the Americans, and a third when the creditors came up from Yerba Buena. It had belonged to other people before that.

The papers had improved since then until they no longer showed it.

The clerk came out when the light was full. He was thin and dressed too cleanly for the yard, and his boots stopped where the mud began. A book sat under one arm and a pencil in his hand. Before every number he swallowed, as though the figure had to be got down before it could be spoken.

“Eneas.”

Enos let it pass him once.

“Eneas.”

“If the horse answers first, charge her.”

The clerk did not take it.

“This mare is not on yesterday’s account.”

“She was not here yesterday.”

“From where?”

“North pasture.”

“Whose?”

Enos ran the brush down her flank. She leaned away and then leaned back when she understood that nothing was going to be done to her.

“Hers, mostly.”

The clerk wet the pencil on his tongue.

“Brand?”

Enos lifted the edge of the blanket and looked, though he knew already. The mark had been burned badly and long ago and had grown out with the hair. It might have been a cross. It might have been two letters.

“Uncertain.”

“Nothing is uncertain if a man looks.”

“Then look.”

The clerk did not cross the mud.

He wrote instead.

Enos watched the hand move. A mark in that book could make a horse belong to a man who had never touched it. It could make debt out of a week of rain.

“Put her down as bay,” the clerk said.

“You said she was missing.”

“Now she is found.”

The mare blew warm air against Enos’s striped sleeve.

“The Captain wants six sound animals by noon.”

“Which captain?”

“The river captain.”

“For what?”

“Supplies upriver.”

“Pay?”

“Credit.”

“With who?”

“The house.”

“The house eats better than I do.”

“The house risks more.”

Enos looked at the storehouse, the patched roof, the sacks going in one door and other sacks coming out.

“Do you refuse?”

“No.”

The clerk wrote paid in advance, which meant the opposite, and turned the page.

A cart entered the yard while they were talking, two oxen in front and a man walking beside one wheel with a whip he was not using. Behind it came three Indians carrying sacks on tumplines. One was old. One was a girl. The third was somewhere between and would not be there long.

The old man put his load down near the storehouse and stood with his hands hanging. His hair was cut ragged at the neck. His shirt had once been blue. A strip of red cloth was tied tight around one wrist, not for show.

“Take two pack saddles to the river shed,” the clerk said. “The bay and the mule with the white ear.”

He looked toward the old man.

“Take him if you want another hand.”

Enos did not answer immediately.

The old man had already carried two sacks inside and would carry the rest because there was a word for what he was doing and the word was agreement.

“He has carried enough.”

“He is entered for the morning.”

“Enter me twice.”

The clerk looked up.

“For the same pay?”

“For the same credit.”

Jacinto laughed from the rail.

“You will answer for both loads.”

“Yes.”

The old man looked toward Enos.

There was nothing in the look that wanted anything. It was only the way one man looks at another who has taken weight off him without making a business of it.

Then he looked away.

So did Enos.

The pack saddles had been stored wet. One had a stitch gone where the skirt met the tree, and Enos softened a length of rawhide in his mouth and put in a repair that would hold until dark and no farther.

The mule with the white ear did not want to be caught, which was reasonable given what catching had led to before. Enos followed it around the pen without hurrying until it had put itself against the rail.

“Come on.”

By the middle of the morning the sun had cut a hole through the fog. The fort was somewhere upriver behind the trees. A man could not see it from the yard, but he could see what it did: chalk marks on barrel heads, requisition slips, men saying authority in three languages to people who did not have any.

New Helvetia was one name for it.

The German’s place was another.

The people who had been on that water before any of it had their own way of saying where they were and were not asked to write it down.

At the river shed Enos loaded the mule first. It swelled its belly against the cinch and he waited, then tapped it behind the foreleg. The breath came out and he took up the strap.

A man in a brown coat entered the shed while he was working.

Enos kept his head down.

The man stopped when he saw the mare.

“That one off the north pasture?”

“She came in last night.”

“There was a gray came through here.”

“So I heard.”

“With a rider on him.”

Enos passed the rope through the hitch and pulled it down.

The brown-coated man looked at him longer than the mare required.

His eyes went to the stripes on the coat.

“You come down from the Columbia?”

“Many things do.”

“You Hudson’s Bay?”

“Not today.”

The man considered that.

“Baker was looking for somebody.”

“Then I hope he finds him.”

“There may be work.”

“There is always work.”

“For men who know horses.”

Enos did not give him anything back.

After a while the man said, “Be at the fort tomorrow,” and went out, stepping on the drier boards.

Enos tied the last diamond hitch and put both hands on it, leaned his weight into the rope and felt it hold.

At the shed door the old man with the red cloth stood aside to let the animals pass. He touched two fingers to his own shoulder where the tumpline had cut him, then pointed toward Enos’s shoulder and made a small lifting motion.

Enos nodded.

By then the sun was up enough that the stripes around the bottom of his coat showed clearly.

He looked at them once before taking the road.

The cart had fallen behind somewhere past the willow cutting.

Then the mare had stopped at the second rise.

Then the gray had blown from the laurels.

Now the cart carrying Baker’s employers had gone back the other way with the horse and without the saddle.

Enos and Tomás continued toward the river.

They did not hear the cart again.

Tomás waited longer than Enos expected him to.

“Did you know the tracks?”

“Some of them.”

“Was it Baker?”

“I do not know who Baker is.”

“That is not an answer.”

“No.”

Tomás looked at the hide coat but did not ask about it again.

The road climbed. From the top they could see the river country spread below, tules going silver where the wind crossed them, smoke standing in three places, roofs low among the trees. The fort sat farther up, square and pale, looking like it had been there longer than it had.

“Will you go tomorrow?” Tomás said.

Enos looked at the loads, the mud on his boots and the new saddle riding high across the mule. Baker’s bridle hung from the horn. The hide coat sat warm around his shoulders, already beginning to take his shape.

He put a hand into his trouser pocket and found the button.

He took it out.

Bone or horn. Old thread through the shank. Nothing worth carrying.

Tomás looked at it.

“From the coat?”

“Yes.”

“Why keep it?”

Enos turned it once between his fingers.

Down in the yard the clerk had written paid in advance and turned the page over. Somewhere farther north there was almost certainly another book with another balance in it, and perhaps a word in the margin beside his name.

He had not stayed to see which.

“I owe the house,” Enos said.

“You always owe somebody.”

“That is how they know where I am.”

He put the button back into his pocket.

At the next bend a dog came out from under a cart and barked at the mule. The mule stopped, lowered its head and looked at the dog until the dog reconsidered the entire arrangement and went back underneath.

Tomás laughed.

Enos did not, but it was near.

The mare pushed her nose against his shoulder. He rubbed her once between the eyes and they went down the grade toward the river, the loads creaking behind them and the light going flat and yellow across the water.

The new saddle moved slightly with the mule's stride.

The bridle knocked once against the horn and settled.

The hide coat was warmer than the striped one had been.

Enos put his hand against his pocket to make sure the button was still there.

It was.

Bastard

Washington City, April 1845

The letter had to go Thursday, which meant Benton had two days to make a man out of sentences.

Benton sat at the long table with maps of the West spread before him. He always worked facing west. He was the kind of man who kept the future in front of himself.

The papers lay over the maps, and when he pressed the quill into a sentence, the point carried through. His words left their indentations in the crooked lines of the country beneath.

Rain had come hard before daylight and passed, leaving Washington wet and already warming. The upper panes stood cracked, but the room still held the damp: wool, paper, coal smoke, and the muddy street below. Water fell from the eaves in diminishing drops. Whenever a wagon went past, its wheels cut the standing water with a long tearing sound.

Benton had taken off his coat.

Sir: In the matter of the command of the third expedition, I take the liberty—

He stopped and read it back.

Take the liberty went out in red.

He had used it once in '38 and heard it read back to him for a year.

I recommend without reservation—

Better.

Reservation was the word the department would look for, and finding it absent they would stop looking.

He kept three inks on the table and had for twenty years. Red for cuts. Blue for emphasis. Black for sentences that were not yet guilty but had been seen in bad company.

The system had come out of a clerk in the War Department who once restored a line Benton had killed, on the theory that a single stroke through a thing indicated hesitation. The line went out over Benton's name and was answered in the *Intelligencer* inside a week. After that he gave hesitation its own color.

Then the name.

Benton had spent enough years in government to know that the first map made of a man was his name.

He had written Frémont's a hundred times and it still cost him half a second. The accent came off the pen at an angle he disliked, and the *t* at the end had the look of something added, which it was. The department clerk who copied the letter would drop the accent because clerks always did, and the printed version would drop it again, and by the time the name reached anybody who mattered it would have flattened into something an American could pronounce without thinking.

Benton put the accent in anyway.

Not from affection.

It was in the man's signature, and a recommendation that spelled its subject differently than the subject spelled himself invited a question.

Questions were what good paper prevented.

He leaned over the page and wrote the next paragraph standing, which he did when he wanted a sentence to sound as though it had arrived already decided.

The officer in question has proven himself in two prior surveys under conditions of extremity. His observations have been confirmed by later parties. His conduct in the field has been without—

He stopped.

Without what.

Outside, somebody called at a horse in the street. The animal answered with iron on stone and moved on.

Benton looked down at the maps beneath the letter.

Mountain ranges crossed under the paper in fine dark hachures. Rivers bent toward seas most of the men who would read the recommendation had never seen. Roads existed in pencil where wagons had not yet gone. Blank country remained in broad pale spaces waiting for somebody in Washington to decide what belonged there.

He thought about how the paragraph would read in a year if Frémont did not come back.

It would read very well.

The letter was a modest thing while its subject remained alive to be measured against it and would become a considerable one afterward. The department would print it. The papers would print the department. Roads, harbors and passes could move west beneath the shelter of a

dead officer's reputation, and a dead officer had the great administrative virtue of never returning to object to what had been done with his name.

A living one came back wanting things.

A command.

A promotion.

Money owed.

Recognition.

Perhaps, eventually, a constituency of his own that had not been assembled by Thomas Hart Benton.

That required more care.

Benton wrote *without fault*.

He looked at it.

Too much weight in two words.

Red ink crossed it out.

Without occasion for censure.

That would hold.

The department could lean on it without falling through.

He sat again.

The wet air had begun to swell the edge of one map where it showed beyond the paper. Benton flattened it with the side of his hand and kept writing.

He was fond of the girl.

That was the difficulty.

Upstairs, Lily began crying. A chair moved in the adjoining room, then Jessie's steps crossed the floor and went toward the stairs. The crying changed when she reached the child, not stopping at once but losing its grievance by degrees.

Benton knew the sequence without looking up.

His daughter was in the house. His granddaughter was above him. The man he was preparing to send west stood scarcely ten feet away pretending not to wait for the decision that would take him there.

Benton put his palm over the recommendation and pressed the paper flat against the map.

Then he continued writing.

Across the room, Frémont had been standing at the sideboard for eleven minutes with the roster in his hand and had read the first six names four times.

He knew it was eleven minutes because there was a clock, and he had been watching it in the way a man watches something he is pretending not to need.

Benton was writing.

He had been writing since breakfast and had not said what he was writing, and Frémont had not asked because asking would make it a favor. Whatever Benton was doing for him was not going to be a favor if Frémont could help it.

The roster was for the party.

Names.

Terms.

What each man was owed.

He held the sheet over the western maps without noticing it.

Names laid across country they had not yet crossed.

Godey, Alexis. Hunter. Six hundred.

Owens, Richard. Same.

Carson, C. Same.

Carson could not write his own and had made a mark two expeditions running. The mark had entered three government documents and money had been paid against it, and nobody had ever raised the matter because Carson was known.

There were perhaps forty men in the country who could get by on being known.

Frémont had spent part of the winter trying to decide whether he was one of them.

He had not settled it.

Delaware, six. Names to be entered on hiring.

He looked at the line.

Six men, first entered as a number.

He did not like it and could not think what to put instead, so he left it.

Then his own name, at the top where the commanding officer's belonged.

Bvt. Capt. John Charles Frémont, Corps of Topographical Engineers.

There was a version of that name with two letters fewer in it.

It had appeared once in Richmond, in a newspaper, before he was born: his mother's husband setting down publicly what she had done and with whom, petitioning the legislature to release him from her, and the legislature declining.

Frémont had never seen the paper.

He had learned about it at fourteen from a boy at school who had learned it from his father, and the boy had not even been cruel. That had made it worse.

Cruelty might have belonged to the boy.

This belonged to everyone.

The legislature had declined.

That was the piece that stayed with him.

Not the affair.

Not even the husband.

A body of men had sat in a room and failed to pass a document. Because the document failed, his mother could not marry the man she loved. Because she could not marry him, John Charles Frémont had entered the world already carrying a judgment made by men who had never seen his mother's face.

He had put the accent on in his twenties and the *t* with it.

Frémont.

A small addition.

Ink fixing what a legislature had failed to.

Nobody had objected.

He had half expected somebody to.

"John."

He turned too quickly.

"Yes, sir."

Benton still had not looked up.

"Is Carson signing?"

"He makes his mark."

"Witness it yourself. Do not let a clerk do it."

“Yes, sir.”

That was all.

Benton went back to the page.

Frémont stood a moment longer in case there was more. There was not.

He crossed to the window.

The rain had left the city shining unpleasantly. Mud showed in the wheel ruts. Steam lifted faintly from the backs of two horses standing at a hitch rail where sun had finally reached them. A man carried his coat over one shoulder and stepped from stone to stone to avoid the deepest water.

Frémont made himself look down at the roster again.

The seventh name.

Then the eighth.

In the next room Jessie had the fair copy in front of her and a pen better than either of theirs because she had bought it herself and neither man had noticed.

The report had come back from the printer in sheets. Corrections were to be entered for the second run.

She had done the first run during winter.

Most of it had been done at a table in this house with John talking and stopping and putting his hand over his eyes because he could ride eight hundred miles without losing direction and could not sit down to write a paragraph without becoming lost somewhere inside the sentence.

After the third day Jessie stopped waiting for him to find one.

She began writing them herself and reading them back for his yes.

John always said yes.

That was not generosity.

By the fourth day he had become grateful in a way that embarrassed both of them, and they had agreed without agreeing never to name the arrangement.

She turned to sheet forty-one.

We found the stream much swollen and were obliged to construct a raft, in the doing of which two days were consumed.

She read it twice.

The paper was soft at one corner from the damp in the room.

Jessie drew a line through *in the doing of which two days were consumed* and wrote *which took two days*.

The change removed eight words and altered nothing a man in Congress would claim to notice.

That was why it mattered.

The report was going to ten thousand households and to men who would read four paragraphs and form an opinion of half a continent. They would not know why they trusted the prose. They would only know that it moved easily.

Words that moved easily traveled farther.

Sheet forty-three had *hostiles* where the field note had said *a party of Indians, mounted*.

Jessie stopped.

She remembered putting it there.

John had been tired that day. She had read the sentence aloud and he had said yes without opening his eyes.

Now *hostiles* sat in print.

One word.

Six letters more than *Indians* and an entire intention added.

Jessie put the point of the pen beside *hostiles*.

She held it there too long.

Ink gathered at the nib, fattened, and touched the paper beside the word.

A small black point appeared in the margin.

Jessie looked at it.

Then she took the blotting paper and pressed it down.

The mark lifted until almost nothing remained.

Hostiles remained exactly where it had been.

She would remember later that she had considered changing it.

That seemed important.

It would not appear anywhere.

From the study came the faint scrape of her father's chair.

He had been at the letter since breakfast, which meant it was the recommendation, which meant the recommendation was going, which meant John had the command and did not know it yet.

Her father would not tell him until Thursday.

Benton liked a man to remain uncertain for two days before being made.

Lily had quieted upstairs.

Jessie continued.

On the title page her husband's name was set in type large enough to carry across a room.

Below it, smaller, was the printer.

Below that, the order of the Senate.

The Senate had a name on it too, in a manner of speaking.

Jessie's appeared nowhere.

Her hand was in nearly every page.

Her name was in none of them.

She had spent some part of the winter thinking about that and eventually reached the end of the thought. There had been nothing useful beyond it, so she had not gone back.

The pen remained excellent.

It could carry a line through an entire sentence without returning to the ink. The pens in her father's study could not.

She had never told him.

The room had grown close now that the rain had passed. Jessie pushed the upper sash another inch. Damp air came through carrying mud, wet brick, horse and something green from a garden farther down the street.

In the study, Benton's quill scratched steadily.

His papers lay across maps of rivers, mountains and country that other men would ride months from now.

Jessie changed *owing to the fact that* to *because*.

She heard her father come out of the study.

His steps went down the hall and stopped where John stood.

Jessie waited.

Benton said nothing.

After a moment his steps continued toward the front of the house.

John remained by the window.

Jessie looked back at the page.

The ink was taking longer to dry in the damp.

She turned the sheet over carefully so it would not smear and went on.

The pen left a faint groove in the paper.

Delawares

Bent's Fort, August 1845

There were ninety-four men on the Arkansas and room in the country for about sixty.

Frémont did the arithmetic in the mornings before the heat, sitting on a barrel in the shade of the north wall with the roster across his knee and a second sheet for the ones he was keeping. The wall gave shade until nine and after that gave nothing. Below the fort the river ran shallow and brown over stones and there were men in it most of the day, washing or standing.

It was not difficult work. Most of them had made it easy by being ordinary.

He struck a teamster who had lamed two mules between Westport and here. He struck a man named Pool who had been drunk twice. He struck four hands who had come out for the wages and had said so, which was honest and disqualifying. He kept a Missourian with a bad eye because the man could shoe, and he kept Doby, who was slow but had never once put a thing down where it could not be found.

The ones he struck would go back with Abert down the Canadian, and there was a story about that which was true—the Canadian wanted surveying—and it would hold up in Washington, which was the more important of the two.

Talbot brought coffee at seven and took the marked sheet away at eight and made the fair copy in the shade of the storehouse.

“Sir. There is a question about the Delawares.”

Frémont had put six on the sheet in Washington in April, because six was what the last expedition had carried. Twelve had come up from the Missouri.

“What question.”

“Whether to carry them on the same sheet.”

Frémont looked at him.

“They draw the same pay,” Talbot said.

“Then the same sheet.”

Talbot went away and came back an hour later and said the same sheet would not do, because the twelve of them had come as twelve and were negotiating as twelve, and the sheet had a column for the day a man was hired and they had all been hired on the same day by somebody who was not present.

“Who hired them?”

“It is not written down.”

“And there are twelve.”

“There are twelve, sir.”

Frémont set the roster on the barrel head and looked out at the corral for a while.

Carson came in on the eleventh with Owens and four horses and a mule carrying nothing much.

Frémont saw him from the wall and did not go down at once, because there was a way to receive a man and a way to hurry at him, and he had spent four years learning which was which.

Carson had been on the Little Cimarron with a house and forty acres in corn. He had put the crop in that spring. Frémont knew that because Owens had told a man at the gate and the man had told the cook and the cook had told Talbot within the hour, which was how the fort worked.

“You sold it?”

“I sold my half.”

“To Owens?”

“Owens sold his too.” Carson pulled the saddle and set it on the rail. “There was nobody in it after us.”

“I am sorry for the crop.”

Carson looked at him a moment as though the sentence had come from farther off than it had.

“It was in the ground,” he said. “It will do whatever it does.”

Frémont had written the man’s name in Washington in April, on a letter he had spent two days making, and here in August the man had walked up the Arkansas and put his saddle on the rail. He thought about that longer than the occasion warranted. The paper had gone out ahead of everything and the country had answered it.

Carson asked about the animals first and the men second and never asked about the route at all, which Frémont noticed and put away for later.

They came across from the lower corral in the afternoon, four of them for the twelve.

Frémont had the table brought out and set in the shade with the roster and the inkstand on it, and afterward he understood that this had been a mistake, because a table put a side to a thing that had not needed sides.

Sagundai did the talking. He was not the largest of them and he did not stand in front. He stood at the near corner of the table with his hands loose and spoke English slowly, not because it was difficult but because he wanted each part of it received before he sent the next.

Powder and lead found by the expedition.

Frémont agreed.

Horses replaced if killed, not if lamed.

Frémont agreed to that too and Talbot wrote it.

Pay at the end and not in goods.

“That is customary,” Frémont said.

“It has not been customary.”

Frémont let that sit and then said the pay would be in coin at the end.

Sagundai nodded once. Then he said the last of it.

“We ride close to you.”

Frémont waited for the rest.

There was no rest. Sagundai stood with his hands loose and his eyes level and had finished.

“You will scout ahead,” Frémont said. “Naturally there will be times when—”

“Others scout ahead.” Sagundai moved one hand very slightly toward the corral where the rest of them were, and toward Carson at the rail beyond, and toward the country generally. “We ride close to you.”

The afternoon went on around the table. A man was hammering somewhere in the fort and had been for an hour. Down at the river somebody laughed.

Frémont understood what he was being offered and understood that it was better than what he had asked for and that he could not write it down in the words in which it had been given.

“Put them down as guides,” he said.

Talbot’s pen went to the column.

Carson had come up behind them at some point without being heard, which he did.

“Put them down as themselves first.”

Talbot stopped.

Frémont did not turn around. “Meaning.”

“Meaning their names go on before the work does. Then the work.” Carson came around into the shade. “You do it the other way and in six months you have twelve guides and no man remembers which.”

“That is a clerk’s objection.”

“Then it will please the clerks.”

Sagundai had not moved and was watching the two of them with an attention that gave nothing back. Behind him the third and fourth men had not spoken at all and did not appear to be waiting to.

“As themselves,” Frémont said.

Talbot turned the sheet and started again at the top.

Swanok gave his name once, and Talbot wrote *Swanock*, and Swanok looked at the page upside down for a moment and then away.

He was not tall enough to make fools of men nor small enough to invite correction. His hair had been cut close with a knife. The rifle he carried was clean where it mattered and ugly everywhere else. When Talbot asked him to say it again he said it the same way, at the same speed, and did not correct the spelling.

Afterward Frémont asked Carson about him at the horse line.

“He was in the Pawnee business.”

“Which business.”

“The Republican town.” Carson ran a hand down the near foreleg of a horse and stayed down there a while. “Forty-one, forty-two. He was in it.”

“In it.”

“He was the reason for a good deal of it.”

Frémont looked over at the corral. Swanok had a horse’s off hind foot up between his knees and was working at the frog with a knife, unhurried, the animal standing without being held.

“And you would keep him.”

“I would not want him behind me if I had a choice about it,” Carson said, letting the foreleg down. “I have no choice about it and I would rather he was behind me than somewhere else.”

“That is not an answer I can write.”

“No.”

Frémont stood there in the smell of the horse line, which was the same at Bent’s Fort as it had been at every place he had ever been, and thought about the sentence he would eventually write about the composition of the party, and how *twelve Delawares, experienced men, of great service throughout* would be true in every particular and would leave the Republican Pawnee town in Kansas where it was.

He was not troubled by that. It occurred to him that he ought to be, and the observation arrived without any feeling attached to it, and he went in to supper.

From the wall Frémont watched the lower corral in the last of the light.

The sutler had come out with a case of goods and had it open on a blanket, and there were men around it the way there were always men around it on the night before pay was discussed. Sagundai went past it without stopping. One of the younger Delawares did stop, and looked, and after a moment came away with nothing, and Frémont could not tell whether that had been the young man’s decision.

Sagundai stood by the rail with a horse’s lead in his hand and did not use it.

Swanok came over and stood with him. Neither of them said anything for a long while. Then one of them said something short, and the other did not answer, and that appeared to conclude it.

Frémont had asked Carson at supper whether they talked among themselves about the route.

“They talk.”

“About what?”

“I have not asked them.”

“You could ask.”

Carson had gone on eating for a moment. “I could,” he said.

They went out on the sixteenth.

Sixty men and something over two hundred horses and mules and a small herd of cattle that would not last the month, out from the fort in the early cool with the Arkansas on the left hand.

Frémont rode near the front where he could be seen and where the dust had not yet organized itself. The orders in his case said the headwaters of the Arkansas and the Red, and said nothing about the Sierra, and nothing at all about California, and he had read them enough times to be able to quote the part that did not close any doors.

Behind him the party sorted itself out as it went, the way a party does. The hunters got forward. The packers fell back. Talbot rode with the instruments and worried about them.

And somewhere off the right flank, not far and not close, in the broken ground where the willows came down toward the river, twelve men rode who were not scouting.

He did not look for them. He knew about where they were.

Knife

The bridle lay in the mud between them with the left cheekpiece broken and one buckle replaced with wire.

It was worth about a day's work to a man who needed one and nothing at all to anybody else. Childs had taken it off Tomás's shoulder because taking was free for a man that size, and the boy had held on, and between the taking and the holding it had gone into the mud, where it settled nothing.

Childs slapped him with a hand the size of a stove lid and the boy went down beside it, and the bridle stayed where it was.

Jacinto came off the rail.

He was not a fighting man and did not come like one. He came the way a man crosses a yard to take back a tool, reaching for the bridle with one hand and putting the other flat on Childs's chest, and that was as far as his plan went.

Childs hit him.

Jacinto went backward over a feed box and Childs went after him and it stopped being anything a man could call a fight. It was work. Childs stood over him and put the boot in with the patience of a man breaking ground.

Ribs.

Back.

Ribs again.

Jacinto got a hand down into his boot and came out with a knife.

Childs kicked him in the face.

The knife left his hand and went flat across the yard, and the mud had dried to plates in the sun since the rain quit, so it had a long way to travel and traveled all of it.

Nobody moved.

Enos came out of the cookhouse shade with half a bottle gone.

"Childs."

The name came out louder than he intended.

Childs looked up from Jacinto.

Enos looked at the man on the ground, then back at Childs.

“Looks like I am next.”

Childs left Jacinto where he lay and came on. He was slow the way a gate is slow, which is to say not slow enough if you are standing where it opens.

Enos waited until he was close enough and broke the bottle across his face.

It did less than he had hoped.

Childs rocked back, blood starting along one cheek, and Enos looked at the jagged neck still in his hand.

“You are one big son of a bitch.”

He threw it at Childs’s face and went after it.

Then there was no more thinking anywhere in it.

Childs swung.

Enos went in low and all at once, fingers and teeth and the crown of his head, and his weight was wrong for it and it did not matter, because Childs had never in his life fought anything that did not care what happened to it.

They went down.

Mud.

An elbow, and his ear came open.

Blood, loose between them.

Childs got a forearm across his throat and bore down, and Enos’s hand, flung out sideways in the mud, closed on the knife.

He did not decide anything.

The groin.

The ribs.

Under the arm.

Three, short and fast, the blade in to his fingers each time, and the forearm on his throat went loose and the whole size of the man stopped meaning anything at all.

Childs rolled off him and lay in the mud holding himself in two places with two hands and not enough hands.

Enos got up onto one knee.

His arm went back once more.

Tomás was at the corner of the storehouse, still down where the slap had put him, watching.

Enos stopped.

He stood the rest of the way up and stood there breathing, and the yard had gone quiet in the way yards do when they have decided to watch rather than help.

Childs lay with both hands clamped over himself and blood working through his fingers.

Jacinto had got himself against the feed box. One eye was already closing.

Nobody went to either of them.

Enos wiped the blade down the leg of his trousers, once each side, folded it and put it in his pocket.

It had rained three nights running and then stopped. Three weeks since the business on the road with the gray horse. Nobody had said anything more about it and the man in the brown coat had not come back down.

It was somewhere in there that Enos noticed the horses.

There were three of them stopped in the thoroughfare on the far side of the yard, and they had been there long enough that the men on them had already made up their minds about what they were watching. He did not know how long.

Long enough.

The animals were the first thing. They were better than anything at the landing and they were not tired in the way animals at the landing were tired.

One man had a field glass hanging off his saddle and had his hand on it without using it. One had a rifle laid across his thighs the way a man carries a rifle he has never had to think about. The third sat a little forward with his forearms crossed on the horn. He was hatless and his hair had been cut close with a knife, and the rifle slung across his back was clean in the places that mattered and ugly everywhere else. He watched the yard with an open and entirely unembarrassed interest, the way a man watches a play he has paid for.

Then the three riders turned their horses.

The hatless one said something to the man with the rifle. The man with the rifle shrugged, and they went on up toward the fort at a walk without hurrying, the way men ride when they have already got what they came down the road for.

They were not gone long.

Carson came back down from the fort with Swanok and Sagundai behind him.

Neither Delaware had a weapon in his hand.

That did not improve anything.

Carson stopped at the edge of the mud.

“Captain John C. Frémont requires a word with you.”

Enos looked toward Childs.

Then at Swanok.

Then Sagundai.

“Fair enough.”

He picked the bridle out of the mud and put it in Tomás’s hands.

“Take it where it was going.”

Enos went up the hill with Carson.

The Delawares came behind.

At the fort, Enos waited.

Nobody told him whether he was being held and he did not ask. Swanok went somewhere inside the wall. Sagundai disappeared without Enos seeing him leave. Carson went into the office.

The whiskey burned down to a headache he could work behind.

The man in the brown coat was across the yard by the storehouse with a tally board and did not look up, and Enos did not go over.

Then the mule made itself necessary.

It had backed into a stack of powder boxes inside the yard wall and stood in the middle of them with the composure of a bishop waiting for an apology. Two men were shouting at it. A third had the lead rope and was pulling from the wrong side, which taught the mule everything it needed to know about the third man.

Carson appeared in the office doorway.

He had found a hat.

“Move him.”

Enos looked at Carson.

Carson looked at the mule.

That was sufficient.

Enos went to the animal's head and put two fingers on the white ear and said something to it that nobody else in the yard could hear. Then he took a handful of loose flour out of a split sack, let the animal have the smell of it, and stepped away sideways.

The mule came after the flour and left the powder boxes standing where they were.

The men who had been shouting looked cheated.

Carson gave the smallest nod there was.

"You do that with men?"

"Men want more flour."

Something happened at the corner of Carson's mouth that did not develop into anything.

He went back inside.

The ink would not dry.

It sat black and shining on the requisition page while the river came through the walls and put a wet hand on the whole building. The table was two planks over barrels. One barrel had an old mark burned into it in German and a newer one in English painted over the top, and nobody had bothered to take the first one off.

Frémont wrote anyway.

He had his coat buttoned in a room where nobody else's was, and he held the page at an angle to the lantern and read it back to himself before he let it go.

Supplies obtained at New Helvetia under necessary authority.

Talbot sat with the second book open and his pencil ready and the patience of a man paid by the day.

Carson came in from the doorway.

"Bay mare is serviceable. Mule is sound. Man who brought them is filthy, half drunk, and cut open at the ear."

Frémont looked up.

"Name?"

"Enos. Been north. There is old Hudson's Bay on him somewhere. Does not wear it anymore."

Talbot's pencil went to the page and waited there.

Frémont looked past him into the yard.

Enos stood with the mule's rope slack in one hand, not looking in. Mud had dried black on one knee. Blood had dried along the side of his head.

"Do not enter him yet."

Talbot lifted the pencil off the page and looked at Frémont.

"He looks like a problem. Let us see what use there is in him before he becomes ours."

Frémont looked toward the doorway.

"Bring him in."

Carson did.

Enos came through with dried blood along one ear and stopped where the floor changed from dirt to plank.

He looked at Frémont.

Then Talbot.

Then the open book.

Frémont looked him over.

"Looks to me as though you may have killed a man."

"He is alive now. Fever takes him after, that is not murder. That is divine intervention on circumstance."

Frémont looked at Carson.

Carson looked at Enos, then back at Frémont.

"He was mostly alive when we came up."

The room sat quiet for a long moment.

Talbot's pencil remained above the page. Carson stood near the doorway. Enos stood with the blood dried along one ear and mud black on his knee, and the men took the measure of one another.

Frémont put one hand on the table.

"As an officer of the United States, the people here will look to me for some assurance in this matter."

Enos waited.

"I can tell them a stranger came to town, cut one of their drovers and walked away."

Frémont looked over his shoulder at Carson.

He waited long enough for Enos to understand the other half of it.

Then he looked back.

“Or I can tell them a man attached to my party settled a quarrel before we moved.”

Enos looked at him.

“I am not attached to your party.”

“As of yet, you are not.”

Enos looked at Talbot’s open book.

Frémont continued.

“Are you familiar with Oregon and the country north of here?”

“I have moved through it.”

“Then I should like you to join us as far as French Camp and consider this matter resolved.”

Enos looked at him for a moment.

“French Camp.”

Talbot lowered the pencil to the page.

In the open line he wrote Enos.

He paused at the space after it, then moved on.

Jacinto hung the bridles under the shed roof in the afternoon and took his time about it, which was how he did things when he expected company, and because his ribs that afternoon permitted no other speed.

The Frenchman came down before the light went.

He stood in out of the sun with his hat off and his hair stuck to his forehead and looked at the pegs on the wall as though he had come about tack.

“The one in the yard this morning,” he said. “With the knife.”

“He did not have the knife.”

“He had it after.”

Jacinto set the last bridle on its peg and squared it.

“That is Enos.”

“Enos what?”

“He likes to be known.” Jacinto took his time. “Not too well.”

The Frenchman waited for the rest of it.

“He is careful,” Jacinto said.

That was wrong and he knew it while he was saying it, but the man was French and paying attention, and Jacinto let the word stand.

The Frenchman chuckled.

“He carefully opened a man three ways in the middle of the yard.”

“Sí.”

The Frenchman put his hat back on.

He looked out at the yard where the blood had already gone into the ground and become part of the general condition of the place.

“Basil Lajeunesse,” he said.

Jacinto nodded and did not offer his own.

“He speaks French, your careful man?”

“Enough to say he does not.”

Lajeunesse laughed at that, a real one, too loud for the shed, and went out into the light still laughing, and Jacinto watched him go and had the brief and unwelcome feeling of a man who has sold something without being told the price.

They went out through the gate in the last of the afternoon.

The mule walked beside Enos because it had better sense than several of the men who were mounted.

Tomás was at the gate.

“Bring the cart on in the morning,” Enos said. “As far as the road lets you.”

The boy lifted one hand.

Enos had both of his full and did not lift either.

French

French Camp was not French and not a camp, except by the standards of men who had slept in worse arrangements.

It stood low in the damp country: sheds, hide roofs, brush fences, wagons, picket ropes, cooking smoke, and men who spoke three languages badly before breakfast and four after whiskey. Hoofprints held water. Ash lay in silver islands where the night's fires had gone down. A dog with one torn ear came out from under a cart, looked at the Americans, and went back under the cart.

Enos came in beside the pack string and smelled coffee, wet leather, old fish, horse piss, and frying fat. He had been cold since before daylight and the smell of the fat went into him like a kind word.

"French Camp," said Tomás, who had found an excuse to come as far as the road allowed.

"Which one is French?"

Tomás looked around. Two Canadians mending a bridle. A Mexican boy carrying wood. Three Americans arguing over a kettle. One Delaware cleaning his knife on grass. A red-bearded man asleep against a barrel.

"The kettle," Tomás said.

Enos laughed once and the split beside his ear pulled wet again, and he decided not to do it again soon.

The place took Frémont's party in without giving anything up to it. Men came to look at the horses. Women looked at the men looking at the horses. A child went to the white-eared mule with a handful of grass held out flat and got it accepted.

Carson swung down near the far shed and men gave him room, though most of them could not have said what for.

Swanok stayed back with his horse. Enos knew him then only as a shape off the American line, a man Carson made space for and other men went around.

Frémont came in after Carson, not first and not last. His coat was damp at the collar and the damp made it look poorer than it was. He looked at the sheds, the picket ropes, the men, the smoke, and then at the road out again. Enos had watched a good many men look at a place to

find out whether they could sleep in it. This one was looking at it for what it could be made to do.

No order came. Men began moving before words arrived. Pack ropes loosened. Saddles came off. Horses blew and dropped their heads. One man found a dry place under an eave and was removed from it by a larger man with a frying pan.

A woman with flour on her forearm gave Enos coffee in a cracked cup.

“You with them?”

“Temporarily.”

“That is how fevers start.”

“I have had worse.”

“Then you should recognize it.”

She went back to the pan. The fat hissed. Somebody near the fire told a long story about a mule that had served two governments and respected neither, and it went over well because everybody there had known the mule or one like it.

For an hour the camp held. Warmth, smoke, bad jokes, food, rain, horses, and the ordinary mercy of people being tired in the same place.

By noon the Americans had become the entertainment.

French Camp would enjoy a stranger so long as he did not ask to be admired before he had paid for anything. Men gathered at the cook fire to watch Talbot try to buy onions in Spanish. He came away with onions, a wooden spoon, and a suggestion concerning his mother, and understood one of the three. The women waited until he had gone to laugh.

Enos sat on an overturned keg mending a girth strap. The mule stood behind him breathing hay dust into his collar. Carson came by with a tin cup and stopped near the animal.

“He yours?”

“Not by his account.”

“Sound animal.”

“Do not say so where he can hear it.”

Carson drank. “You know this place.”

“I know where the coffee is weak and where the mud is deep.”

“That is most of soldiering.”

It was the longest thing Carson had said to him and Enos did not trust the occasion.

Across the yard Frémont was talking to two men near a shed. One had a scarred cheek and a red sash. The other kept shaking his head. Talbot had the notebook out, and once the notebook was out the men in the yard began remembering carefully or not at all.

“What do they want?” Enos asked.

Carson did not look over. “Same as this morning. Same as tomorrow.”

“That is a broad appetite.”

“It has flags on it.”

Near the brush line Swanok stood talking to nobody. A child came up to him with half a tortilla held out in both hands. He looked at the child, then at the tortilla, and took it gravely. The child ran off delighted to have survived it.

“He eats?” Enos said.

“When necessary.”

“Dangerous habit.”

Carson looked at him. “You talk like a man who leaves doors open behind him.”

“I talk like a man who has had to use windows.”

Carson smiled at that, small and quick, and then Frémont called him and he set the cup on the keg and crossed the yard. Enos watched the two of them. Frémont’s hand moved once toward the river. Carson’s did not move at all. Talbot wrote.

Lajeunesse took Carson’s place on the keg without being invited and put his cards face down under his boot heel, which was how he protected an investment.

“You were looking at him.”

“At which.”

“The one with the tortilla.” He tipped his head toward the brush line. “Everybody looks at that one. It is the great entertainment of this expedition.”

“He was hungry.”

“He was polite. That is what frightens people.” Lajeunesse found his tobacco and discovered it was Tomás’s tobacco. “In Kansas he burned a town.”

“Which town.”

“Pawnee. A big one. The Republican, they call it.”

Tomás looked up. “He burned it?”

“He was in it.”

“That is not the same.”

“No,” Lajeunesse agreed, and did not correct himself, and put the tobacco in his cheek. Enos went on with the girth strap.

“You have not asked,” Lajeunesse said.

“Asked what.”

“Whether it is true.”

“It does not change what I do tomorrow.”

Lajeunesse considered that with what appeared to be real pleasure. “There. That is the first useful thing you have said today.”

Tomás dealt badly. Nobody complained.

“The other one is worse,” Lajeunesse said.

“Which other one.”

“The one nobody talks about.” He nodded across the yard, where Sagundai stood with two of the pack animals doing nothing much. “This morning I walked past him three times. Three. The third time he said good morning to me and I jumped like a girl.”

“You did,” Tomás said.

“I did. And I have been shot at.”

“You have been shot at badly,” said the Canadian.

“By the best. And I did not jump.”

Enos looked over at Sagundai without appearing to. The man had one hand on a mule’s neck and was watching the road out of camp, and there was nothing on the road out of camp.

“That one I would not want to owe money to,” Enos said.

“You would not want to owe him a good morning.” Lajeunesse spat. “The other one, the tortilla one, him I understand. He is a hard man and he has decided about it. He will do a thing and then stand near the horses and let you think about it. That is honest work.”

“And this one?”

“This one has not decided anything. He is waiting to see what is required.”

Lajeunesse picked up his cards, looked at them, and put them down again in disgust.

Tomás laid down a card and won something for the first time all afternoon and looked so pleased that the Canadian let him keep it.

Enos pulled the girth strap tight against his knee and tested it.

“You are not worried,” Lajeunesse said.

“About them?”

“About any of it.”

“I am going as far as the river.”

Lajeunesse laughed loud enough that a man at the next fire turned around, and clapped him on the shoulder hard enough to hurt.

“Mon beau,” he said. “So am I.”

The warmth stayed in the camp through the afternoon but it had thinned. Men were still laughing. Fat still hissed. The American party had begun putting lines through the place without string or chalk.

The woman with the flour on her arm came by and saw Enos watching it.

“They leave soon?”

“They left once already.”

“Men who come back are worse.”

“Why?”

“First time they ask. Second time they remember that asking did not kill them.”

She went on with a pan in each hand. Enos looked at the river road. Smoke lay low beyond the trees, or dust did.

California

One look at Neal's house and you knew he had left the second expedition a blacksmith, because he surely had not become a carpenter. The roof argued with itself about where the wall ended, and the only thing in the room more crooked than the doorway was Talbot's ledger.

Frémont composed himself over the page.

Carson chewed loudly on a strip of dried meat.

Frémont waited.

Carson chewed.

"Mr. Carson."

The chewing stopped.

Frémont dipped the pen.

Sacramento River, latitude 40°.

April 1, 1846.

He considered how much of California Jessie needed.

All of it, eventually.

Not tonight.

The Spaniards are somewhat rude and inhospitable.

That was restrained.

He had been restrained below. More than Castro deserved and considerably more than Castro would say. He had stood on the mountain under the flag with enough rifles to make removing him expensive, and he had come away without giving the Mexican government the thing it seemed determined to have from him.

Of course I did not dare to compromise the United States.

That was the difficulty. A man could be insulted privately. An officer of the United States had to consider the paperwork afterward.

He continued.

The room had gone quiet except for the point of Talbot's pencil moving occasionally over the ledger.

Then came a small wet sound from the other side of the room.

Frémont kept writing.

Carson had his knife at his mouth. The point was between two teeth and he worked it there with the concentration of a surgeon.

Frémont looked back to the page.

He ought to forgive the cutthroat his manners.

Carson had spent too much of his life in country where manners were another thing a man had to carry. There were men who became less useful the farther they traveled from a road. Carson improved. Take away the houses, fences, bridges, milestones, inns, signs, clocks, and finally the road itself, and something in him settled.

Frémont had seen him look across country neither of them knew and choose correctly.

Water where there appeared to be none.

A crossing where the river appeared to refuse one.

Tracks that were not tracks until Carson showed them to you.

Weather while it was still a discoloration in the sky.

Men following them before there was any reason to turn around.

The eastern papers had made Carson into something already. Scout. Trapper. Mountain man. Frémont had helped them do it and did not altogether regret the work. There were worse figures for a young country to make heroes of than a man who could be set down alone beyond the last settlement and remain entirely himself.

Perhaps more himself.

Frémont had made his reputation describing the wilderness.

Carson seemed to have been made by it.

The knife came free.

Carson sucked loudly at the meat he had loosened.

Frémont looked over.

Carson put the knife back between his teeth.

“Kit.”

Carson looked at him without removing it.

“Captain.”

The room held.

Talbot’s pencil stopped but he did not raise his head.

Frémont kept his eyes on Carson.

Carson kept his on Frémont.

There was nothing insolent in his face that could be named and nothing obedient in it either. The knife remained where it was. Carson appeared prepared to sit that way until one of them died of age.

Frémont said nothing.

Neither did Carson.

After a while Carson pulled the knife from his teeth and examined the point.

“You know, Captain. Samuel Neal said he could raise a hundred mean men in a week. Maybe more.”

Frémont’s expression changed.

“A hundred.”

“That is what he said.”

“Americans?”

“Mostly.”

Talbot’s pencil touched the ledger.

Frémont saw it.

“Do not enter that.”

The pencil came up.

Carson wiped the knife on his trouser leg.

“Was there any indication of an Indian threat?” Frémont said.

“Neal said it could be as many as a thousand.”

“Who saw them?”

“Neal did not say.”

Frémont waited.

Carson folded the knife.

“Neal is scared. That is what I know.”

Frémont looked at him.

“What did he say about them?”

“An Indian let loose, he is of all animals the most savage.”

Talbot looked up.

“Well said, Mr. Carson.”

Carson glanced at him.

“I said what I meant.”

Frémont had gone still.

“Most savage,” he said.

Carson looked at him.

Frémont turned the phrase over.

“An Indian let loose.”

He looked toward the page.

“He has an imagination for devilment.”

Talbot watched him now.

Frémont continued.

“An imagination for devilment that seems peculiar to him.”

Carson said nothing.

“And a singular delight—”

He stopped.

Talbot waited.

“In inflicting suffering,” Frémont said.

“Yes,” Talbot said. “That is better.”

Carson looked from Talbot to Frémont.

“You talking about these California Indians or Swanok and Sagundai?”

Talbot’s mouth moved.

Frémont looked at Carson.

Carson was serious enough that it was difficult to know whether he had intended the joke.

“Swanok will be glad to know what animal he is,” he said.

“That will do.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Frémont returned to the letter.

Carson settled against the wall.

He could not see what Frémont wrote.

Talbot could.

Although it was in my power to increase my party by many Americans—

The pen stopped after *Americans*.

A hundred mean men in a week.

Maybe more.

Frémont continued.

I refrained from committing a solitary act of hostility.

Talbot looked at the sentence.

Then at Carson.

Carson was putting the knife away.

Frémont continued writing.

For his own part he had become disgusted with everything belonging to the Mexicans. There would be no southern return. He meant to go north through the country her father knew, examine the pass, complete the reconnaissance, and then turn east for home.

Her father knew the pass.

That was sufficient.

Benton understood what happened when a pass became a road.

Shasta stood north of them, white above the valley and separate enough from the lower country to seem put there for an instrument.

Frémont had been using it for days.

A mountain like that gave a man more than beauty. It held. Rivers disappeared behind timber. Roads lost themselves in mud. Valleys bent out of sight. Shasta remained, and from it the lesser country could be corrected.

He had made a profession of such corrections.

Latitude. Bearing. Distance. Water. Grade.

Fix one point and the others began to arrange themselves around it.

At a distance the country beneath the mountain appeared almost empty. Frémont knew it was not. They had ridden through ranches and settlements, Indian villages and river camps, cattle, fields, men living in arrangements older than any line he carried in his case.

But distance improved arrangement.

Smoke became a mark.

A settlement became a point.

A pass became a line through higher ground.

Shasta remained above all of it.

He imagined the line continuing north.

Once a pass was known, a wagon could be told where to go.

A family could too.

Frémont let the pen rest.

He had been thinking about land since the coast.

That part he had not written.

San José had tempted him. So had the country toward the sea. Good earth, water, timber, climate. A man could place a house in his mind surprisingly quickly once he allowed himself to begin.

His mother would like the Pacific.

He had decided that before he had decided anything else.

Jessie would like parts of it too.

The thought had a domestic quality that made the politics of it seem almost rude. A house did not look like conquest. Neither did an orchard. A field under fence. Children near water. A road coming over the mountain carrying another family.

None of those things looked like an army.

Carson said, "You still having Larkin buy up California for you?"

Frémont did not look around.

"I have asked Mr. Larkin to make inquiries."

"Inquiries. You paying for that with vouchers too?"

Talbot looked up sharply and Frémont turned in the chair.

"My private affairs are not expedition business."

Carson nodded toward Talbot. "I would not expect them to be. That ledger is about as crooked as Neal's doorway."

Talbot looked at him for a moment, but said nothing.

Frémont broke the tension. "Larkin has been asked to look at property. Nothing more."

"For your mother."

"Yes."

Carson nodded.

"Must be a hell of a woman."

Frémont's face changed enough that Carson changed the subject.

"Neal got his land. Came out here shoeing your horses. Now he has cattle and a house."

"I know."

All three men looked, despite themselves, at the doorway.

Carson said, "Mostly a house."

Talbot smiled.

Frémont did not.

"Neal obtained his property legally."

"Mexican grant?" Carson leaned his head back against the wall. "These Mexicans are rude and inhospitable right up until one of them sells you something."

Frémont looked at him.

Carson could not know what was written on the page.

That made the jab sting.

"I am not discussing Mexico with you."

"Did not know we were."

Frémont turned back to the letter.

Outside, Neal's forge had gone cold. The smell of it remained in the room: charcoal and iron, with the damp coming through whatever portions of the wall Neal had believed did not require finishing. Frémont looked down at the map beside the page. Neal had crossed the mountains as his blacksmith and stayed, now he owned part of California.

That fact seemed uncomplicated when considered alone. There were others like him. More at New Helvetia. More below. Men who had crossed with wagons, men who had come by ship, men who had married into the country, men who had acquired grants from the Mexican government while remaining thoroughly American in every matter that seemed important to them.

More were coming.

The trail behind Frémont did not close when he passed over it, that was Benton's point.

Talbot reopened the ledger.

"What precisely did Neal say about the settlers?"

Carson rubbed a thumb along his jaw.

"They are scared. Worried Mexico will take their land, worried Indians will kill them."

“Are they leaving?”

“There is talk. Sutter’s. South. Oregon. Anywhere they think they can sleep.”

“And Neal.”

“Neal is not leaving.” Carson smiled a little. “Built the house. He has to stay now.”

Frémont ignored it.

“Why did he tell you about the hundred men.”

Carson looked at him.

“Because I asked.”

“Why.”

“Because I would rather have them and not need them than need them and have them on their way to Sutter’s.”

Talbot’s eyes moved between them.

Frémont hesitated.

“We cannot raise a force of American settlers.”

Carson said nothing.

Frémont looked at Talbot.

“Men who attach themselves to the expedition can be entered with the Sutter’s men.”

Talbot’s pencil waited.

“As what, sir?”

“Useful.”

Carson looked at Frémont.

“How many?”

“As many as are useful.”

Frémont looked back to Carson.

“What number are they giving for the Indians?”

Carson rubbed his jaw.

“Depends who is telling it. Some say a thousand. Some more.”

“And you?”

“I have not seen them.”

Frémont looked down at the map.

“A hundred Americans?”

“I have seen those.”

The northern Sacramento ran toward country that became less certain the farther the ink went. Beyond it lay the lake country. Beyond that Oregon. Somewhere through it was the pass Benton wanted examined. A route that could be measured in grades, water, grass, distance.

A family measured it differently.

Frémont put one finger on the map.

“If there is a genuine threat to the settlements, I want to know. Not stories. Not a thousand because one man saw smoke.”

Carson nodded.

Frémont sat forward.

“Kit. If there is a village, observe it.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Nothing else.”

Carson picked up the rifle.

“Of course.”

The ease of it bothered Frémont.

Carson opened Neal’s crooked door and went to do the work that was left to do.

Talbot watched him go. Then he looked at the letter.

Frémont caught the glance.

“Talbot?”

“Nothing, sir.”

Talbot looked back to the ledger.

Frémont followed his glance to the sentence.

Although it was in my power to increase my party by many Americans—

Outside, Carson called for a horse.

Frémont read the line once more.

Then folded the letter to Jessie.

Wintu

The Sacramento did not announce itself.

It came low and brown through the trees, not wide as a promise and not narrow enough to be useful. The banks were cut hard in places and soft in others, with roots hanging out like black fingers. Willows crowded the turns. Cottonwoods stood behind them with pale trunks and leaves that moved though there was hardly wind.

They came to it in bad order. Men who had laughed at French Camp rode with their mouths closed now. The jokes had run out somewhere in the wet grass.

The horses knew it first. They lifted their heads and stepped high. The white-eared mule stopped and would not move until Enos spoke to it softly and lied about the intelligence of men.

Frémont halted them above the river where the ground fell away in a broken shelf. Below, the water bent around a gravel bar. Beyond the bar was timber. Beyond the timber, smoke stood thinly, or else dust caught the light. No one said which.

Carson rode the line once with his rifle across his thighs while Swanok worked ahead through the willows, appearing where the shade broke and disappearing again before Enos could decide whether he had stopped. Pryor went from rifle to rifle checking caps, and Doby followed with the cartridge box, filling what men had spent or spoiled on the road.

Enos checked his own powder. It was dry enough to fire and wet enough not to when he needed it.

That was as well as the weather permitted, and an excuse he knew had buried better men.

Frémont came down last with Talbot and two armed men. His face had been arranged for necessity. It was a good arrangement.

“No firing unless ordered,” Carson said.

The order traveled down the line and became less serviceable each time it changed hands. By the time it reached the men with the horses it meant no firing, firing if fired upon, firing if certain, firing if Indians rose from the brush, and one version in which nobody knew who had said what.

Enos checked his rifle because the others checked theirs.

He had one swallow of whiskey in his canteen and knew it by weight. He did not drink it. That seemed like discipline. It also seemed like stupidity. Across the river a dog barked. Every man heard it. Every man pretended the sound had not entered him.

Swanok reappeared near Carson and said something low. Carson listened, then looked at Frémont. Frémont lifted his field glass, though there was nothing a glass could improve. Talbot put his ledger beneath a horse blanket where the damp could not get at it and opened another cartridge box.

“There,” Frémont said.

He did not shout. The word did not need help.

The line broke.

It went all at once, the way a rope goes, and there was no order in it that Enos could hear afterward and no moment he could point to as the beginning. Men put their heels in. The ground came apart under forty horses. Somebody’s hat went by him in the air.

The village was still mostly hidden by willows and morning smoke. He saw a rack, a mat roof, a flash of water, a person crossing between two poles with something in both hands.

Then the person was gone.

He thought of French Camp. Fat hissing in a pan. A child giving Swanok half a tortilla.

And his hands did not move.

He was not aware of having decided anything. The horse under him had gathered with the rest and then had not been asked, and it stood now on the lip of the shelf turning half a circle and coming back, and Enos sat on it with the reins in his left hand and the rifle across his thigh and did nothing at all.

The others were already down the bank.

Carson was four horse lengths ahead when he looked back.

He did not shout. He turned his animal without hurry and came back up the slope at a walk, which took longer than a gallop would have and was worse for it. He stopped an arm’s length off and drew the pistol from his belt and laid it across the front of his saddle with the muzzle toward Enos’s chest.

His face had nothing in it. That was the part Enos remembered afterward with the most clarity—not the pistol, which was only a pistol, but that there was no anger in the man and no apology either, and that the whole business took him about four seconds and cost him nothing.

“The Captain did not make a request, sir,” Carson said.

The *sir* was the worst of it.

He waited about as long as a man waits for a horse to move over.

Then Enos put his heels in and went down the bank.

What happened after that he was never able to get back.

Not in the week following, when it was closest. Not at Grave Creek nine years on, in a room with a woman who did not ask. Not on a ridge above a canyon with a fiddle coming up out of it.

He had pieces.

Clay under the hooves, and the horse going down onto its hocks at the bottom and coming up again.

A mat wall kicked inward.

A basket rolling down the bank on its rim, turning as it went.

Water to his knees and then not.

Somebody yelling *hold* and somebody else yelling *now* and both of them being obeyed by different men at the same time.

A rifle going off close enough on his right that the side of his face was hot for an hour afterward.

His own voice. He knew he had used it. He did not know what for.

There was a stretch in the middle of it that was simply gone. Not dark, not confused—absent, the way the middle of a night’s sleep is absent. He came out of that stretch standing on the gravel tongue at the lower end of the village with his rifle in both hands and the barrel warm and the ramrod not in its pipe, and he stood there some seconds working out where it would be.

He found it in his left hand.

He had loaded twice, then, at least.

He did not know at what.

In the years afterward, when men asked him, he said that he had held horses.

That was true of the lake, where three of his own had gone down in the dark and he had stood at the picket line with four ropes in his hand.

It was not true of this morning.

He kept the answer anyway. One true thing could shelter a surprising number of others if a man did not examine it too closely, and nobody who asked had ever required him to itemize.

The one thing he kept whole was the boy.

He was at the upper end near a storage pit, perhaps eleven, with mud on one cheek and a stone in his hand. He was not aiming it. He was a frightened child holding a stone as though he might crush it inside his fist.

Enos brought the rifle up.

He had it on him. The sight sat on the small chest and the boy did not move and did not run and looked back at him with his mouth a little open, the way a child looks at a thing he has not yet been told the meaning of.

Enos did not fire.

He wanted afterward to have been able to say that it was mercy. He worked at it for a long time and could not make it come out that way, because he remembered what had gone through him while the sight was on the boy, and it was not the boy.

It was that somebody might be keeping the count.

That out of the whole of that morning, which he could not account for and would never be able to account for, there might be one entry that ran the other way. Something he could hold up later to Carson, to himself, to whatever kept books on such things.

Not that one. I did not do that one.

He lowered the rifle after the longest two seconds he had known.

Swanok came out of the willows on the boy's blind side, unhurried, the way he came out of everything, and took him by the hair with the left hand and put the knife across with the right.

The boy made no sound.

Then Swanok knelt and did the rest of it, and it took him about the time it takes a man to unbuckle a cinch.

He stood and wiped the blade on his leg, once each side, then looked at Enos for a moment across forty feet of trampled ground.

There was nothing in it. It was not challenge and it was not accusation. It was a man noting where another man stood and how long he had been standing there.

Then Swanok went back into the willows.

Enos fired the rest of his cartridges over the retreating Wintu, then stood with the rifle at his knee.

The firing thinned.

Not all at once. One shot far off in the willows, then two together by the bank, then nothing but men breathing hard and the river going on with its business.

A basket floated near the gravel tongue, caught in an eddy. It spun there, neat and useless.

Across the water the Sacramento carried foam, ash, willow leaves, and one black feather past the men.

Afterward the village became work.

That was the cruelty of men who survived. They turned horror into tasks because tasks had handles. Count the wounded. Gather weapons. Watch the brush. Bring the animals down. Keep the powder dry. Put out that fire. Do not step there. Move him. Leave her. Ask the captain. Ask Carson. Ask nobody and do it.

Enos carried water in a blackened kettle whose handle burned his palm. He gave it first to a Delaware man with blood in his hair, then to a Missourian who had spilled half a cartridge down his own shirt.

After that there was no one living in the village to give it to.

This was not said aloud.

At some point he put the kettle down and got his canteen off the saddle because his mouth had gone to paste.

It was empty.

He turned it over and shook it and stood there with it in his hand and could not remember having drunk it.

He put the stopper back in and hung it on the horn.

Carson stood with Frémont near the lower bank. Their words did not reach Enos. Carson pointed once toward the brush and once toward the water. Frémont listened with his head slightly turned.

Swanok came back through the burned houses with Sagundai. There was blood on Swanok's sleeve and more along the outside of Sagundai's hand, but neither appeared hurt.

Carson looked them over.

"Hit?"

Swanok shook his head.

"Sagundai?"

"No."

Carson looked up the bank toward the others.

"Anybody?"

Nobody answered at first.

A man opened his coat and looked down at himself as though he had not thought to check. Another ran both hands along his ribs. Someone near the horses had blood all down the front of his shirt and discovered, after some examination, that none of it belonged to him.

A torn sleeve contained an unhurt arm.

A cap had been shot off.

A saddle skirt had a hole through it.

No dead.

No wounded.

A horse grazed lame they would butcher and eat tonight.

Carson looked back toward the village.

Smoke moved low beneath the cottonwoods. Bodies lay on the gravel and among the houses, and others had gone down into the willows where the river bent away. A man could have spent the rest of the afternoon counting and still been arguing when the light failed.

Frémont came up beside him.

"How many?"

Carson kept his eyes on the village.

"The number killed I cannot say. It was a perfect butchery."

The Missourian with the bad eye laughed.

He had been kept because he could shoe and because usefulness had survived worse deficiencies than character. There was blood across his knuckles. He wiped it onto his trousers while looking toward the village.

“Never stood a chance. Horse-stealing, dirt-worshiping heathens.”

Nobody answered him.

He squinted toward the lame horse.

“Be decent meat by dark.”

Then he went to look at it.

Talbot had the animals gathered above the bank and was already counting what remained: cartridges, powder, caps, tack, one lame horse that would be meat by dark, and whatever food the men had taken from the village and could carry.

Frémont looked over the figures once and moved on.

Carson came past leading a horse with a torn rein.

“You all right?”

Enos said nothing.

Carson stopped.

“You were a long time coming down. Do not be a long time again.”

Then he went on with the horse.

By late afternoon they moved out.

Smoke lay low behind them. No one sang. No one joked about the mule. The warmth of French Camp had become a thing carried under the ribs and not spoken of.

At the rise Enos looked back.

The river bent around the gravel bar as before. Water had no talent for memorial. It took ash, blood, foam and leaves with the same brown patience.

Ahead, Frémont rode with Talbot near him.

The day’s account was inside the notebook now, protected from damp.

Gillespie

The horses knew before the men did.

They came up out of the wet bunch grass together and stood with their ears north, and one mule quit chewing and lifted its head. The rain had stopped where it landed, and the country had kept it.

Carson cut a strip off a broken bridle with a small knife. The knife stopped.

“Rider.”

Nothing showed for a while but the low road and the timber and the heat sitting on the grass. Then a horse came out of the pale dust with its neck stretched flat, and a second horse behind it with no rider and a dispatch satchel lashed across the saddle.

The man had no hat. His coat had been blue once and salt and rain and saddle sweat had been at it since. The right cuff was stiff with old dirt and something darker worked into the cloth. He came off the horse more than he dismounted and Carson caught him by the coat before rank could make a ceremony of it.

“I have come for Captain Frémont,” he said. “Lieutenant Archibald H. Gillespie. United States Marine Corps.”

“You have found his camp,” Carson said. “Captain is just past the fire. I will have the Delawares see to your horse.”

“Then the ride was not wasted.”

“I find it rarely is.”

The words came out clipped and dry. Not wit. Courtesy with its throat cut.

Frémont sat beyond the officers’ fire with his coat unbuttoned. He read the man’s silhouette before the firelight found him. The heavy leather satchel at Gillespie’s hip was enough to tell him the ride had not been undertaken for company.

Frémont stood.

“You have traveled a long way to deliver a letter, sir.”

“More than one.”

“From Washington.”

“Yes, sir.”

Frémont looked at the satchel.

“For me?”

“Some of it.”

That held him.

Gillespie opened the satchel only far enough to draw out a packet wrapped in oilcloth. He kept one hand on the leather while he did it.

Frémont took the packet.

Enos was near enough to see the wax when it came out of the oilcloth. It had been broken and pressed back down, and the second impression sat a little off the first. Weather could do that.

A rider could. So could somebody else.

Frémont turned it once in his hand.

“Larkin?”

“He has received what was intended for him.”

“Larkin knows this?”

Gillespie looked toward the fire.

“Captain, I believe there is very little Mr. Larkin does not know.”

Frémont looked at him for another moment.

“Inside.”

Frémont and Gillespie went into the tent with Carson at the entrance. Talbot was called in after a while.

The voices went low and then stopped and then went lower. Rain tapped the ridge rope.

Gillespie’s horse stood with its head down while one of the Delawares walked a hand along the near foreleg. The loose horse had already found grass and was tearing at it with the desperate concentration of an animal that had crossed more country than politics required.

Men filled the silence with what they had.

War, one of them said.

Rescue, said another.

California, said a third, as though it were a place rather than a condition.

Enos sat with his rifle across his knees and did not join in. A message got bigger in the mouths of men not allowed to hear it. By supper the orders would have a flag in them, and a woman in distress, and three murdered settlers, and British gold, and by morning they would fit whatever road Frémont chose.

The tent stayed closed.

At dusk Frémont came out with a sheet of paper folded once in his hand.

Gillespie followed and stood at his shoulder near the fire.

The men watched because there was nothing else to watch.

Gillespie looked at the paper.

“Do you need to read it again, Captain?”

Frémont looked at the fold a moment.

Then he crumpled the sheet in one hand and put it into the fire.

Dry paper took flame without argument. For a few seconds the writing showed black through the orange, then curled inward and disappeared. A piece of ash lifted above the fire, broke in two, and went over the heads of the men.

Gillespie watched it go.

“Thank you for your discretion, Captain.”

No one asked what had been on the page.

After that there was no page in the camp for a man to point at and say what Washington had meant.

The orders had come from Washington, from men in chairs he had never sat in, but the command was his alone.

The men came to the fire with cups and blankets over their shoulders. It burned low and blue in the middle and the smoke went among them and made every face less certain. Sagundai sat facing the open side of the ring. Swanok stood behind the last man, where the dark started.

“Gentlemen,” Frémont said, and the word did its usual work of making a mixed company briefly respectable. “The situation in California has altered.”

A mule coughed behind the pickets with more honesty than the meeting allowed.

“American interests require movement. We have seen Mexican weakness. We have seen British designs advance under trade and delay. There are families already on the road and more coming. If passage is not secured, others will secure it against us.”

Enos heard secured and looked at the horse line.

Crane spoke first, out of loyalty to a form that had fed him before.

“We are not an army. Our commission is survey.”

“Our duty is American.”

Denny leaned forward. He had a scout's eyes and a face made older by practical doubt.

"If we move the way you are saying, the account will not hold. Too many camps. Too many witnesses. Men know the difference between passage and clearing."

"The account will hold if conduct justifies it."

Lajeunesse laughed. It was not a good laugh.

"Conduct is an ambitious horse, Captain. It carries murder if you give it oats."

"Choose your words," Carson said.

Lajeunesse touched two fingers to his brow.

"I choose them poor but personal."

Sagundai looked at him then. Not hard and not soft. Long enough to keep.

Frémont let the quiet run until it belonged to him.

"No man here is ordered to murder. Men are ordered to move, and to protect American movement and American passage from hostile interruption."

Crane stared into the fire. Denny looked at the horses. Lajeunesse smiled at Enos across the ring.

"Hear that, mon beau. We are safe. It has been improved by language."

Nobody laughed.

Enos found Carson afterward at the picket line, running a hand down a strap that did not need it.

"Did they say who?"

"No."

"Did they say what?"

Carson took the strap up a hole and let it back down.

"Orders are like traps," he said. "The man who sets one does not explain it to the rabbit."

"And which are we?"

Carson went on to the next horse.

After the men broke up, Swanok sat with his back to a cottonwood mending a cracked throatlatch with sinew gone dark from use. He softened the strip in his mouth, drew it flat between his thumb and the knife, and worked it through the old holes without looking down for long.

Sagundai sat facing the road.

Carson came between them once and did not stop walking.

“Denny watches the horses.”

Sagundai nodded.

“Crane watches paper.”

Swanok looked over at the man by the fire—thin shoulders under a blanket, boots set outside it too neatly for camp.

“Lajeunesse watches mouths.”

“He uses his own too much,” Sagundai said.

Carson’s face did not change.

“Yes.”

Swanok bit the sinew and spat the end away. The knot held.

Enos was at the edge of the ring and looked away a half second late.

Swanok had seen the looking.

Frémont stayed by the map after the fire had gone down to coals. Gillespie sat on a rolled blanket with both hands around a cup he had not drunk from, and the satchel beside his boot, which seemed to weigh something even empty.

Frémont watched the two men near the animals.

“Sagundai has value.”

Carson did not look over.

“Yes.”

“He remembers well. Carries well. Repeats only what he means to repeat.”

“Yes.”

“Swanok is another matter.”

Carson waited.

“I do not like men I cannot price.”

“You are not buying him.”

“No?”

“No.”

Swanok was standing where nobody could leave the camp without going past him. His hands were empty.

“Sagundai is valuable,” Carson said. “Swanok is necessary.”

Frémont did not answer that.

He looked away first.

Later, from under his blanket, Enos heard another man say Klamath under his breath, trying the word the way a man tries a boot not yet broken in.

Sagundai said it back once, softer and cleaner.

“Klamath.”

It did not become anything. It found a place near the fire and stayed there.

“The word is ready,” Sagundai said when Carson came near.

“Not yet.”

“No.”

They went north in the morning through black timber and low fog with the branches writing water across their shoulders. Men cursed softly because a loud curse seemed to invite an answer.

Swanok rode ahead and off the trail. Carson let him, and rode a little behind and to the right where the man had room to see. When Swanok slowed, Carson slowed. Frémont rode farther back with Gillespie asking questions that did not travel forward.

Toward the middle of the morning he stopped under a bench that ran along the slope above them, dry-looking and open, and shook his head at it.

“That carries,” the Tennessean said. “That carries better than what we are on.”

“Soft under. Looks good from above. Takes hooves.”

“You know that bench?”

Swanok looked at him.

“I know ground that lies.”

The Tennessean snorted.

“Ground does not lie.”

Nobody answered him and they went the low way.

At the second creek Swanok pointed with two fingers toward a crossing that looked no better than the one they were on, and Carson turned his horse that way, and the line came after.

They found the first blind above it.

It was not much. Three branches bent where branches had no reason to bend, brush pushed in wrong side out, a strip of bark rubbed pale where a rifle had been rested. Most men would have gone by and called the shot bad luck afterward.

Swanok got down and stood looking at it without touching anything.

Carson got down too. Enos stayed up because nobody had invited him into the meaning and he had learned not to arrive early at that kind of thing.

“Old?”

Swanok shook his head.

“For us?”

He looked up the slope and then down at the water.

“For whoever was foolish.”

They found two more above the crossing. Not a line. Places where men had waited, or had practiced waiting, or had wanted somebody to believe waiting had happened there.

Enos looked at the brush.

The cut ends were pale and still wet at the pith. Whoever had bent that had done it inside a day, maybe inside a night, and had done it above a crossing that the company had not chosen until Swanok raised two fingers an hour ago.

He turned that over and did not put it anywhere.

Frémont came forward with Gillespie behind him.

“Ambush?”

“Maybe,” Carson said.

“Maybe is insufficient.”

“It is what the ground offers.”

Gillespie moved in his saddle.

“The dispatch warned of hostile intention.”

The first time he said dispatch out loud, six men turned their heads. The word had been starving them.

“It warned of danger to American interests,” Frémont said.

“Yes.”

“Not particulars.”

Gillespie looked at him.

What passed between them was not disagreement. It was two men understanding that they would be asked later for something clearer than they had.

Swanok had gone down to the water. He came up out of the mud with a piece of cloth, blue once, torn narrow.

Carson took it and turned it over.

“American?” Frémont said.

“Cloth has no country after rain.”

Enos liked him for that and disliked needing to.

They camped that night without fires.

The order came from Frémont and was carried by Carson, which meant it arrived as a fact instead of a discussion. Men ate cold flour cakes and meat gone hard at the edges. The horses stood in close. Rain came through the trees and found every collar.

No fire meant no jokes worth keeping. Men whispered when they had to speak, and a whisper made cowards of ordinary words.

Coffee.

Powder.

Blanket.

All of it sounded like conspiracy.

Near midnight a horse pulled against its picket and blew hard, and every man came awake as if dropped.

Carson was already up. Swanok was at the horse with one hand raised.

Not alarm.

Wait.

A hammer clicked somewhere to the left.

“Down,” Carson said.

The hammer eased back.

They waited a long time. Rain on leaves, horse breath, one man’s teeth going until another man put a hand on his sleeve.

Then a deer stepped into the gap between two trunks, looked at the camp, and was gone.

Several men breathed at once.

“I near killed supper,” the Tennessean whispered.

“Supper near killed you,” Enos said.

The laughter went around low and did some good.

When it settled, Enos saw Swanok standing near Carson. They spoke too low to hear. Carson made one motion north. Swanok shook his head once, then pointed east, then south, then touched two fingers to his own chest.

Carson did not like it.

It carried in his shoulders.

Frémont came out of his blanket with his coat over his shirt.

“What is it?”

“Country is emptying ahead of us.”

“Because they fear us?”

Nobody answered fast enough.

“Because news walks,” Swanok said.

Frémont looked north into the black trees.

“Then we follow the news.”

It was a sentence a man could write down afterward and admire.

In the dark it sounded thinner.

Enos lay back and did not sleep. He thought about the pale cut ends on the bent brush, and about the hour between a man raising two fingers at a crossing and the company arriving at it, and he took the thought no further, because there was nowhere to take it that a man could come back from.

He heard Lajeunesse turn over twice, and then a third time, and then go quiet.

Klamath

The campfire account began with where men sat.

Frémont had the map under the lantern, one corner held beneath his cup. Damp had begun lifting the paper along the folds, and every so often he flattened it with the side of his hand. Gillespie sat near the dispatch satchel with his ruined hat between his knees. Sagundai faced the road. Swanok stood where the camp narrowed toward the horse line and the dark timber beyond it. There was no door there. He made one.

Crane sat nearest the papers. Denny had taken the ground nearest the animals and was scraping mud from a spur with a sliver of wood. Carson sat behind Frémont and off his right shoulder, forearms across his knees, doing nothing. Enos had seen him spend whole evenings repairing tack that needed no repair. Tonight he watched the men. Lajeunesse had found a flat rock beside the fire and sat on it with one boot off and his stocking black at the sole. The heel had begun pulling away again. An older rawhide mend still held through two holes and had come loose through a third, and Basil had a fresh strip softened between his teeth while he worked the point through with the end of his knife.

Enos sat beside him with the heel braced between two fingers while Basil drew the rawhide through, caught one end in his teeth and pulled the repair tight.

Basil made no attempt to conceal it. The flat rock betrayed what otherwise might have passed for something considerably less boisterous.

Enos stopped.

“Basil?”

“French whispers, mon beau.”

“I do not know what smells worse, your ass or your feet.”

“I am a man of the wilderness.”

Basil raised his eyebrows.

“Untamed.”

Enos looked at the rock. “You should tell that rock to keep your whispers secret.”

Basil considered it.

“This is true, mon beau. A man cannot trust a flat rock.”

Enos let go of the heel. Basil drew the rawhide tight with his teeth, cut the end and worked the boot back onto his foot. He stamped the heel once against the rock. The mend held. Across the fire a horse shifted against the picket. Leather creaked and a bit touched iron somewhere in the dark. Swanok turned his head toward the sound, waited until the animal settled, and looked back toward the fire.

Frémont drew the map closer. Denny made one more pass at the mud packed into his spur. Crane's thumb remained tucked inside his coat against the folded paper there. Basil had been pressing the repaired heel of his boot against the flat rock, and his hand stayed on it. Carson sat behind Frémont looking at none of those things and somehow seeing all of them. Frémont flattened the map with one palm and laid a finger north and east of their camp.

"We move before dawn."

Nobody asked where.

His finger traveled farther into the lake country and stopped.

"Forty miles, near enough. The Klamath village is here, by the fishing water."

He kept his finger on the place.

"Lieutenant Gillespie brought instructions concerning this country. The village is to be cleared."

Gillespie had been working one of the crushed places from the crown of his hat with his thumb. The thumb stopped. He did not look up.

Denny's sliver stopped inside the spur.

"Cleared."

Frémont looked at him.

"That is the instruction."

Denny worked the sliver free and rubbed his thumb over the iron where there was no mud left.

"Fishing villages."

Frémont waited.

"Women there. Old people. Children. Men with nets and split fish. That is what sits around fishing water."

A man across the fire shifted where he sat. "They hit us first."

Crane turned his head toward him.

Only his head.

“Did they?”

The man met his eyes for perhaps half a second, then bent over his boot. His fingers found the laces and began working at them with considerable attention.

Enos’s eyes went to Swanok before he meant them to.

The Wintu boy came back whole, too recent yet to have become memory: mud on one cheek, a stone closed uselessly in his fist, the front sight resting against his small chest. Enos lowering the rifle. Swanok coming through the willows on the boy’s blind side and taking him by the hair.

Swanok stood beyond the fire now with his hands empty.

Basil had followed Enos’s look.

“With the Wintu,” he said, “we went down the bank to them.”

Nobody answered.

Basil pressed his thumb once against the rawhide at his heel and looked across the fire at Frémont.

“I have never walked away from a fight, Captain.”

His eyes moved briefly toward Swanok and then back.

“But this one has not come.”

Frémont’s face did not change.

Denny looked at Basil, then at Crane.

Gillespie resumed turning the ruined hat between his hands, pushing the crushed place outward with his thumb only to have it rise crooked again.

“Careful,” he said.

Crane’s hand moved farther inside his coat. The folded paper showed beneath the wool now, held flat under his palm.

“I have been careful.”

Gillespie looked at the hand.

Crane saw him looking and left it there.

“Careful at the Wintu fires. Careful while words got made after the work was done.”

The hat stopped moving in Gillespie’s hands.

Basil sat forward on the flat rock with his elbows against his knees, his empty cup hanging from one hand.

“Forty miles.”

Frémont looked across the fire at him.

“That is a long way to carry a quarrel.”

“You have not been ordered to enjoy it.”

Something changed at the corner of Basil’s mouth but never became the smile that ordinarily would have followed.

“No.”

Denny stood without throwing anything down or making a show of it. He put one boot beneath himself, rose and remained there with the spur in one hand.

“I do not refuse a fight.”

Crane looked up at him. “Nor I.”

Denny turned the spur between his fingers, looked once toward the dark beyond the horse line, and then back at Frémont.

“This is riding forty miles to kill who is still home.”

Nobody shifted after that. The horses could be heard more clearly because the men had gone quiet: a hoof moving in wet ground, a rope taking weight, one animal breathing through its nose. Sagundai still faced the road, but his eyes had come around to Denny, then Crane, then Basil. Carson had not looked at Frémont since the orders began. He was watching the same three men.

Frémont took his finger from the map.

“You may speak less and sleep more.”

Crane gave a short breath through his nose that was not a laugh.

“I will not sign an account of it.”

Gillespie’s thumb stopped against the crown of the hat.

“No account has been put before you.”

Crane looked at him.

“There will be.”

Carson raised his eyes.

Crane saw it, and for a moment the two men looked at one another across the fire, Carson still seated and Crane with his hand inside his coat, and Enos felt the conversation move somewhere none of the words had gone.

Frémont folded the map. The sound of the paper broke it. He slid the map into its case, stood and took the lantern with him. Gillespie picked up the dispatch satchel and followed, and the circle dimmed when the lantern left.

Nobody began talking again. Men put away cups. One rolled himself into a blanket without removing his boots. Another checked the pan of a rifle, lowered the hammer carefully and set the gun beside him. Basil stayed on the flat rock a while longer, one hand resting on the repaired heel.

Enos looked at him.

“Tomás says you owe him tobacco.”

Basil glanced over.

“He says many things.”

“He remembers that one.”

Basil looked into his empty cup.

“I will pay him.”

He set the cup beside the rock.

Denny passed behind Enos on his way toward the horse line.

“Sleep light.”

Enos turned, but Denny had not stopped walking. He disappeared beyond the edge of the fire before Enos decided whether the words had been advice or warning.

The camp went down slowly. Flame left the wood and became a red seam through black. Men disappeared into blankets. Someone coughed, waited, then coughed again. A horse tugged once at a rope and got no answer from the night. Sagundai remained upright facing the road. Swanok still stood at the mouth of the horse line. Basil lay beside the flat rock with one arm beneath his head, his cup upright beside him and the repaired heel pointed toward the coals.

Enos closed his eyes.

He did not sleep.

Crane moved first.

Enos heard wool scrape dirt and opened his eyes enough to see Crane standing beyond the fire with his boots in one hand. He looked toward Carson, who appeared asleep, then toward Frémont's shelter where nothing moved, and finally toward the horses.

He started walking.

Denny rose almost immediately afterward. That told Enos Denny had not been sleeping either. He went after Crane without looking at him.

Basil opened his eyes. He lay still for a moment, watching the two men leave the fire, then sat up and reached for his coat.

Enos knew before he stood.

"You are an idiot."

Basil pulled the coat around his shoulders. "Frequently, mon beau."

"They will not let you."

"They have not been asked."

"They do not require asking."

Basil's hands stopped on the coat. He looked at Enos, and there was no joke waiting behind his face now.

"If nobody warns them, the children will wake to rifles."

Enos caught his sleeve. The wool tightened between his fingers.

"That is a poor reason to die."

Basil looked down at the hand, then back at him.

"There are no good ones."

He drew the sleeve slowly through Enos's fingers.

"Men improve them afterward."

Basil put on the coat and followed the others.

Enos stayed beside the dying fire long enough to watch him disappear into the dark.

Then he stood.

The grass outside the light was black with damp and cold through the soles of his boots. The horse line was mostly shapes: backs, ears, the occasional white of an eye when an animal turned its head. Denny was gathering horses, working quickly without appearing hurried, taking leads down from the picket and laying them one over another across his hand. Crane stood nearby with his boots still in one hand. Basil had come up beside him.

Denny had four horses gathered by the time Enos reached them, three mounts and a spare. He looked at Enos once and put all four leads across.

“Hold these.”

Enos took them. The leather was cold and wet.

Crane looked toward the road.

His face changed.

Enos followed his eyes.

Swanok stood between them and the timber.

Enos had not seen him arrive there. Swanok’s weight rested slightly on one leg, his arms loose at his sides and his hands empty. He did not look prepared to fight.

That made looking at him worse.

Crane’s shoulders drew back. Denny let his hands fall away from the horses. Basil came around the nearest animal and stopped when he saw Swanok.

Denny spoke first.

“We are checking the near line.”

Swanok’s eyes moved over him, then to Crane, then Basil.

“A mare is pulling lame.”

Swanok said nothing.

Crane shifted his boots into his left hand.

“We are leaving.”

Sagundai came out of the dark behind them and stopped far enough away that no man could say he had crowded anybody.

“Go back to your blankets.”

Crane looked at him. “Tell him to move.”

Sagundai glanced once toward Swanok.

“He will not.”

Denny’s hand closed once at his side and opened again.

“We are not prisoners.”

“No,” Sagundai said.

He left enough space after the word for Denny to hear it properly.

“But if you leave this camp tonight, you will be carrying warning to the village.”

Denny stared at him.

Carson came from beside the packs.

Enos had not heard him get up. His coat was open and the hatchet hung low against his thigh. He stopped a few paces from Denny and looked first at Crane, then Basil, then the four horses standing behind Enos.

“You ride out now,” he said, “you are not leaving us. You are going to them.”

Crane drew breath.

Basil turned his head toward Enos.

It was such a familiar movement that for an instant the horse line became French Camp again: Basil about to say something foolish, waiting to see whether Enos caught it before anybody else did.

His eyebrows lifted slightly.

Carson moved first.

The hatchet struck Basil in the back of the head with a sound too small for what it did. His face changed with surprise before pain had time to reach it. He took one step, the repaired boot finding the ground cleanly beneath him, and then his knees folded.

All four horses came against Enos together. The ropes snapped through his hands, burning his palms and jerking his shoulders forward.

Denny spun toward Carson and opened his mouth, but Swanok crossed the distance before the shout came. Enos saw Denny’s eyes widen when Swanok’s hand closed over his mouth and the other arm went close around his body. For an instant they might have been two men wrestling in the dark, until Denny’s knees softened and his gaze moved past Swanok toward the horses, then to Enos standing there with their ropes gathered in his hands.

Whatever he saw after that belonged to nobody.

Swanok lowered him carefully to the ground.

Crane ran.

He still had one boot in his hand and one foot bare, which made the first strides crooked. The folded paper worked halfway from his coat and flashed white against the dark wool as he crossed the edge of the firelight.

Carson’s pistol came up.

Sagundai’s rifle followed.

The shots broke almost together.

Crane went forward onto one shoulder and rolled facedown beyond the picket line. The paper slid free and opened beside him.

Then every horse in camp understood what had happened.

The line erupted. Ropes slapped posts, hooves struck mud, and one mare came halfway up and crashed sideways into another animal while men shouted over one another in the dark. The four leads in Enos's hands pulled apart and his arms went wide. A rope burned across the heel of his right palm. Another rolled around his wrist and cinched down before he twisted free. The spare went backward hard enough to pull him two steps while one of the mounts tried to cross in front of him.

For several seconds there was only the work: give enough rope here, take it back there, turn the head, keep the line clear of the feet, stay upright.

Then Enos looked up.

Basil was on his knees in the mud.

Carson stood behind him with the hatchet still buried.

Enos moved.

The four ropes came tight. The horses followed him half a step and nearly took his feet from under him.

Swanok turned.

Enos saw the knife in his hand now, blood along the blade and over one knuckle. Swanok looked at Enos's face, then at the four ropes stretched through his hands, then back at him.

Enos stopped.

The horses breathed around him, pulling in different directions, the leads cutting straight lines through the dark from their bridles into his fists. Swanok did not threaten him. His look only measured what Enos was holding, where he stood, and what would happen if those hands opened.

The Wintu boy passed through him again: the stone, the open mouth, Swanok appearing where there had been only willow.

Enos looked at Basil.

He did not let go.

One of the horses pulled again. Enos gave it an inch and took the inch back when it settled. By the time Frémont came from his shelter the animals had begun to come down around him, not calm, only discovering that the ropes still ended in the same hands.

Frémont stopped outside the strongest firelight and let his eyes move through the camp: Crane facedown beyond the horse line with the paper beside him, Denny where Swanok had lowered him, Basil still on his knees though his body no longer knew the posture, Carson beside him, then Enos standing among the frightened horses with four ropes gathered through his hands.

Frémont looked back at the dead.

“How many?”

Nobody answered.

Gillespie came behind him carrying his ruined hat. His eyes went to Crane and remained there a little too long before he forced them away.

Swanok crossed to Basil and Carson stepped back. Swanok put one hand against the dead man’s shoulder and worked the hatchet loose from the skull. Basil’s body shifted with the effort, and the repaired heel dragged once through the mud before catching.

Enos heard himself make a sound.

Swanok looked toward him but did not stop. He wiped one side of the hatchet against his trousers, then the other, and handed it back to Carson.

Carson took it by the handle without looking at the blood.

Beyond them the flat rock sat beside the fire.

Basil’s cup was still upright beside it.

Swanok looked at Frémont, then around the camp.

“Klamath.”

Forty Miles

They buried Lajeunesse, Denny, and Crane before dawn in ground too shallow to be called a grave.

They had shovels. One was lashed to a mule with a cracked leather thong, its blade knocking against the pack frame each time the animal breathed hard. Another hung under a canvas roll and struck iron with a dull clank whenever the mule shifted. A third lay beside the cook kit with dried mud still on the step.

“No proper tools,” Gillespie said.

No one laughed.

They carried the bodies off the trail, not far enough for honor and not near enough for accident. Denny went first, wrapped in a blanket that still had horse hair stuck to it. Crane followed, his coat buttoned over the hole in his back and the folded paper removed from him. Lajeunesse came last because men had to agree without saying so who would touch his head.

Enos took his boots.

They were good boots. Better than his. He had watched Lajeunesse put the mend in the near heel at French Camp, working the rawhide with his teeth and swearing at it in two languages, and when Tomás said a cobbler would have done it better Lajeunesse said a cobbler would also have done it for money. The mend had held as long as Basil needed it to.

Enos held the boots by the tops while two men lifted the body. He did not look at Carson. He did not look at Frémont. He watched the boots swing once against his leg. The graves were scraped more than dug. Wet soil came up black and stingy. Roots stopped the blades. Stones turned the edges.

They put brush in the bottoms first, then bodies, then more dirt than earth wished to give. Logs came next. Stones. Dead limbs dragged sideways to confuse the eye. Denny’s rope went under a pile of branches. Crane’s boot prints were scuffed out with a saddle blanket. The horses were driven over the place twice to spoil sign. One mule refused and had to be hauled through by the bridle. When it was done, the place looked like poor work done in a hurry by men who expected no inspection.

Enos stood last by the mound that held Lajeunesse.

He set the boots side by side, then picked them up again because leaving them would mark the place. He wiped dirt from one heel with his thumb.

“This is not what I thought you meant by better lies,” he said. “Farewell, mon beau.”

Behind him, Carson said, “Mount.”

The forty miles began there.

They rode out with three men hidden behind them, the word Klamath ahead of them, and shovels knocking against the pack frames. A few men still had blood on their cuffs and wanted the morning to notice it. The horses noticed nothing except the bad hour. They came off the line stiff and hollow-backed, and the men rode them without talking, because the thing behind them would not bear it and the thing ahead of them had not yet asked.

Frémont rode near the front, coat buttoned wrong from the night and face composed by daylight. He gave few orders, and those were small: cartridge boxes closed, spare lead secured, rear horses tied short, no man falling out without word. No one called it pursuit.

Carson moved along the line before they cleared the timber. He checked girths, looked at hooves, told a man with a loose powder horn to cork it. Then he came up beside Sagundai and rode there a while.

“Ground softens past the second creek,” he said. “We will want the west side.”

Sagundai did not answer. He was watching the country the way he watched the road out of every camp, which was without appearing to expect anything from it.

Carson rode there a while longer and then went back down the line.

Enos had tied the boots to his saddle by their pull straps and they rode against his knee. Taking them was provisioning. Any man on the column would have done it, and several had watched him do it and thought better of him for it. Wearing them was another matter. Wearing them was inheritance, and a mile passed under him and did not settle whether he had agreed to inherit. He could hear how the argument would have gone. Lajeunesse would have said a dead man’s boots fit better than a live man’s advice, and Enos would have said that was because the dead man was through arguing, and Lajeunesse would have claimed the point for himself and demanded tobacco on it. The boots rode against his knee. He left them tied.

The trail dropped into wet ground where the horses sank above the fetlocks. Cold climbed out of the water into boots and cuffs. Wool took the wet and kept it. By the eighth mile

the company smelled of horse sweat, damp leather, old blood, and coffee boiled before sunup in a pot no one had cleaned. The coffee came around in two canteens and made no one better.

He thought about the grave.

Deep enough to be cold. Too shallow to keep anything off him. That was what they had given a man who was owed tobacco by Tomás and a knife by Enos and who had gone under the horse sign with both debts standing—a hole that would fail at the one thing a hole was for. Wolves would have it open by the second thaw. Everyone at the digging had known it and nobody had said it, because saying it was work the brush and the logs were supposed to do.

At the fire that last night Lajeunesse had said there were no good reasons to die, that men improved them afterward. Enos had taken it then for one more thing said for the shape of it. The scuffing was sound practice. Enos had dragged a limb across the ground himself and had done it well, and that was the part that sat wrong—that his hands had known how without being taught.

Around the twelfth mile, Haskins asked the question too loudly because his horse had slipped and fear had not finished leaving his throat.

“Are we still following sign?”

Carson rode ahead of him, eyes on the wet track.

He did not answer.

The line went quiet. After that, men watched the ground more carefully. They found broken fern, scraped bark, hoof cuts, a heel mark, and one place where rain had made a story of everything. Sagundai dismounted twice and crouched over ground that said nothing to Enos. Once he touched a bent blade of grass. Once he touched nothing at all.

Carson got down beside him the second time.

“Old?”

Sagundai rose and mounted.

Carson stood a moment over the ground that had not been explained to him, and then mounted too, and the line went on.

Enos had seen a man hanged at the Dalles of a court that fit in one wagon. What he remembered of it was not the drop. It was the paper. A man had read the name off it entire before the business was done—the whole of it, dated and witnessed, every letter where it belonged—and the crowd had stood quiet for the name in a way it did not stand quiet for the man. Enos had signed under names that fit him badly all his life, and the clerks had misspelled

even those, and every book that held him held him wrong. It had come to him at the time, watching, that the one document that would ever get a man like him exact would be that one.

His own hole he had made a rough peace with years ago, the way a man makes peace with weather. Off a worn trail somewhere, dug in a hurry by men who owed him nothing. Deep enough to be cold. Too shallow to keep anything off him. It asked nothing of anybody and it would be honestly come by.

He looked at the boots against his knee and left the thought where it was.

No one spoke Lajeunesse's name.

Frémont's name would be spoken. It would be printed. It would go east in a satchel wrapped in oilcloth and come back the size of a country.

Looking down the line at Frémont he thought of a conversation with Lajeunesse. "John C. Frémont. Only a man trying to distinguish himself uses a middle initial. What the hell does the C even stand for?" Enos knew as little about the use of middle names as he did about whether he had one. A mile passed beneath him before he settled on an answer fit for his dead friend. Cocksucker. Another mile passed and Enos resolved that the entry was sound, and he smiled to himself at the thought of Lajeunesse witnessing it. Then he closed the book on John Cocksucker Frémont, and it did not open again.

Carson came by at the next crossing and said the horses would water above the rocks. Enos said that they would, and moved the mare up, and closed the gap in the line when Swanok's head turned along the flank. There was nothing in his outside for anyone to read. He had spent a life arranging that.

Swanok took the outside all day. He did not say where a man could not go. He simply rode there. At the gray clearing where they halted, a young rider drifted toward the back trail with his cup in one hand and reins looped over the other arm. Maybe he meant to piss. Maybe he meant to look back. Maybe he meant to keep going until the company became somebody else's trouble.

Swanok stepped into his path. No hand raised. No word.

The rider stopped, looked down at his coffee, and turned back toward the others.

Near the thirtieth mile, Sagundai found ash under wet needles. Not a camp. Not proof. A black smear where somebody had burned small and moved on, or where weather had collected the remains of a branch. Carson squatted beside him. Frémont remained mounted.

“How old?” Frémont asked.

Sagundai rubbed ash between thumb and finger.

Carson said, “Old enough.”

They rode.

The next miles lost shape. Timber, mud, water, rise, descent. A hat knocked off by a branch. A girth tightened. A horse shod badly and favoring the off fore. Rain came in fits, never enough to clean anything, only enough to make straps swell and wool heavier. Men who had wanted blood before sunrise now wanted dry socks, and were ashamed of it, and wanted them anyway.

Once the line ahead opened and Enos saw empty air where the man’s horse should have been. A blanket roll was not his. A shoulder turned wrong. A profile had no joke prepared. The absence rode with excellent posture. It never complained of rain, never shifted in the saddle, never drank coffee, and never owed anybody tobacco.

Pryor caught him looking.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That so?”

“Nothing is hard country.”

Pryor left it alone.

Toward dusk they came down through the last of the timber and gathered under the trees below a ridge, and nobody dismounted until told. Morning men had leapt from saddles as if anger had springs. Evening men waited. Their legs trembled when they hit ground.

Enos loosened the mare’s cinch and stood with his hand on her shoulder. Pryor was beside him, working his stiff knee, saying nothing.

“He died with better taste than provisions,” Enos said.

It was the line he had been asked for at the fire and had refused to promise. He paid it now, quietly, to a man’s knee and a horse’s shoulder and the wet ground of a country that had never heard of any of them.

Pryor did not laugh. He finished with the knee and straightened up and looked at the ridge.

Carson checked his rifle. Dry pan, covered lock, no ceremony. He said nothing to anyone. Swanok moved along the flank and closed gaps before gaps became choices. Sagundai stood where he could see the descent and the faces of those receiving it.

They went up.

From the ridge the land fell away into darker timber and water beyond. Smoke showed thin in the distance, or mist did. Men argued over it in whispers until Frémont raised one hand and ended the argument without settling it.

Frémont took the map from its container. The paper had softened at the edges from damp. He opened it against his saddle and held it down with both hands.

“Here,” Frémont said.

Carson looked where he pointed.

Pryor whispered, “Forty miles.”

Enos looked at the horses with their heads low, the men standing crooked, the mud black on their boots, the blood dried where saddle leather had worried skin raw.

Below them, something moved near the water. Maybe a man. Maybe brush. Maybe only the country continuing without permission.

Frémont folded the map carefully.

“Mount quietly,” he said.

No one spoke of sign. Men tightened girths, checked caps, flexed numb fingers, and climbed back into saddles that had become enemies by acquaintance.

They had not chased anyone.

They had arrived first.

Dokdokwas

Dokdokwas first showed as smoke.

It lay low in the wet air among tule houses and willow frames, gray and ordinary, no higher than a man's shoulder in places. The water bent around the village and took the dull morning light without improving it. Nets hung from poles. Split fish lay on a rack.

Men came down off the ridge without shouting or hard spurring, no rifles lifted for a charge. They had ridden forty miles and simply arrived with the steadiness of men who had ceased being angry enough to excuse themselves.

Pryor wiped rain from his nose with the back of his hand.

"That the place?"

Enos looked at the smoke, the baskets, the fish racks, the water.

"Generally, Pryor, the battle is where your horse is facing."

Pryor shook his head.

Doby sat his horse with his powder horn tucked beneath his coat. Carson raised one hand and the line halted.

Frémont remained mounted under the willows that grew immense on the Williamson River delta. Rain ticked from the brim of his hat. His coat was dark at the shoulders and clean at the front where the saddle had shielded it. He folded the map against his thigh and returned it to its case.

Sagundai dismounted near Frémont's stirrup and watched the village without moving his head much. His eyes went over the water, the brush, the gaps between houses, the deer path on the right, the higher ground on the left, the children, the young man cutting kindling near the bank.

Swanok was already lower on the slope.

Enos had not seen him leave the line. He stood where a narrow path passed between brush and water.

Carson swung down and stared at the village. The Missourian with the bad eye covered the crusted one with his palm and squinted through the other.

"Straight at them before they scatter."

Carson turned on him.

“The Captain will explain the strategy when the strategy needs explained. Until then plan on going to battle the direction your horse is facing.”

Enos looked at Pryor and pointed at Carson as though the argument had now been officially won.

Carson pointed with two fingers. Not at Dokdokwas, at the pieces of it. The water. The willows. The bank. The high grass along the southern edge.

“Side them. Cut them to the water. The water offers no cover. Drive them where rifles can see.”

He pointed left.

“Take the edge of the brush line. Stay low.”

Then right.

“Go through the grass, stay below it and do not shoot any of our men in the back as they go past you.”

He looked toward the animals.

“Mules stay here. If one gets loose, let it go before you ride it into our line.”

A man asked, “What if they go behind the houses?”

Frémont sat his horse behind Carson.

“They will not have time.”

The men waited.

“But if they do, burn the houses.”

Frémont nodded.

Men began to work. Girths were loosened and tightened, rifles brought out from beneath coats, damp pans checked and caps changed with fingers stiff from cold. One man dropped a cap into the grass and went to his knees feeling through the wet stems until he found it.

They moved down in two lines, boots sinking into wet grass and coming free with sucking sounds. The horse holders remained among the willows above. Enos went with the left-side line because the line opened in front of him and took him.

When they were halfway down, a child came out of a doorway holding a strip of dried fish. A woman behind him said something and reached for his shoulder.

Pryor came down beside Enos and leaned close enough that the words did not have to carry.

“Do we wait?”

The first shots cracked the silence.

The child’s blood flashed across the woman behind him.

More rifles fired from the rise.

Carson was thirty yards downslope, crouched behind a wet stump, powder smoke drifting above his head as he gave commands to both lines.

The rifles were so loud that Dokdokwas seemed to move without sound beneath them.

Enos saw a woman come out with a basket on her hip. She broke toward the water, then stopped.

Swanok rose above the grass.

The basket fell. Dried roots spilled into the mud.

Enos turned away.

Cooking smoke vanished where the Americans put fire to the tule mats. Dark smoke from the burning tule joined the lighter rifle smoke and spread low across the village.

Carson called out, “Water.”

Men shifted west along the southern edge of Dokdokwas, the brush behind them and the high grass and tule in front. They had placed themselves between the village and the cover.

Above the grass, the shoulders of women.

Below it, unseen children.

The line drove them north.

Enos saw no bows rise above the tule. No arrows came back through the smoke. Carson moved west with the others, firing when someone rose clear enough to see, and the men around him fired with him. Ahead, the high grass folded and shook as people forced their way toward the Williamson.

Along the south bank, Swanok came west to east in flashes: a contorted brown face flushed with rage and an English hatchet bobbing in and out of sight.

Enos lost him in the tule and found him again farther east.

A woman broke from the grass at the river’s edge and stopped.

The Williamson widened there before giving itself to the lake, dark and cold and broad enough that the opposite bank offered nothing quickly.

Something small moved through the grass behind her.

She looked back.

Rifles fired.

She went into the water.

More shoulders appeared above the tule behind her. Women where Enos could see them.
Children only in the lower movement of the grass.

The firing followed them to the bank.

Some went directly into the Williamson. Others stopped at the edge and were shot there.
Those who entered found the bottom falling away quickly beneath them. Water reached waists,
then chests. Arms went out for balance. Heads turned back toward shore.

Rifles fired into the water.

Swanok kept coming east.

The Americans kept moving west.

Between them, Dokdokwas emptied into the Williamson.

Pryor stood close enough that Enos could see his mouth move before he heard him.

“God help us.”

Enos said nothing.

The line continued through the village.

Fire went ahead of some men and followed others. Tule roofs caught from below,
burning slowly at first and then taking all at once where the inner layers had remained dry.
Smoke turned the distances uncertain. Enos stepped around a cooking pit and nearly put his boot
through a basket crushed into the mud. Dried fish lay scattered beside it. A digging stick had
broken near the handle. One of the racks came down when a volunteer caught it with his
shoulder.

A cradleboard lay facedown beside a post.

One man stepped over it.

The next went around.

Enos loaded because the others loaded. Powder went into his hand before there had been
any decision to take it. He poured and rammed and brought the rifle up.

Movement showed behind one of the houses.

A child crawled toward a storage basket tipped against the wall and pulled himself
underneath it.

The basket moved once.

No one else appeared to see.

A rifle fired beside Enos.

The man who fired worked immediately for another cartridge.

Enos looked at the basket.

It had stopped moving.

He raised his rifle above it and fired into the smoke.

Nothing fell that he could see.

“Reload,” Carson called somewhere behind him.

Enos reloaded.

The Americans moved farther west.

People still came out of the houses where fire drove them, but there was less running now. Enos saw one old man emerge wrapped in a blanket and stand for a moment as though trying to understand which direction remained.

The rifles answered before he chose one.

He disappeared into the grass.

The firing went on.

By the time Frémont came down from the willows, the volleys had separated enough that individual shots could be heard again. A handler brought his horse behind him. Mud climbed the sides of Frémont’s boots as he crossed the ground toward Carson.

Carson looked back through the smoke.

“Close.”

Frémont waited.

Shots sounded farther west. Then another near the river.

Then the spaces between them grew longer.

Nobody counted the dead.

Men went through them.

Doby found the portion of a drying rack the fire had missed and began pulling down fish that had not burned, knocking ash from the skins with the side of his hand and wrapping what he could carry in a blanket. Others took meat and whatever provisions they recognized.

Baskets of epos remained where they had fallen.

So did the wocus.

The Americans stepped around both.

Swanok, Sagundai and the other Delawares went after different things.

Enos watched them move among the bodies and what remained of the houses. They turned the dead, crouched beside them and rose with whatever could be carried. Knives went into belts. Necklaces disappeared beneath shirts. Beads, carved bone and small pieces of jewelry went into pouches. A good blanket came free from beneath one body and was shaken once before being rolled. One of the Delawares emerged from a house with a pelt across his shoulder.

Sagundai crouched beside a body near the water and worked something loose from around the neck. He looked at it in his palm, rubbed mud from it with his thumb and put it away.

Swanok passed Enos carrying the English hatchet in one hand and a string of beads in the other. Blood had dried dark along one sleeve. He stopped beside another body, bent and came up with a knife, which he slid behind his belt before moving on.

Nothing about it was hurried now.

The shooting was finished.

There was time to choose.

Enos went back toward the house where he had seen the basket.

Fire had passed it. Heat had split the weave along one side.

The child remained underneath, knees against his chest, both hands over his ears.

Alive.

Enos crouched.

The child looked through the broken reeds at him.

Neither moved.

Pryor stopped behind Enos.

“What you got?”

Enos put one hand against the basket and eased the split side back toward the ground.

“Nothing.”

Pryor looked beneath it.

He took off his hat.

After a moment he put it back on.

They walked away.

Frémont and Gillespie were at the riverbank.

Canoes lay among the tule above the water, some overturned, some pushed half into the Williamson where they had been abandoned. More showed farther along the shore.

Gillespie pointed upstream.

“There are others.”

Frémont looked along the bank.

“Gather them.”

“All of them?”

Frémont looked across the lake.

“All of them.”

Men went down to the water.

The canoes were heavy and wet and did not come easily. Two men could roll one. Three could drag it through the mud. Poles were shoved underneath the larger ones and used as levers until hull after hull came up from the tule and collected above the bank.

One still held a paddle.

Another had fish scales silvered along the bottom.

Water moved from end to end inside a third as men dragged it uphill.

Enos watched the pile grow.

Gillespie stood beside Frémont.

“That leaves them no crossing.”

Frémont watched another canoe being hauled from the reeds.

“Burn them.”

Fire was brought from the houses.

The wet dugouts smoked first and refused the flame, so men shoved broken fish racks underneath them and packed burning tule into the spaces between the hulls. House poles went across the pile. Dry wood caught, then the inner surfaces of the canoes began to blacken.

Flame worked slowly along them.

Another canoe was rolled onto the top.

Then another.

Enos stood where heat from the pile reached one side of his face and cold from the Williamson reached the other.

Beyond the fire, the lake spread wide and gray.

There were no canoes left along that part of the bank.

By the time the company gathered to leave, the canoes were burning hotter than the last of the houses. Men carried dried fish, blankets, pelts, knives and what they had stripped from the dead back toward the horses. The epos and wocus remained among the broken baskets and burned tule.

Gillespie put the board against his knee and wrote. Enos could not see the words.

Frémont gave the order and the company rode out, parting the smoke before it found its height.

Providence

Washington City, May 1846

The mail came at seven and there was nothing in it from the West.

Benton went through it twice. Two departmental memoranda, a printer's proof, four letters from Missouri, one from a man in Baltimore who wanted a canal, and the *Union*. He set them in their places on the desk and then went through the pile a second time with his thumb, moving each item across the blotter individually, which was not a thing a man did if he believed the first look.

His knees had come up bad with the weather and he had risen too fast from the chair to get to the door when the boy knocked. He put a hand flat on the desk and waited for it to pass through him.

The last he had was a letter written at Sutter's in January and carried out by sea, and it had reached him in the second week of April, and it said that the party was in good order and that the country was fine and that the ground had been examined between the American and the Sacramento.

Nothing since.

Eleven weeks.

He had gone eleven weeks before and thought nothing of it, and had gone longer. The difference now was that there had been noise in the papers out of Monterey in March about a standoff on a hill and a flag, and no account of it from the only man who could have written one.

He put his spectacles on.

The draft lay under the map. It was his own work and Jessie had been through it, and her hand had got smaller over the years—less loop, less ornament—and she had cut four sentences and put a better verb over a worse one in two places. Beside the paragraph on the population of Oregon she had written:

Give them purpose before they hear the cost.

He read it and moved the map nearer the light.

Oregon lay under his hand in rivers and distances and claims. The Columbia had a white scar through it where the paper had been folded and opened too many times. Someone in the

administration had put possible lines in pencil and then rubbed them nearly out, which had left the sheet dirtier than a decision would have.

The map did not smell of wet wool. It did not show a lame animal or a rubbed-through saddle or a man standing in weather waiting for somebody to tell him what he was.

It also did not show anything that had happened since January.

That was the whole of the difficulty and he sat with it for some minutes.

He could wait. There was an argument for waiting. A senator who spoke to the country about a place and was contradicted by that place inside the month had spent something he could not get back, and the correction would travel with the speech afterward like a dog.

Against that: the treaty was moving. It would be before them inside three weeks. Men were arranging their positions now, this week, in rooms smaller than the chamber, and the ones who arranged first would find the others coming to meet them. A speech given after the vote was an article. A speech given before it was a floor.

And there was the other part, which he did not put into words even at the desk, because it did not require them. Whatever had happened out there since January was going to arrive. It would arrive in somebody's handwriting, in a packet off a ship, months old and already finished, and it would arrive into a Senate that had either been prepared for it or had not.

He would rather it arrive into a prepared room.

A clerk came in with an armful of paper and stopped inside the door.

"Senator?"

"Leave them."

The clerk set them on the side table. "The printing office asks whether the extract should carry the full Providence section."

"The full section."

"Yes, sir."

"And the passage on race."

The clerk waited long enough to prove he had heard, and no longer. "Yes, sir."

When the door shut, Benton took up a pencil and struck a soft sentence in the middle of the second page and put a straighter one over it. Then he folded the draft, opened it again, and smoothed Jessie's note flat with his thumb.

Jessie went up to the gallery at half past eleven and got a place at the end of the second bench where the rail did not cut the view.

She had heard him rehearse none of it and had read all of it. That was the arrangement and neither of them had ever said so. She knew which sentences were his and which were his after she had been at them. She knew where the paragraph on Oregon had been dull and what she had written in the margin to fix it, and she had watched the fix take and felt about it the way she usually felt when a page became better: that better was the point, and that better was not the same as anything else.

The chamber filled the way it did. Damp coats. Boots that had been polished at the door and not before. The reporters at their table with the paper squared and the pencils out. Men came in talking about the treaty and stopped talking about the treaty when they sat down, as though the room required it.

Her father took his place and put his spectacles on with both hands.

He began with territory.

Not blood, not rumor, not any unpleasant particular. Territory first, because territory was the broad road into every smaller permission, and because a man who opened with an atrocity had already conceded that one had occurred.

Oregon. The Columbia. The Pacific. Commerce. British delay. American families already turning their faces west. Wagons, claims, harbors, timber, grain, and the road to Asia, laid out in a voice clean enough for the ink bottles.

He let no sentence appear to perspire.

The map lay open beside him and he touched it once, not to find anything.

Jessie watched the reporters' table. There were four of them and three were writing steadily and the fourth had stopped, which meant something was coming that he intended to get exactly.

"It would seem," her father said, "that the White race alone received the divine command, to subdue and replenish the earth."

The fourth man began to write.

A few in the chamber shifted. Most did not. The room had been built for it and took it the way it took everything, in wood and plaster and wool and breath.

He went on. He put the races in their order and gave each one its distance below the next. He said the Red race had disappeared from the Atlantic coast and that the tribes which resisted civilization had met extinction. He said that this was a cause of lamentation with many, and that for his own part he could not murmur at what appeared to be the working of a divine law.

He did not hurry any of it.

“Civilization, or extinction,” he said, “has been the fate of all people who have found themselves in the track of the advancing Whites.”

Somebody near the aisle nodded. A man in the third row looked at his own hands and kept looking at them.

Jessie sat with her gloves in her lap.

She had read the sentence four times on paper and it had been a sentence. In the room it was something else, and the difference was not in the words, which were the same words. It was that fifty men were receiving it and none of them were going to say anything, and the pens at the reporters’ table were going, and by Saturday it would be in type, and after that it would be a thing the country had been told rather than a thing her father had said.

Give them purpose before they hear the cost.

She had written that in the margin in her own hand, in March, at the table by the window, with Lily asleep upstairs.

Her father turned a page.

He spoke of the van of the Caucasian race topping the Rocky Mountains and coming down to the shores of the Pacific, and of the great population that would grow up there, luminous with the accumulated lights of European and American civilization.

He did not use Frémont’s name. He did not need to. The map held the place for him.

He finished without flourish and sat down.

The first sound was paper.

Men came to him before the session had loosened its posture. They spoke of Oregon, of the treaty, of British arrogance, of American families, of Pacific commerce, and of the danger of letting caution look wiser than movement. One of them said the country wanted moral clarity in advance of the next appropriation. Benton thanked him and did not smile.

A young man with soft hands said the Scripture would carry.

“It has carried farther things,” Benton said.

At the desk afterward the proof had already come back from the printing office with the type set tight and black. The phrase looked smaller in print than it had sounded standing up. He set the proof beside Jessie’s sheet and did not put one on top of the other.

The clerk came in with the afternoon’s papers.

“Anything from the West?” Benton said.

“One, sir.”

He had it open before the boy was through the door.

It was from a man at Monterey and it was dated the eleventh of January. It had gone out by ship and been landed at Panama and carried across and put on another ship, and it said that Captain Frémont’s party had come in and been resupplied and had gone south in good order, and that the country was quiet.

Benton read it twice.

Then he put it with the January letter in the same drawer, because they said the same thing and had been written within a week of each other, and there was nowhere else for it to go.

San Rafael

He remembered the weeks south by the light.

The mornings had changed first. They came over the eastern hills sandy and gold now, warming the dry grass before the dew had altogether left it, and by noon the road smelled of oak bark, horse sweat and dust. They had been out of the mountains long enough that a man could look west and imagine the country might finally have run out of stone, though every creek cut and wash proved otherwise. The stone had merely gone underneath.

They rode through grass that brushed the horses above the fetlocks and sometimes nearly to the knees. Cattle stood in the shade and watched them pass. Ranch houses appeared white and low among the oaks, empty-looking until a door opened and somebody came out to see what sort of men were using the road. By midday coats rode behind saddles and the horses ate better than they had in months, which improved the disposition of nearly everyone except Frémont, whose disposition appeared independent of forage.

The moon was half full when Enos first noticed that Lajeunesse's boots had begun to wear loose.

He had one off beside the fire and was turning it in his hands while men farther down the line argued over the words to a Spanish song. Basil's rawhide mend still held at the heel. It was crooked and ugly and had lasted longer than most repairs done with better tools, but the leather around it had stretched until the boot moved around Enos's foot instead of with it, and the sole had gone thin enough that by evening he could tell limestone from river rock through the bottom.

Leather did that. It learned the foot, then kept learning after there was nothing useful left to know. He had opened the lining inside the upper the first week he wore them, moved the button out of his trouser pocket, and sewn it shut again. A pocket could be emptied by other men. A boot came off last.

Enos worked grease around the mend with his thumb.

Carson came through the firelight and glanced at the heel.

"Nice patch job."

"Came with the boot."

Carson looked at the rest of it, then at the saddle.

"Looks about as shit as your saddle."

Enos pulled the boot on and stamped the heel once against the ground.

Carson went on toward the other fire.

The moon climbed over the oaks while Enos slept.

A few mornings later it was still in the western sky after sunrise, pale enough to look embarrassed about being caught there. By then the expedition had ceased resembling anything Enos would have called an expedition before joining it. Men came and went. Horses multiplied. Americans appeared at ranches already knowing Frémont's name, and Mexicans came out of houses knowing it for much the same reason. Orders arrived after the acts they justified. There were flags now, and receipts.

Enos trusted neither more for being written.

One afternoon a man came out of the brush with a bow half drawn.

The horses saw him before the men did. Carson brought his rifle up and the cap snapped without firing. Frémont was already moving. He put the bay into the man so quickly that afterward Enos remembered the horse better than the body—a dark bay with one white hind foot, striking the man once with the shoulder and going over him badly because a horse had no understanding of why its rider might suddenly ask it to become a weapon.

Frémont hauled the animal around. One of the Delawares finished what remained, and the column kept moving without an order to halt.

No one asked the man's name.

By evening the only sign that anything had happened was a place behind them where the grass had been flattened.

That night there was a little less moon.

Nobody mentioned him.

The days warmed as they went south, and Lajeunesse's boots grew looser. Enos folded a strip of cloth down the side of the left one and got half a day from it before sweat made the cloth worse than the space it filled. At camp he pulled it out, tossed the wet strip into the fire, and put the boot back on.

By the time the moon had narrowed to a crescent, Lieutenant Arce's horses came up the road.

They announced themselves first as dust, then as sound, and only afterward as horses. Two hundred and some head moving north under an escort, hooves overlapping until no single

animal could be heard in the whole of it. Then ears and heads came out of the haze, followed by the riders and the papers proving where everything belonged.

Arce had papers, which interested Talbot.

Arce had an escort, which interested Carson.

Arce had horses, which interested everybody.

Whatever conversation settled the matter took less time than the documents establishing the old ownership had taken to prepare. Nobody was killed. That made it the cleanest thing the party had done in weeks.

It was also theft.

Enos stood beside the road and watched two hundred horses that had been traveling north turn and begin moving south.

The papers presumably continued to say otherwise.

For the next several nights sleep became largely theoretical. Two hundred additional horses made two hundred additional noises, and none of them understood politics well enough to keep quiet for military necessity. Enos woke once to the crescent moon low over the grass and a strange mare breathing three feet from his head because somebody had tied her poorly. He fixed the knot, lay back down, and found the left boot beside his blanket opening farther along the welt.

The moon narrowed until there was almost nothing left of it.

Sonoma came before daylight.

Lanterns moved around buildings that had not yet become shapes, and the general came out of his house in his shirt. Brandy was offered. Terms were offered. Neither survived contact with the Americans. Men who had been farmers when the moon was half full stood armed around a Mexican officer and put him in a wagon.

Later somebody raised a flag with a bear on it.

From the ground it looked enough like a hog that the argument lasted through breakfast.

“Bear.”

“Hog.”

Carson ate without looking up.

“Whatever it is, it is ours.”

The moon disappeared.

For several nights there was only darkness above the fires, and rumor filled it.

A fight Enos had not seen arrived with fifty men in it. By the next telling there had been a hundred. By supper there were two hundred, and sometime after dark somebody added a bugle.

Nobody could say who had blown it.

Not long afterward two Americans were found dead and badly used.

That account did not grow.

Enos saw one of the men who had found them and understood why. Some stories acquired decoration because nobody had seen enough. Others arrived already carrying everything they could hold.

When the moon returned it was a thin white edge on the other side of darkness, and by then the country had narrowed around them almost without Enos noticing. The great valley had become ranch country, the ranch country roads, the roads settlements, until finally there were mission walls and corrals and a strip of shore below San Rafael where the fog came in every morning and removed the opposite side of the water.

They were there three days with little to do.

The first morning the fog burned away before ten. The second did the same. By the third Enos had begun to think the place possessed only two conditions: invisible and waiting.

He was at the horse line when the sun came through and found a boat on the water.

It crossed from the far side and put in below the estero. Three men stepped out before the boat turned and went back the way it had come. The man at the oars did not wait to discover what became of his passengers, which afterward looked like foresight and at the time looked like tide.

There was an old man and two younger ones.

The young men were alike enough that Enos looked twice. Eighteen or twenty, perhaps, and carrying saddles they had gone back to retrieve after buying horses in town. Each had one across a shoulder with an arm laid over the seat to hold it.

That was what Enos remembered later.

Their hands.

Both occupied.

Whatever else a man might imagine from the mission above them, he did not have to imagine whether either boy had a hand free.

One of the saddles was worth looking at. It had a good California tree, close rawhide work, dark leather tooled along the skirts without asking to be admired, and silver at the conchos in precisely the amount Enos thought silver ought to occur on a working saddle.

The young man shifted it on his shoulder.

The silver caught the morning once.

Enos approved.

The old man wore a broad dark hat shaped by years rather than a hatter. The brim turned differently on the left than the right, and his coat was good cloth gone shiny at the cuffs. They had come for the saddles. The old man had sons being held at Sonoma.

That was why he had crossed.

Frémont came to the edge above them.

Carson was nearby.

Enos had his rifle lying across the saddle in front of him.

The three Californians stopped below. One of the young men lowered the silver-mounted saddle to the ground.

Frémont looked down the slope.

“We have no room for prisoners.”

There was nothing in the sentence that said shoot.

There was nothing in it that required explaining.

Enos brought the rifle to his shoulder.

The young man with the silver saddle looked at him, and at that distance Enos could see the dust on his knees and the dark leather of boots still new enough to hold their shape. The face above them seemed younger than the saddle.

Enos found the chest with the sight.

The young man saw the rifle.

Then Enos behind it.

For a moment neither of them moved.

Enos's finger stayed where it was.

The moment lasted long enough for the young man to understand something from it. He turned. His brother turned with him, and the old man began moving after them.

The revolver fired from behind Enos.

The first boy pitched forward, and Carson fired again before he reached the ground. His body struck the shingle beside the saddle, turning it enough that one of the silver conchos flashed.

His brother was already running. Carson moved the revolver across him and fired until the boy stumbled, dropped to one knee, and then went flat on the shingle.

Only then did Enos realize his own rifle was still at his shoulder.

He lowered it.

The old man had made more distance. His coat opened behind him as he ran, but the broad hat remained on his head.

Carson returned the revolver to its holster and pulled the rifle from his horse. He followed the old man briefly through the sights and fired.

The old man dropped hard and rolled onto his side.

Carson lowered the rifle.

“God damn it.”

Enos looked at him.

“Shot him right in the ass.”

The old man moved.

One leg came underneath him and he managed to get an elbow into the dirt.

Carson watched him for a moment, then looked at Enos.

“I do not suppose you want to do the thing that needs doing either.”

Enos said nothing.

Carson’s eyes stayed on him just long enough to establish that silence as an answer, then went back to the man on the shore.

He started walking.

There was no hurry in it, but no hesitation either. He went downhill with the pace of a man whose destination and business had both been settled before the first step. As he walked he drew the revolver and began replacing the cartridges he had spent, his hands doing the work without requiring much of his attention while the old man tried to drag himself farther along the shingle.

By the time Carson reached him, the revolver was loaded.

He closed it, looked at it once and holstered it.

Then he drew his knife.

From above, Enos could not hear whether Carson said anything to the old man or whether the old man said anything to him. Carson knelt, put one hand on his shoulder, and did what he had gone down there to do.

He stayed beside him for a moment afterward.

Then he cleaned the knife, put it away and started back.

On the way he stopped at the silver-mounted saddle and picked it up.

When he reached Enos, the revolver was loaded, the knife was clean and the saddle rode easily over one shoulder.

He dropped it beside the horse line and looked at Enos's rig.

It had been Baker's once.

Years had made the statement inaccurate in pieces. The tree was Baker's, as was the bridle and the good breast strap. One stirrup leather had been replaced above the Sacramento, and a billet came from a Mexican vaquero who had wanted flour more urgently than leather. The cinch had been replaced twice, though Enos had kept the better iron ring from Baker's first one. What remained had been repaired, shortened, punched through, stitched and greased until the saddle belonged less to the man who had first owned it than to the miles that followed him.

A saddle used long enough became an argument against provenance.

Carson pushed at one skirt with his boot.

"You might want to swap that out for that piece of shit you have been stacked on for the last nine months."

"Longer."

"That does not help its case."

Enos crouched beside the Californio saddle and turned it over.

The tree was plainly better. So were the skirts, and the rawhide had been worked tight by somebody who knew that close work lasted longer than pretty work. The leather had been oiled rather than drowned in grease. Small wear marks had begun forming around the silver conchos, enough to show the saddle had worked and that whoever owned it had cared how it looked while doing so.

Enos understood that kind of vanity.

"Tree is better."

“Whole thing is better.”

“Cinch is not.”

Carson looked toward the shore, then down at Enos’s feet.

“Boots match the saddle. Dandy for my taste, but I hear a Frenchman likes to dress like that.”

Enos looked up.

“You calling a dead man a dandy?”

Carson considered the point with more seriousness than it deserved.

“In the event I see him again, I will apologize for my carelessness.”

Then he walked away.

Enos set the saddles side by side and began taking them apart.

The Californio tree stayed, along with the skirts and the better stirrup leathers. Baker’s stirrups were heavier and sat Enos’s feet properly, so they moved across. The Californio cinch came off and Enos’s went on. Baker’s breast strap stayed with him, as did the newer billet and two smaller pieces of leather nobody else would have bothered comparing.

Enos compared them anyway.

The bridle was never in question. Baker’s leather had gone dark around the places Enos handled it, the reins fell into his hands without needing arranging, and the bit had worked with enough horses to have learned that persuasion generally outperformed argument.

By the time he finished, the saddle no longer belonged cleanly to either dead man.

Before evening another man had taken Baker’s old tree from the supply pile, and somebody else cut one of the skirts for leather. What had once been a good rig disappeared into other men’s repairs with the efficiency of meat disappearing from a carcass.

Enos saddled the bay with the new one, walked him ten paces, and tightened the cinch again.

It sat well.

A little silver showed beneath Enos’s leg.

He liked it.

There was no useful reason not to.

Then he remembered what Carson had said about the boots.

The young Californio lay where he had fallen with one leg turned outward. The boots were nearly new, dark leather drawn close through the ankle, with good heels and silver-mounted spurs fine enough to be noticed without becoming ridiculous. The rowels were narrow and clean. They had belonged to somebody who knew that a horse did not need to suffer merely because its rider liked silver.

Enos looked down at Lajeunesse's boots.

The rawhide mend at the near heel still held. Almost nothing else did. The soles had worn thin, the left welt was beginning to separate, and the months between Klamath country and San Rafael had stretched the leather until both boots moved before Enos's feet did. If he stepped on a small stone he could tell its shape.

He looked back at the young man.

The new boots had probably not traveled a hundred miles.

Enos went down the slope.

Nobody asked him why.

That told him something about the morning too.

He left the young man's face turned toward the water and worked the first boot free. It came reluctantly because the leather was still close. The second was harder, and Enos took his time rather than damage anything.

A man could be dead and still own good workmanship for another minute.

He carried the boots uphill and sat with his back against the rail.

Basil's came off without resistance. They stood beside one another in the dust, the crooked rawhide repair still holding at the heel where Basil had put it, months earlier, using his teeth because his fingers had been too cold to pull the strip tight.

The repair had outlived the man.

Enos picked up the new left boot and pulled.

It stopped at the arch.

He pulled harder until the heel went home.

Narrow at the arch, like a young man's foot.

He stood and walked a little distance. The leather pressed him from both sides.

Leather stretches.

The other boot went on. When Enos put his heel down the little silver rowel turned cleanly.

He liked that more than was necessary.

For a while he looked at Basil's old boots standing in the dirt.

One dead man's boots ought to walk like any others.

He picked up the near one and worked a finger inside the upper, beneath the narrow piece of leather he had opened and sewn shut weeks before. The small hard shape was still there.

Two stitches came free beneath the knife point.

The button fell into his palm.

Bone or horn. He had never settled which. A little thread still remained through the shank from the Hudson's Bay coat he had taken off under the laurels years before.

The coat was gone.

The Company probably still had paper somewhere that was not.

Enos turned the button once between his fingers before putting it into his trouser pocket.

The new boots would need an awl before he could move it properly.

Basil had never asked why Enos kept something hidden inside a boot.

That had been another of his virtues.

The old boots went beside the supply pile, where one of the Delawares found them before supper. He tried one against his foot and frowned.

"Too large."

"Grass."

The man looked at him.

"In the toe."

He considered this, stuffed the front with dry grass and put them on.

By sunset Basil's boots were walking again.

Enos's new ones still pressed across his arches.

Leather stretches.

After dark he sat near the picket line with an awl and waxed thread. The Californio leather resisted the blade, which recommended it further. Enos opened a narrow place inside the upper where it would not rub against his leg, slid the button between the layers and stitched the facing closed again.

The work was not attractive.

It did not need to be.

When he pulled the boot on, the button sat against the outside of his calf where he could not feel it.

Good.

Two mornings later Enos saw a man eating at the cook fire in the old Spaniard's hat.

He knew it immediately.

The brim turned upward slightly on one side and dropped on the other, and the crown had been worked over the years into the shape of the head that had worn it. The man at the fire had pushed it back while eating. He tore bread with his teeth, drank coffee, laughed at something Henderson said, and the old man's hat moved when he laughed.

Enos watched him longer than he meant to.

He shifted his left foot. The new boot had already begun loosening, and the little silver rowel turned when his heel moved.

Boots were one thing.

The hat seemed different.

He could not have said precisely why.

A little morbid, perhaps.

The man finished eating and went to water a horse.

Enos watched the hat go.

By then the moon had begun filling again and the camp had begun emptying. Men spoke of whatever came next with the confidence of people who believed one thing ended merely because another had acquired a name.

Enos had stopped believing endings required agreement.

The morning he decided to leave, dust rose around the horse line and settled across everything with impartiality: boots, blankets, horse legs, hats, the lower edge of Baker's hide coat and the silver on Enos's new saddle.

Henderson saw him tightening the bedroll.

"Look at you."

Enos did not.

"Silver."

“It came with the saddle.”

“Could take it off.”

“So could you.”

Henderson considered that and let it go.

“You leaving?”

“Horse is.”

“You clear it with the captain?”

“No.”

“You going to?”

“No.”

Henderson spat into the dust. The boy beside him looked toward the tents as though an officer might emerge and make the departure official.

None did.

Enos led the bay toward Talbot.

Talbot was working at the tailgate with the second book open on a folded blanket, ink already staining the side of his hand. When he saw Enos coming, his face made the small resigned movement of a man discovering that work he had hoped was finished had remembered his name.

“Not you.”

“Morning.”

“You drew rations yesterday.”

“I ate them yesterday.”

“That is generally what happens to rations.”

“I have had poor examples.”

Talbot looked past him at the saddle.

“That yours?”

“It has been.”

His eyes dropped to the silver at Enos’s heels.

“And the boots?”

“They are a bit tight over the arch.”

Talbot looked from the spurs to the conchos.

“They match?”

“Seemed a shame to separate them.”

“I imagine a Frenchman would think that.”

Talbot turned back to the table.

“Those are property of the expedition.”

“Severance.”

Talbot looked up.

“You are deserting.”

“Take a note for them?”

Talbot studied Enos for a moment, then reached beneath the folded blanket and pulled out the older ledger.

It was thicker than the one he had been working in and considerably less respectable. The leather had gone dark along the spine from hands and grease, the corners had softened until they no longer possessed corners in any useful sense, and several pages had swollen from having been wet and dried again. It opened where repeated use had taught it to open.

Names ran down the pages in different hands. Some had been ruled through. Some carried figures forward onto later pages. Men dead for months still occupied lines beside men who had ridden away and men Enos could not remember ever seeing.

Talbot began turning pages while Enos leaned against the tailgate.

“You keep everybody.”

“Until the ledger says otherwise.”

“That seems crowded.”

“It is.”

Talbot found one entry, then another, and after several more pages a third. Enos leaned closer. All three belonged to him—not in any philosophical sense, but in flour, coffee, tobacco, powder, feed and rations. Three names, three sets of figures, three balances, all attached to one man.

Enos studied them for a while.

“I thought I had been eating well.”

Talbot ran a finger down the columns. “You have.”

“Three times.”

“You were useful.”

Enos looked at him. “Nobody paid me.”

“No.”

Talbot turned back a page and checked another figure.

“A useful man overpaid is still useful.”

“Especially if no one paid him.”

Talbot’s mouth moved slightly. “The ledger just needs to balance.”

He went back through the entries. There was nothing hurried or furtive in the work.

Talbot knew perfectly well that the three names were Enos and had apparently known for some time. The expedition had needed horses held, animals found, roads read, languages guessed at, fires made and men found after dark. Whether the coffee went against one version of Enos or another had mattered less while those things were happening. Now Enos was leaving, which made the arithmetic interesting again.

Talbot looked toward the saddle.

“Saddle, boots, spurs.”

“The bridle is mine.”

“I did not say bridle.”

“Good.”

Talbot made a small notation.

“You taking the note?”

“I am considering whether I want a fourth account for you.”

“That seems excessive.”

“Three apparently were not.”

Talbot turned back several pages until he reached names Enos recognized. One man had died north of them. Another had been buried beside a road. A third had simply stopped appearing at fires, and nobody had ever settled whether he had left, deserted, died or found a better expedition.

Talbot ran the pen down one column and began carrying figures. Part of Enos’s balance went onto the account of the first dead man, then another portion onto the second. The saddle followed, then the boots and spurs.

Enos watched him work.

“They did not owe that.”

“No.”

“I do.”

“Yes.”

Talbot transferred the last figure and checked the total.

“Then why put it there?”

“The ledger needs to balance.”

Enos looked at the dead men’s names.

“Convenient men.”

“They are unlikely to object.”

“That does not make it true.”

Talbot checked the column again. “No.”

The answer was so simple that Enos had nothing useful to do with it. Talbot sanded the wet figures and brushed the excess away.

“Washington will reconcile the accounts before anyone collects a note from you out here.”

There was no contempt in it. He might have been predicting rain.

Enos looked again at the three versions of himself. Only one still carried anything beside it.

Talbot put down the pen.

“What did Hudson’s Bay put when you left them?”

“Deserted.”

Talbot glanced at him. “Did you?”

“I left.”

“That is generally what it means.”

“To the ledger.”

Talbot looked back at the page.

“And today?”

“Still leaving.”

He picked up the pen and ruled through the three entries with one stroke, carrying the same line through the names and what remained of the balances he had moved elsewhere. Then he went to the remarks column.

Enos watched him write.

discharged at San Rafael, 28 June

Talbot checked the figures once more. The balance beside the surviving entry was clean.

"You said I was deserting."

"You are."

"That is not what you wrote."

"No."

Enos waited.

Talbot closed the ledger.

"It balances."

That was the last thing Talbot ever said to him.

Enos put his foot into the stirrup. The boot was already easier through the arch.

Leather stretches.

He swung up. The new saddle took his weight differently, a little higher in front and closer through the seat, but Baker's stirrups sat where his feet expected them and the old cinch held. The Californio silver showed beneath his knee. Baker's bridle lay easy in his hands.

At the cook fire Henderson raised two fingers.

"Tell them south we died pretty."

"I will improve you where needed."

Henderson laughed. The boy did not.

Enos rode past the last tents.

The camp thinned gradually into the things men came back for if they remembered and abandoned if they did not: a barrel hoop, gray ash under half-burned sticks, a broken cup, a strip of rawhide, one torn boot without its mate, a stake driven into the ground with nothing tied to it.

The man wearing the old Spaniard's hat crossed ahead of him carrying water.

Enos watched him go.

Still morbid.

He touched his heels to the bay. The silver rowels turned and the horse took the road.

Fog covered the water below, and Enos did not look back until the mission disappeared around the bend.

At the bottom of the grade a creek ran low and clear over stone, watercress holding in the slack places. He let the horse drink and listened to the bit click softly while it drew water.

No one came after him.

There was no shouted order from the road above, no rider breaking around the bend, no shot from behind. After a while the absence of pursuit became ordinary enough that Enos took the tin cup from behind the saddle, filled it from the running part of the creek and drank.

The saddle beside his thigh was dark and close worked, a little silver showing where somebody had once thought silver belonged. His left boot was already beginning to fit.

Inside it, between two pieces of leather sewn together badly enough that nobody would admire the work, the button rode where no one could see it.

Enos poured the remaining water over his hands. The dust ran off in a thin brown thread. He rubbed one knuckle with his thumb until the skin reddened and then stopped.

There was nothing on his hands.

There had not been.

He looked at them anyway.

The bay raised its head and water ran from its mouth.

Enos put the cup away, gathered Baker's reins and let the horse find the far bank.

By noon the mission would be out of sight. By evening, if luck had any laziness in it, he would have a fire under a rock and no man asking what to call him.

Behind him, a worn ledger carried the cost of his saddle and boots against men who would never see the figures, three versions of Enos had been struck through, and the man who was actually riding away owed nothing the book could collect.

Deserted was what one ledger had called leaving.

Discharged was what another had chosen.

Enos let the horse climb.

He knew better than to call either one the truth.

He kept his eyes on the road.

Narrative

Washington City, September 1846

The first draft made the dead obedient.

The real one came in September, without Frémont, which was an improvement. A man could defend himself and spoil a page by breathing on it. A document had better manners. It lay flat, accepted weight, took correction, and did not interrupt while being made serviceable.

Benton had the papers spread across the long table in the back parlor: a copied dispatch, a folded map, a list of dead men, a marked draft, an earlier printed account, a letter in Frémont's hand, and a loose report fragment from the Klamath country whose second page had traveled hard and been folded while damp. Rain had been working at the windows since morning, enough to darken the street and soften the light without ever committing itself to weather.

The table held the usual instruments: paper knife, ruler, steel pens, inkstand, fine drying sand, compass, dividers, and the brass weight shaped like a sleeping dog. Everything was clean. Nothing on the table had mud dried against it or had knocked against a mule in the dark.

Jessie stood. Benton sat because his knees had hurt since breakfast and because there was no advantage in letting pain appear urgent.

Jessie loosened the packet and ignored the order in which somebody else had tied it. She read enough of each page to understand what sort of claim it intended to make, then arranged the papers according to what they could establish: ground and distance together, movement beside them, reports of danger in another place, orders and conduct in a fourth. The divisions did not hold for long. A river crossing occurred before an alarm on one page and after it on another. A village acquired hostility somewhere between a field note and a copied dispatch. She moved the papers until the contradictions could be read without having to remember where they had been.

The casualty list came last, with Crane, Denny, and Lajeunesse written one beneath another with the peculiar neatness dead men acquired once nothing more could happen to their names.

Jessie placed the list beside the field report, read them together, then pushed both toward her father.

"Does this look right to you?"

Benton read.

“What.”

She put a finger against the place where one sentence gave way to the next.

“Here. Three men are dead. By the next sentence the road is in danger.”

Benton drew the map closer.

“The east road in the basin.”

Jessie followed his finger.

“There is no road there.”

“There will be.”

She looked from the map to the report and followed the distance with her eyes.

“Forty miles.”

Benton looked at her.

“Nobody else knows that.”

Jessie left her finger on the page for another moment before drawing Frémont’s letter toward her. His hand leaned forward even when the sentence did not. She had worked through enough of his prose to know the habit. John liked arrival. He disliked apology. When he had to move around a thing he generally did so by describing everything near it until the thing itself appeared to have been accounted for.

“He does not say much.”

“He says enough.”

“The camp was in confusion. Loyal men fell. There was danger to the road.” She turned the sheet. “He never quite says who saw what.”

Benton looked at the letter.

“He is in command of the field, Jessie. He is doing what he believes necessary to finish the business I have dispatched him to and return home.”

Jessie rested her hand on the page for a moment before setting it beside the field fragment.

She read from the rougher account.

“The hostile outrage committed upon our camp, leaving three faithful men dead and the surrounding road in immediate peril—”

She moved farther down.

“Wanting proper tools to bury them, we laid them among the laurels—”

She stopped and read it again.

“An engineering expedition without proper tools?”

Benton looked at the line.

Jessie read laid them among the laurels once more.

The phrase was gentler than what it described. It gave the dead foliage and shade and said nothing about the depth of the ground, the road beside them, or how soon the living men had ridden away.

She left it.

Jessie had done this sort of work before and had called it correction because everyone else did. Men brought papers into her father’s house with vanity, weather, ambition, and fear still hanging from them, and she removed whatever would not survive the journey into print.

A page allowed things a room did not. It held still. It could be turned and placed beside another page until their differences became obvious. A phrase could be moved six inches on a table before it was moved six words in a sentence.

She turned the earlier printed account face up. Somebody had dragged a thumb through the ink near John’s name.

“This has the alarm after they find the dead. The field report has it before.”

“Before.”

Jessie began moving the phrase, then stopped.

“If I move it like that, it looks moved.”

“Then do not.”

She returned it and spent several minutes reading the surrounding sentences, moving one clause and then another, putting the dead where they had been and changing what came near them. When she finished, the sequence had shifted without any single sentence appearing to have traveled very far.

She read it again.

“There.”

Benton said nothing.

The same three names appeared on every page. John grieved them. The field report used them to explain movement. The copied dispatch used them to explain danger. By the time the

printed account reached Washington they would be background, three men whose greatest public usefulness was that they could no longer contradict what followed.

Jessie looked again at the map and touched the pencil line with the end of her pen.

“Forty miles?”

“Necessity.”

She followed the route once more.

Forty miles was enough country for anger to cool and enough for a horse to tire. It was enough for a man to turn back, enough for somebody to ask whether the men ahead were actually being followed. The distance did not prevent the argument Washington would want. It merely made that argument harder if anyone knew to ask.

Nobody else knew that.

Jessie slid the map partly beneath the rough report and continued reading.

The tactical account described the water being cut, the brush denied, men divided by approach, houses entered, stores destroyed, and canoes gathered and burned. The phrases were dry and competent, and the competence carried its own accusation.

“This stays with the field account.”

“The result comes over.”

Jessie moved the report aside.

Something still bothered her near the bottom of the second page. She read it again and then returned to the first.

The rough account contained no count of the dead at the village.

The copied dispatch did.

Jessie brought the pages together. The number appeared cleanly in another hand and then appeared again in the printed account, altered slightly in its wording but otherwise accepted. She worked backward through the papers looking for the thing that had produced it.

There was no tally attached to the rough report, no list of names, and nothing in John’s letter supplied it. The figure simply appeared between one version and the next and survived because every later page found it already there.

“This number is not here.”

Benton looked at the field report.

“No.”

Jessie checked John's letter once more.

"Nor here."

Benton waited.

The American number was different. Three had Crane, Denny, and Lajeunesse attached to it. Three could be followed from bodies to names to paper. The other figure had no such path.

Jessie laid the dispatch aside.

"Then it stays where it is."

She drew the marked draft toward the center and began assembling what remained. Three men had died. Their deaths could be made to establish danger. The danger could establish the need for movement. The distance could remain on the map where nobody outside the room yet knew to examine it. The tactical method could stay in the field report. The enemy count could remain in the copied dispatch without being granted another clean copy.

She dipped a steel pen and waited for the excess ink to fall.

Three faithful men killed in the attack upon the camp, and the road thereby shown to be in immediate peril, Colonel Frémont ordered a prompt movement against the hostile Klamath party believed responsible.

Jessie read it once.

"Ordered is wrong."

"He ordered it."

"I know."

She placed the point of the pen against ordered but did not draw the line.

She had done smaller versions of this before. A party of Indians, mounted had once become hostiles under her hand because the printed sentence required an intention the field note had not supplied. She had noticed the change afterward, considered taking it back, and let it stand.

John would still have given the command. The men would still have ridden forty miles. Nothing that had happened would become untrue if she altered the sentence.

The choice would disappear.

Jessie looked at her father.

"If I do this, the page will not say what he decided."

Benton looked at the sentence.

“No.”

“It will say there was nothing else to decide.”

He said nothing.

Jessie kept the pen where it was.

There was still time to leave ordered. Nobody had instructed her to remove it. Nobody in Washington would know she had considered doing so, and the sentence would remain closer to what had happened than the one she was about to make.

She drew the line through the word.

Three faithful men killed in the attack upon the camp, and the road thereby shown to be in immediate peril, a prompt movement became necessary against the hostile Klamath party believed responsible.

Jessie read the new sentence slowly.

The need now existed before John entered it.

She kept looking at it.

“This is what we will print.”

Benton looked at the page.

“Yes.”

Jessie sprinkled a little drying sand over the fresh ink and tipped the excess back onto the tray.

When she returned to the copied dispatch she found Carson everywhere, giving orders, choosing ground, directing men, controlling the water and brush.

“Carson is everywhere in this.”

Benton looked at the page.

“Carson is a frontier hero. But John commanded the expedition.”

Jessie marked the first reference to Carson, then the second.

Swanok could come out without altering the sentence. His name went.

Sagundai remained only because the identification of the village had been attached to him. Jessie moved the identification away from the man who had supplied it, read the sentence again, then struck his name as well.

The account continued to make sense.

With each name removed the action became less particular. The men receded while the movement remained, clean enough to have happened almost by itself.

John did not disappear.

The rain thinned and the room brightened slightly. The ruler, pens, inkstand, drying sand, compass, and dividers caught the weak gray light and looked almost delicate against the papers, clean tools being used to measure a dirty distance.

Jessie drew the fair page close and wrote carefully:

The outrage upon the camp, in which three faithful men were killed, showed the road to be in immediate peril. Wanting proper tools to bury them, we laid them among the laurels before the party continued. A prompt movement became necessary against the hostile Klamath party believed responsible. The resulting engagement ended in the destruction of enemy stores and means of crossing, and the dispersal of the hostile village.

She stopped after village and read the paragraph from the beginning.

The field material had contained forty miles, the water, the names, and a number for the dead that nothing on the table could explain. Most of it had fallen away without requiring an explicit lie.

“Read it.”

Jessie did.

Benton listened without interrupting.

When she finished, he looked at the page.

“That will carry.”

Jessie looked toward the rough pages, then at Frémont’s letter beneath the ruler.

“John will like it.”

“He will.”

What Benton had told the chamber in May was already printed. Whatever Jessie wrote now would enter a room prepared months before anyone inside it knew what had happened. The room had not predicted the facts. It merely had places ready for certain kinds of facts when they arrived.

At the bottom of the packet Jessie found a folded roster she had not yet used. It carried the smaller accounting that traveled beside larger events: names, terms, rations, animals, powder, wages. The first entries had been made earlier in the expedition. Farther down, other names had

been added at Sutter's and afterward, the hand and spacing changing as men entered the company by degrees.

Jessie ran her finger down the later additions.

"These were added at Sutter's."

"Yes."

"They are all marked useful."

Benton looked over.

"Until they are not."

Jessie read farther.

Some of the later men appeared more than once under altered names. One acquired an initial between entries. Another lost a surname. Spellings shifted while charges for flour, coffee, tobacco, powder, feed, and rations continued without much concern for which version of a man carried them.

She could have corrected some of it. That was what a fair copy was supposed to do. Names could be regularized. Duplicates could be reconciled. A clerk encountering the page later would thank whoever had made the columns easier to follow.

Jessie did not touch them.

The inconsistencies belonged to the record as surely as the clean sentences did. Choosing among them would not recover what had happened. It would only make the uncertainty less visible.

Benton reached for the drying sand.

Jessie put her hand over the line.

"Wait."

Benton waited.

She folded the roster once, gently enough not to sharpen the old crease, and slid it beneath the map.

Benton shook the fine sand across the wet ink.

The grains dulled its shine, and the amended page lay between them drying cleanly in the gray light.

Useful

The camp stood where the road quit pretending.

It came out of the timber in two ruts and ended in a mess of stumps, mud, chips, ox dung, and men. Beyond it the ground rose black with brush. The rain had quit sometime in the night and left everything shining. Axes leaned against a fir. A broken wagon tongue lay in the grass with the look of a thing shot for cause.

Three children stood on it playing court, which Enos took as a poor sign for the country.

He came in leading the mule, because the mule had opinions about civilization.

The animal stopped twenty yards short of the first tent, lowered its head, and began cropping at wet grass as though the whole matter had been settled. Enos pulled once on the lead. The mule lifted one ear.

“You too,” Enos said.

A man by the fire looked over. “He deaf?”

“No. He listens poorly.”

The camp smelled of coffee, green wood smoke, wet wool, horse sweat, sour flour. Under it ran the old smell of men gathered for work they had not yet admitted was war by other means.

Applegate came from the far side of the wagons. He walked carefully, not from fear but from the habit of watching where every foot went.

Enos had seen him twice before. Once bent over a map. Once watching a team fail a grade while six men shouted six plans and the oxen chose none.

He saw Enos and did not smile. One of his virtues.

“You came back.”

“The mule did. I am attached to him by habit.”

Applegate looked at the mule. It had its ears flat now and was investigating a puddle.

“I meant useful.”

He made a mark in the notebook, though Enos did not see how the mule had earned ink, and then closed it. He was younger than he looked when the light struck him from the side. Not young, but not yet old enough for the country he was trying to measure. Mud to the knee. Hands

nicked and swollen. He had the face of a man who had learned that paper did not lift logs and still believed paper ought to be present when logs were lifted.

“What name are you using?”

Enos looked past him. A girl in a blue dress was feeding a strip of bacon rind to a dog so lean its ribs showed clear through the hide. Behind her a fellow drove stakes into a washed place where water had eaten the new road. Each blow sank the stake half an inch and splashed mud up his shirt.

Applegate waited. He was good at it.

The last name sat in Enos’s mouth like a bad tooth. It had done service. It had got him past men who wanted papers and men who wanted stories and men who wanted a reason to strike first, and it had stopped being a name some while ago and become a saddle sore. He could carry it. He knew where it rubbed.

“Short,” he said. “E. Short.”

Applegate held out the pencil.

It had been sharpened with a knife and left rough, and Enos could feel each cut against his thumb. The list already held a dozen men in small cramped script. Some of the names were plain. Some were too fine for the boots under them. He saw Pruitt’s mark, a hard crooked P, and beside it the word *able*.

“What do you need it for?”

“Rations. Labor account. If the road becomes anything, men will ask who made it.”

Enos looked at the paper a moment.

Some of those names were fit for printing. Others were fit for warrants. A few belonged only to mothers, and the mothers were far enough off to be safe from correction. A man who would not lend you his knife would lend the country a name he did not own.

He bent and made the letters. The rain had started again, light and cold, and it freckled the sheet and blurred the last one before it dried.

It was a small name. Small enough to travel. Small enough to be mistaken for another small thing and lost.

Applegate looked at it and did not say it aloud.

That was the whole of his opinion and it was more courtesy than Enos had been shown by better men.

“You can stay with the road party through the morning,” Applegate said. “We need men who know how to keep moving when nothing improves.”

He folded the paper and put it inside his coat.

“Most men bite.”

They put him on the crosscut because he had two hands and had made the mistake of standing where a man with authority could see him.

The saw was longer than a coffin plank and meaner in the teeth. Pruitt took the other handle. He had a beard full of chips and a left eye that watered from an old powder burn, and he spat on his palms as though the tree had asked for terms.

“Pull.”

The saw entered the fir with a thin complaint. Sap showed pale in the cut. Higher on the slope, axes rang at different times, so that the whole hillside sounded like a blacksmith with fever. Oxen stood in the road with rainwater on their backs and old patience in their eyes. One wagon had been unloaded to the ground and everything a family owned lay in the mud under a quilt: pans, sacks, a Bible, a cradle, a stove lid, two broken chairs, three barrels, and a clock that had stopped and was still being protected.

The fir was green and did not want to be useful. It pinched the saw twice. A boy ran wedges in with a maul too heavy for him and each blow turned his whole body, and the third one missed and struck mud. The men laughed, but not hard. There was too much road left for cruelty to be a luxury.

They worked until the cut showed in Enos’s shoulders and in the old cold place under his ribs.

Then the stump.

They had dug around it and set poles beneath and two men pulled at a rope while another struck at the root with an axe and a fourth stood too close and gave advice. The root came up out of the mud pale and forked and went back down again into the dark.

Enos looked at it. “It has family?”

The man with the axe wiped his thumb on his trousers and handed over the pry pole. “You funny all day?”

They set the pole under the root. The wood was slick. Enos braced his boots and felt the old pull in his back, the one that told him he still had a body and the body had complaints filed in triplicate. Another man took the pole beside him and smelled of onions and fear. Not much fear. Ordinary fear. The kind that came around trees, animals, women in labor, and orders.

The axe went in. Chips flew pale and wet. Enos leaned his weight, felt his ribs pinch, saw white for a moment, and then the root gave with a sound like a knuckle cracking. The stump rose an inch and the men shouted as if they had invented resurrection.

“It was done in the rain,” one of them said, looking at the hole.

“Then it was done fine,” Enos said.

At the spring below the cut the water came out among stones. Enos filled there.

Applegate came down with his notebook away for once.

“Good work.”

Enos drank. The water tasted of tin and leaves. He handed the cup back.

“The mule favors level ground more.”

“So do I.” Applegate looked out across the stump field. His eyes passed over Enos once and came back, not long enough to accuse him of anything. “We move the wagons again at first light. There is a bad grade beyond the creek. We will need every able man.”

“You have that written somewhere.”

“I have it written twice.”

The wheel had gone in past the hub by afternoon, at the soft place where the water crossed, and the woman standing by it had a jaw set hard enough to strike flint on.

She did not thank them for coming. Enos liked her for it. Gratitude before labor was a form of fraud.

“Where is your husband?”

“Under the wagon, being useful.”

Enos crouched and found him there, red-faced and wet to the elbows, with mud on his nose and a small iron pin in his hand. The pin was not complicated.

“Wheel is settled,” Enos said.

They cut poles and set them under the axle. Applegate brought two oxen and had the driver back the team at an angle. The driver was an old man with a white beard yellowed at the mouth, and he clicked to them and called them each by name, and they were Henry and Clay, which showed either a poor opinion of politics or a high one of cattle.

“Push when I say.”

Everyone put a shoulder to something. Enos took the wheel. Mud sucked at his boots and his hands slid on the wet wood. The woman stood near the team with a skillet still in her hand.

“Now.”

They pushed. The oxen leaned. The wagon complained in all its joints. The husband under the axle shouted, though he had been told not to be under it, and Pruitt cursed him by name, though he had only just learned it and seemed glad of the intimacy. The wheel rose an inch, sank, rose again. Enos felt something pull in his back and go hot and set his teeth and pushed harder, because stopping would have required judgment.

When it rolled free the woman said nothing at all and went back to her fire.

Later she found Applegate at the tailgate.

“You said nails.”

He did not turn. “Ask Hobbs.”

“Hobbs said ask you.”

“Hobbs is improving.”

“The box is empty.”

“It is never empty. It is mislaid.”

“My husband cannot mend the tongue with mislaid nails.”

Applegate opened the box, which was in fact not empty, and looked at her.

“Three,” she said.

“That is more than two.”

“Less than four.”

“You have a head for office, Mrs. Vale.”

The commissioner arrived in the last hour of light with a leather book under his arm.

He was broad and red in the neck and had the soft hands of a man who never failed to arrive after the chopping started. A road commissioner, or a man shaped by long practice to be

mistaken for one. He set the book on a plank across two barrels and turned back the cover with some ceremony.

“Labor,” he said. “By the day.”

The rider who had come down from the upper cut that morning had the tally ready and pushed it across.

The commissioner counted with his eyes. Pruitt by the fire. The boy with the maul. Two Applegate hands up at the chain. Four choppers in the brush. Three with the ox team. One asleep against a wheel, though asleep was still a condition of employment in some outfits.

That made twelve, if a Christian counted the boy and the sleeper.

Eleven, if God was keeping the books.

The commissioner wrote sixteen.

He saw Enos watching him do it and did not trouble to cover the page.

“Listen. The grant pays for labor by the day and improvement by the mile. If four men are scouting the ford, they are in service of the road. If you write twelve, some clerk in Oregon City will say we worked like widows and ask why the wagons still stick. If you write sixteen, he may say nothing.” He blotted it.

The map lay open beside the book. The line of the road crossed the paper in a neat brown stroke. On the ground it was mud, roots, corduroy, bent axe handles, ox droppings, and women lifting pans out of the rain.

On the paper it had confidence.

Enos put a finger near the entry above it. “Corn.”

“Acquired.”

“That is a light meal for the men who grew it.”

The rider blotted his own page with sand. “They were not hungry when they got it.”

“Many men are not hungry before supper.”

The commissioner’s smile went. “They came into camp with corn. We needed corn. They would not take coin. We gave a receipt redeemable at the agency when established.”

“When established?”

“It will be established.”

“That is a hopeful dinner.”

The leather book closed halfway in his hand. “You speak their tongue?”

“Some.”

“Good. Then you know they understand trade.”

“I know men understand a gun pointed at a sack.”

“No gun was fired.”

“That improves the corn.”

The commissioner’s face darkened. His gaze went past Enos toward the wagons and then came back, and his voice dropped.

“There are families here. There is winter above us and mud below us. The road must pass. If it does not pass, more families go north by the old track and die by river or snow or bad luck with better manners. We require fit men. Not delicate ones.”

He turned the tally around and pushed it across the plank.

“Sign.”

Pruitt had come nearer with his cup and sawdust on his shirt. “Best sign,” he said quietly.

“Is that counsel?”

“That is weather.” He shrugged. “I been four men myself when the paper needed it. Been two sick mules and a bridge once. Bridge paid better.”

“You have eaten our beans,” the commissioner said.

“I thought poorly of them.”

“You used our saw.”

“It used me back.”

“You are on this road now.”

Enos took the pen. The nib had been cut badly and threw a burr of ink at the first stroke.

The borrowed name went down under the sixteen men, under the corn acquired, under the powder issued for the protection of labor. The ink shone black. Then it dulled.

“There,” the commissioner said. “A useful man.”

Enos set the pen down.

“I have been called worse by better men.”

“I doubt both halves of that.”

A shout came from the crossing.

The near ox had gone down in the traces with a foreleg through the yoke strap and was thrashing, and men were around it in a ring doing nothing in six directions.

“Cut it loose,” somebody yelled.

“Do not cut the yoke,” the commissioner shouted back. “That yoke is issued.”

Enos got down into the mud beside the animal’s head and put his weight across the neck and got the knife out.

“The strap,” he said. “Not the yoke.”

He cut it. The rope fiber and the wet leather took the blade badly and the edge came back across his palm at the end of it and opened a narrow line there.

The ox came up. It stood shaking with its eye rolling and its breath sour and then, after a moment, began to eat.

The commissioner came up last, walking fast enough to appear useful. His eye took in the cut strap, the mud, the ox, the wagon, the men.

“Enter one strap expended.”

Pruitt wiped mud out of his beard. “Enter one ox persuaded.”

The commissioner ignored him and looked at Enos.

“You can write that too.”

Enos flexed the burned hand. Blood showed in the line across the palm, mixed with mud and rope fiber. He looked down the road they had made, and then up at the trees still standing.

“Put me down as a strap,” he said.

Pruitt laughed then, hard and sudden, and it cost him breath.

At dusk the ration came in a dented tin: beans, a heel of bread, and coffee black enough to stand charges.

Enos sat on the cut end of the fir beside Pruitt and ate with a wooden spoon. His palms had opened in two places and the blood had mixed with sap and made a poor glue.

Pruitt chewed and looked down the half-made road. “Tomorrow this will be better.”

“No one is asking you to do more than work,” Applegate said, from the other side of the fire.

“No,” Enos said. “They never do.”

Applegate did not answer. Perhaps he had heard it as complaint. Perhaps he had heard it right. The difference would not lift the grade.

Around them the camp settled. Children fought sleep and lost badly. Somebody sang two lines of a song and forgot the rest. Behind the wagons a woman cried without making much sound. On the broken tongue the children had gone back to their court, and one boy had appointed himself judge and was sentencing another to hang for stealing a biscuit. The condemned took the sentence well and ate the biscuit.

The order came and the fires were kicked apart. In the dark the wagons became shapes without owners. Ox chains clicked. Someone hushed a child. Someone prayed in a voice that did not want witnesses.

Enos lay under a wagon with his coat over his chest and the damp coming up through his back.

The name he had written was on Applegate's paper now, folded and dry if luck held. It would draw beans. It might draw questions. It might draw a bullet if a man read too well.

The road town, when he came to it eleven days later, was a stable without doors, a store with its roof gone gray at the seams, and a plank room with whiskey in it.

The plank room had no sign. It did not need one.

He had been three days on short rations and two of those in wet clothes, and his hands had begun their business before noon and had not stopped. He took the first one standing, hat in his left hand and his right where men could see it.

Half of it went down hard and hot and his stomach made a fist around it.

By the time his eyes cleared, his hands were quiet.

The man behind the counter had a slate on the wall beside him with a bit of chalk on a string. He took it down without being asked.

"Name?"

"For the drink?"

"For the slate."

The slate was crowded. Most of the names on it looked like lies. Some men had chosen ones too clean for their boots. One had written *Judge* and another *General*, and the chalk under both had been rubbed thin by a thumb that knew the work.

“Where you in from?” the man said.

“South of reports.”

He wrote nothing for that.

“Name.”

Enos looked at the slate a moment. He thought about the one drying on a folded sheet inside Applegate’s coat eleven days back, and about how many days it would be before some clerk in Oregon City read it and believed it.

“Put E. Childs.”

“You spell that with an s?”

“Depends who is asking.”

“Then I spelled it careful.”

He set the chalk back on its string.

Enos put a coin on the plank and sat down where he could see the door, and worked the rest of the drink slowly, because it was the last money he had and because there was nowhere in that town he had to be.

Parlor

Washington City, October 1847

The room had been borrowed because the court had too many ears.

It stood over a bank on Fifteenth Street and belonged to a man in Baltimore who did not know his furniture had been drafted into the defense of John C. Frémont. The table was too long for the room. Six chairs had been gathered around it from at least three different households. A lamp with one cloudy chimney burned at the center though there was still an hour of daylight at the window.

Rain had been working the city since morning. Carriage wheels went through the standing water below and sent the sound against the glass.

Frémont stood at the window with one glove in his hand.

He had been worrying the seam with his thumb for some time before Jessie noticed. The leather had begun opening near the forefinger. He stopped when he saw it, examined the damage, and pressed the seam together as though the glove might reconsider.

Benton sat at the table.

His knees had troubled him on the stairs. He had refused the arm of the clerk and taken the banister instead, which meant they troubled him considerably.

Jones had made three stacks of paper.

Charges.

Correspondence.

Public notice.

The clerk had made a fourth and then discovered nobody else had wanted one.

“Mutiny,” Jones said.

The clerk wrote the word though it was already written three feet from him.

Jones continued.

“Disobedience of the lawful command of a superior officer. Conduct prejudicing good order and military discipline.”

Frémont turned from the window.

“Good order.”

Benton looked at the charge sheet.

“It is useful language.”

“It is foul language.”

“It can be both.”

Jones put two fingers on the first charge.

“The court will not try the whole of California. It will try whether Colonel Frémont knowingly defied a lawful command.”

“They cannot separate one from the other.”

“They already have.”

Frémont came away from the window.

“Kearny entered Los Angeles after Stockton had established a government. Stockton appointed me. Men had accepted the authority. The country had accepted it.”

Jones waited.

Frémont did not like waiting once he had begun.

“Kearny arrived carrying instructions written before half of what he was instructing had occurred.”

“Yes.”

“And that makes his command superior?”

“It makes that the question.”

Frémont looked at him.

“No. It makes that their answer.”

Benton had not moved.

“They are not trying California,” he said. “They are deciding which man had the right to sign it.”

Frémont turned toward him.

“And I am to accept the smaller field.”

“You are to defend yourself on the field they have chosen.”

“That is not the same thing.”

“No.”

Frémont stood there a moment longer, then went back to the window.

The clerk had lowered his head over the page. He was the only person in the room who was not related to the defendant by blood, marriage, political debt, or some arrangement that had become indistinguishable from all three.

Jessie lifted the memorandum.

“Kearny. Stockton. Appointment. Military necessity. Confused command.”

“Those are the rails,” Jones said.

“And the rest?”

Nobody answered quickly.

A carriage wheel struck a hole in the street below. Water slapped the curb.

Benton took off his spectacles and cleaned one lens.

“The rest is not before the court.”

Jessie looked at the charge sheet.

“Convenient.”

Benton put the spectacles back on but did not answer.

Frémont said, “I will not let Kearny make rebellion out of obedience to Stockton.”

Jones turned toward him.

“Then do not.”

Frémont waited.

Jones tapped the charge.

“Make the court decide which obedience was lawful.”

“That concedes there was a choice.”

“There was.”

“There was not when I made it.”

“That is your defense.”

Frémont looked at Benton.

Benton said nothing.

That irritated him more than disagreement would have.

Jones drew the charge sheet nearer.

“Mutiny is defined. Disobedience is defined. Conduct prejudicing good order is broad, but still military. We can answer military.”

Jessie had been looking at the spaces between the charges.

“They chose the only crime that does not require counting bodies.”

The clerk stopped writing.

Only for a second.

Jones turned a page carefully this time.

Frémont’s thumb found the broken seam in the glove again and held it shut.

Benton looked at Jessie.

She did not look back.

After a while Frémont said, “No one has charged murder.”

“No,” Jessie said.

“No one should.”

Nothing in the room moved.

The lamp chimney had a long gray mark near the top. One coal had fallen from the grate and sat dark on the iron fender. The clerk’s pen remained lifted above the page.

Jones cleared his throat.

“The defense must not widen.”

Frémont looked at him.

“Widen.”

“The court has given you charges it knows how to hear. You served under competing authorities. You believed Stockton’s command lawful. You believed California required continuity of government. Kearny arrived into a disputed command.”

“Kearny arrived after the work.”

“Yes.”

“That matters.”

“Yes.”

“He did not make California ours.”

Jones let the sentence settle.

“No.”

“I did not wait in Los Angeles for a brigadier general to tell me whether the country had happened.”

Benton shifted in the chair.

That was enough to make Frémont stop.

Jones said, "Say that to Kearny and you will save the prosecution a week."

Frémont looked at him.

Jones turned the charge sheet over.

"The facts are not improved because you resent the order in which they are introduced."

Frémont's face tightened.

Then he looked toward Benton again.

Benton still said nothing.

There was something Jones had been carrying since morning. Jessie knew because he had touched the same folded sheet twice without taking it out.

Now he did.

"There is another difficulty."

Benton watched him.

"Under the Articles, civilian counsel may advise. We may sit beside the defendant. We may pass notes. We may prepare questions."

Frémont turned fully from the window.

Jones continued.

"We may not address the court. We may not examine witnesses. We may not object."

The room changed.

"The Colonel will conduct his own defense."

Frémont said nothing.

Jones let him have a moment.

Then:

"Every question. Every witness. In his own voice."

"Kearny."

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Two months. Perhaps three."

Jessie looked at her father.

He had been speaking in public rooms since before she was born. She had seen him hold the Senate floor until men left for supper and returned to find him still standing. She had seen

him carried from a chamber and return to it. She could not remember a room in which Thomas Hart Benton had been present for an argument and had not eventually entered it.

For three months he would sit beside John while other men defined John in front of him.

“Then you will say nothing,” Jessie said.

Benton took his spectacles off.

This time he did not clean them.

He held them by one arm.

“I will look at him.”

Jones started to speak about decorum.

Then did not.

Frémont almost smiled.

Almost.

Jones put the rule aside and drew out a witness list.

“Stockton’s officers where we can get them. The Navy will send what the Navy sends.”

His thumb went down the names.

“Beale.”

“Beale cannot stand,” Benton said.

“He is in the city.”

“He is in a bed in the city.”

Jessie said, “I saw him Tuesday.”

The men looked at her.

“He is yellow as that lamp. His hands do not finish what they begin.”

She folded her own.

“I told him the court could take his statement where he lay.”

“And?”

“He said he stood at San Pasqual and supposed he could stand in a courtroom.”

Jones marked the name.

“What does he give us?”

“Stockton,” Benton said.

Jones waited.

“Stockton’s orders carried by a man who nearly died carrying other orders.”

Benton looked at the list.

“The court will believe him.”

“Because of the orders?”

“Because he looks like the price of them.”

Jessie looked at her father.

He continued without noticing.

“A healthy witness can be ambitious. A healthy witness may hope to be remembered. Beale will cross that room looking as though the testimony is costing him something merely to remain upright.”

Jones made another mark.

“That helps.”

“It will.”

The clerk had the summary of Beale’s prior statement and copied the qualifying line into his notes.

Lieutenant Beale had passed through the enemy’s lines at San Pasqual by night with Christopher Carson and his Delaware servant and brought relief to the command.

The clerk copied every word.

Nobody asked him to read it aloud.

When he finished, he reached for one memorandum and brought another paper with it.

“There is this.”

Frémont knew the fold.

“What.”

“Larkin.”

The glove stopped moving in his hand.

Jones unfolded the deed.

“Alvarado has conveyed the Mariposas grant.”

“I know.”

“Three thousand dollars.”

“I know what I paid.”

“I am trying to determine what you bought.”

Frémont held out his hand.

Jones kept the paper.

“Ten square leagues.”

“Yes.”

“Within the Sierra Nevada, the Chanchilles, the Merced, and the San Joaquin.”

“Yes.”

“Which ten?”

Frémont looked at him.

“The grant is to be located.”

“That is what concerns me.”

“Why.”

Jones laid the document flat.

“Because this describes a great deal more country than ten square leagues.”

“I know the country.”

“All of it?”

“Enough.”

Benton had put his spectacles back on.

Jones said, “Enough for what?”

For the first time since the charges were read, Frémont looked less angry than elsewhere.

He looked at the deed.

“Water. Timber. Grass.”

His voice changed when he said the words.

Not softer.

More exact.

“Country that can carry cattle. Country a road can reach. There are places above the Merced where the ground holds through summer. Oak lower down. Pine above.”

Jessie watched him.

She had heard that voice before.

Not in Washington.

In letters.

A description of a valley. A river. A mountain that could hold a bearing. A place improved by being made measurable.

Jones put a finger on the grant.
“And which part is yours?”
“Ten leagues.”
“Which ten.”
“That will be settled by survey.”
Jessie leaned over the document.
“So the grant can move.”
Frémont looked at her.
“The grant does not move.”
“No.”
She put one finger beside Jones’s.
“Only the lines.”
Frémont looked back at the paper.
Benton reached for it.
Jones gave it to him.
Benton read the description once.
Then again.
He turned it over though there was nothing on the back.
“Who has the survey?”
“No one yet,” Frémont said.
“Who chooses him?”
“I will arrange it.”
Benton looked at him over the paper.
“Carefully.”
Frémont held out his hand.
Benton returned the deed.
“That may prove a useful distinction.”
Frémont folded it once along the old crease.
“It is land.”
Nobody answered immediately.
He looked from Jones to Benton and then to Jessie.

“Not a commission. Not an appointment. Not California government. Land.”

Jessie had seen the place before John owned it.

Not the ground itself.

The thing in his head.

A house where there had been none.

An orchard.

Children near water.

His mother looking west toward weather that did not belong to Charleston or Washington.

John had been buying the idea before he had bought acreage.

Jones said, “Land still acquires law once somebody owns it.”

Frémont put the deed with his papers.

“So I have noticed.”

Jessie drew the defense draft toward herself.

The first page had already been through three hands.

John’s statement began:

I submit myself to the lawful judgment of the court with regret that acts undertaken for the safety and possession of California should now—

She struck through a word.

Frémont saw the pencil.

“What.”

“Regret.”

“Why.”

“It arrives before anything has happened.”

“The court-martial has happened.”

“The judgment has not.”

“I regret the necessity of defending myself.”

“That is not what the sentence says.”

He came closer.

Jessie read the line aloud.

"I submit myself to lawful review while denying any dishonor in acts undertaken for the safety and possession of California."

Benton said, "Possession is too plain."

Jessie looked at him.

"It is what happened."

"Yes."

That was all he said.

Jones touched the page.

"Service."

Jessie looked at the sentence.

Then wrote the word above possession.

Service.

Frémont watched her hand.

"You make it sound as though I was acted upon."

Jessie did not look up.

"You were."

"By whom."

"The country, according to the defense."

He looked at Benton.

Benton said, "If you originated everything, you may answer for everything."

Frémont's jaw set.

"I was moved by the condition of California."

"Then say what the condition required."

"I have."

"Not here."

Frémont picked up the page.

Jessie let him.

He read the sentence twice.

Then set it down.

"The country did require it."

Jones said, "Good."

Frémont looked at him.

Jones added nothing.

The clerk shifted behind them and his chair struck the wall.

He went red.

“Apologies.”

Nobody answered.

The clerk sat straighter.

Jones opened a newspaper.

“The public account is mixed.”

Frémont’s face told him this was not news.

“Some call you rash.”

“On what authority.”

“Print does not generally disclose its authority when adjectives are available.”

Frémont looked toward Benton.

Benton had begun examining another page.

“Is that useful?” Jones asked him.

Benton did not look up.

“More useful than rebel.”

Frémont said, “I am not rash.”

“No,” Benton said.

The answer came too quickly.

Frémont looked at him.

Benton raised his eyes.

“Rash can be young. Rash can be brave after success. Rebel requires explanation.”

“I obeyed Stockton.”

“Yes.”

“That is not rashness.”

“No.”

“Then why concede it?”

“We do not.”

Jones turned the newspaper so Frémont could see the column.

“We concede zeal.”

“That is a coward’s rashness.”

“We concede confusion of authority where it helps.”

“There was no confusion in Los Angeles.”

“There is now.”

Frémont’s thumb opened the glove seam another fraction.

Jones continued.

“We concede nothing that places you outside patriotic necessity.”

“And Stockton?”

“Clear where we require him. Less clear where the prosecution does.”

Frémont looked at the papers as though they had personally become offensive.

He had crossed mountains that did not care whether he arrived. Rivers had taken animals from him without jurisdiction. Snow had closed behind him. Men had died.

Those things had at least declared themselves.

This table kept moving while it remained still.

“I will not make Kearny right merely because his orders arrived on better paper.”

Jones said, “Then do not make him right.”

“I will have to ask him questions as though I recognize the authority he claims.”

“You will ask him questions because a court recognizes it.”

Frémont leaned both hands on the table.

“That is not a small distinction.”

“No.”

Jessie had been reading the draft.

She crossed out another occurrence of obedience.

Frémont noticed.

“Again?”

“You use it four times.”

“It is the charge.”

“That is why you should use it less.”

He held out his hand.

She gave him the page.

He found the places.

“I obeyed Stockton.”

“I know.”

“I obeyed what I understood to be lawful civil authority in California.”

“I know.”

“Then why remove it?”

“Because by the fourth time you sound as though you are trying to convince yourself.”

He read the paragraph again.

That landed differently.

Jessie could see it.

Frémont put the sheet back in front of her.

“Three.”

“Two.”

“Three.”

She left two.

Jones made a note.

Benton said nothing.

The rain had begun to thin. Wheels below no longer cut standing water with the same force.

Jones gathered the current draft.

“Your statement must do four things. Accept the jurisdiction of the court. Deny dishonor. Establish the authority under which you acted. Leave room for the President after judgment.”

Frémont looked at him.

“After judgment.”

“If necessary.”

“And if I am acquitted.”

“Then the fourth part harms nothing.”

Frémont considered that.

“What exactly does the President need?”

“A reason not to appear to overturn the Army for affection.”

Benton looked up at that.

Jones continued.

“If the court convicts you, the President must be able to distinguish the finding from the punishment.”

“That is already his power.”

“Yes.”

“Then why provide him language.”

“Because power is easier to use when someone has prepared the sentence.”

Frémont looked toward Benton.

Benton had gone back to the page.

That answer apparently required no improvement.

Jessie marked another phrase.

Near evening the court’s clerk arrived.

Not their clerk.

This one belonged to the proceeding and carried himself with the fragile dignity of a man temporarily holding words other people wanted.

His cuffs were clean in front and inked near the wrists.

He handed Jones the copied charges.

Jones passed them to Benton after only a glance.

The new clerk noticed.

Benton read.

“Mutiny.”

He moved down.

“Disobedience of the lawful command of a superior officer.”

Another line.

“Conduct prejudicing good order and military discipline.”

Frémont’s face did not move.

Jessie said, “Good order.”

Nobody improved it.

The court’s clerk remained beside the door.

“Will there be an answer, Senator?”

Benton looked at him.

“No.”

The man waited.

Jones said, “Not tonight.”

That gave the clerk something he understood.

He nodded and went.

The door closed.

For a moment the room was larger.

Jones began speaking of appeal.

Executive remission.

Friendly papers.

Men in the Senate.

Enemies who had overreached and might become useful by having overreached.

Benton listened.

Jessie watched John.

He had been hurt by the charges.

That part was not difficult to see.

The more interesting thing was what he had already begun doing with the injury.

She had watched him do it with bad country.

The first description was obstruction.

Then measurement.

Then route.

A mountain that nearly killed men became a pass.

A winter camp became a line in a report.

A Mexican challenge became evidence of American restraint.

Given enough time, John could turn almost anything that happened to him into proof that he had been the man necessary to survive it.

She looked at the newspaper.

“A wronged officer.”

Benton looked over.

“Yes.”

“A western officer punished by eastern command.”

Jones stopped writing.
Benton said, "Perhaps."
"A man who took California and was punished for taking orders badly."
Frémont looked at her.
"That is not what happened."
Jessie folded the newspaper once along the column.
"No."
She folded it again.
"But it prints."
Frémont stared at her.
The glove seam gave in his hand.
The leather opened from the forefinger halfway toward the thumb.
He looked down at it.
For a while nobody spoke.
The charges lay in a narrow stack.
Mutiny.
Disobedience.
Conduct prejudicing good order and military discipline.
Words made for a court.
Small enough to fit in a column.
Wide enough to carry California if enough people agreed not to look over the sides.
Benton placed both hands flat on the table.
He pushed himself up.
His knees did not take the first attempt well. He waited, still half bent, then tried again
and stood.
Jones looked toward him.
Benton gathered the charge sheet but did not put it away.
"The argument was never over ashes."
Frémont looked up.
Benton put the paper beside the map.
"It was over who would govern them."

Their clerk raised his eyes.

Only once.

Then he looked down and wrote something else.

Applegate

The first thing Jesse saw was the wheel.

It lay half in the mud beside the trace with one spoke cracked and the iron tire sprung loose. Somebody had tried to bind it with rawhide and wire, and the rawhide had shrunk wrong in the night damp and pulled the whole thing crooked, and the wire had cut into the wood. There was no malice in any of it. Only travel.

Jesse put a boot on the hub and rocked it. It was a wheel for a yard, for hauling manure or fence rails under the supervision of women who had never much trusted it, and some family had brought it across a continent and called that thrift.

Jesse took the compass out and let the needle settle.

The marsh ran along the foot of Doak Mountain below them, willow thick wherever the ground held water. Sage and pale pumice covered the drier ground above it. Higher on the mountain the lodgepole began. Basalt showed black wherever the duff went thin.

The South Road did not exist yet except as weather, memory, animal path, emigrant need, and talk. Talk said there was a better way south, away from the worst crossings and the old killing places and the river roads where people arrived half mad and half buried. The Columbia had drowned enough good people to earn no recommendation from Jesse. Rafts broke. Cattle swam until they did not. Wagons went over and the river took the names with the bedding. A land road let a man keep his wheels under him and his dead where he could find them.

Lindsay came up with the chain.

Jesse looked toward the marsh.

“Too low.”

Lindsay kicked through the duff. Pumice, then basalt.

“Fill the outside.”

“How much?”

“Foot and a half here. More ahead.”

Jesse looked along the line.

“Run it.”

Lindsay went west with the chain.

The ground narrowed as he went. Marsh pressed toward the mountain from below while basalt came closer to the surface above. The chain dragged through sage, rang against rock, then went quiet again over pumice.

Lindsay stopped.

Jesse came up beside him.

Two stones stood just above the wet edge, one upright and the other fallen outward. Between them the ground had settled long and shallow in a patch where the sage thinned.

Lindsay looked downhill.

“Cannot go below.”

“Marsh.”

“Yes.”

“Above?”

Lindsay looked at the high side.

“Basalt. Too much cut. We can stay high and work back.”

“How far?”

“I will chain it.”

Lindsay went.

Jesse remained beside the stones. From where he stood the marsh looked almost level. Willow marked the wetter places. Beyond it the basin opened pale beneath the weather.

Lindsay came back winding the chain around his arm.

“Near two miles by the time we work back.”

Jesse looked at the grave.

The road had choices. The man in the ground did not.

“Move the line.”

Lindsay looked at him.

“Two miles.”

“The dead fellow cannot move.”

Jesse got the sketch out and held it against his knee while Lindsay entered the detour.

“What do you want beside it?”

“Grave.”

“No name?”

“We do not have one.”

Lindsay wrote it.

Grave.

No name attached. No tribe. No story. No cause. Just enough paper to keep the wheels off him.

A shout came up from below, and they went down the slope and lost every foot of the careful grade doing it. An ox had put a foreleg into a root hole hidden under the grass and the wagon had rolled against it and pinned the yoke crooked. Its eye showed white and its breath came hard and sour.

“Cut the trace,” somebody said from behind the wagon.

“Do not cut anything yet.”

“It will break its leg.”

“It may. If you cut wrong the wagon will break yours.”

Jesse put men where they belonged—two at the wheels with stones, one at the tongue, Lindsay at the head. A woman in a brown shawl handed him a rope before he asked for it.

“Good.”

“My husband is under the wagon,” she said, as though reporting weather.

“That is less good.”

The husband’s voice came from under it.

“I am not under it by preference.”

“Stay without preference until I tell you.”

They blocked the wheels and slacked the yoke and eased the tongue over sideways. The ox heaved once and Jesse struck its nose with his hat, not hard, but with authority, and they got the animal up. Jesse stood breathing through his mouth and put his hands on the yoke because they had begun to shake and there was nowhere else to put them.

“There,” he said.

He looked uphill toward the line they had chosen.

“That is the reason for the extra two miles.”

By the time Enos came back, the line had become a road.

The man came in from the north in the afternoon with his horse lathered at the shoulder and muddy to the belly. He sat loose in the saddle like a man who had been riding too long or thinking too much. Jesse noticed him because nobody hailed him at once. In the settlements a man's name generally arrived ahead of him. On the road it sometimes lagged behind, or declined to come at all.

Jesse came around the tailgate and took the measure of the horse before the man.

"Name?"

The rider looked over the wagons and the axes and the tied animals and the faces already waiting to turn him into news.

"Call me whatever gets me coffee."

"That is not a name."

"It has served as one."

"You can have coffee," Jesse said. "If you have news, give it after."

"News is dearer before coffee."

"Then keep it. We are poor."

The man got down slowly and led the horse to the creek and stood there washing his hands, though there was no blood on them that Jesse could see. He scrubbed at the knuckles until they reddened. Somebody called to him from the wagons by a name Jesse did not catch, and he did not answer. Then a different man called a different name, and the rider looked up too fast.

Jesse saw it and did nothing with it. A road camp was full of men answering to whatever they could bear. Some had left debts in Missouri. Some had left wives. More than a few had left poorer versions of themselves and were disappointed to find those versions had walked west alongside the wagon. If a man could swing an axe and keep a watch and not steal powder, Jesse did not inquire after his baptism.

An emigrant woman came up and handed him a cup of coffee without asking whether he wanted it. Her sleeves were rolled and her forearms red from washing, and a small child had both hands in her skirt and was staring across the yard at the man by the creek.

"My husband says we will be delayed three days."

"Your husband is an optimist. Five, if the saw does not break and your oxen do not founder and the men work instead of discussing the quality of work they intend."

The child was still staring.

“Is he a road man?” the boy said.

“No.”

“What is he?”

The woman pulled the child back by the shoulder and told him to hush. Jesse watched the rider finish his coffee.

“Useful,” he said.

They had started calling it the South Road, which made it sound as if it already were one. Applegate did not correct them. A named thing could be argued over, paid for, cursed in letters, and eventually built by boys who had never seen it.

The men came to the tailgate after supper with the lantern between them, faces going in and out of the light. The loudest one stood nearest the wheel. The frightened one had arranged himself as angry. The old one said nothing, having buried enough certainty to recognize another grave.

“We can cross here,” Applegate said, touching the paper. “Then south of the ridge, stay above the marsh, fill the outside track, take the wagons down by this spur.”

“How much fill?” the loud one said.

“Two feet in places.”

One of them said there had been killing south of there.

“They say many things south of here.”

“Klamaths?”

“I have heard Klamath,” Applegate said. “I have also heard of bad men with Indian names put on them after the fact, and hungry men making poor judgment, and frightened men making worse reports.”

He tapped the map.

“A road will not settle what happened.”

“Then what is it for.”

Applegate looked toward the wagons, where a child was asleep under one of them with its cheek against a flour sack.

“For moving the next family before the last story grows teeth.”

The man from the creek had come up as far as the outer fire and was mending a strap by himself. He did not look toward the tailgate while the talk went on. He did not look toward the dark either.

A woman came up from the wagons with her shawl pulled through her crossed arms.

“Can we get children over it.”

“With work.”

“How much.”

“A week for a passage. A season for a road. Years for one a woman would not curse.”

She nodded once, the way women nodded at prices they had already decided to pay.

“Then tell them the week first.”

Applegate looked at the men.

“You heard her.”

One of them said, “Your road?”

Applegate looked at the wagons, the children, the lame ox tied off from the others, the blurred map, the man mending a strap at the outer fire.

“No.”

He folded the map and put it under his arm.

“Not mine.”

“Whose then?”

Applegate looked at him.

“That is the trouble.”

He went over to the outer fire afterward with his hands empty, which was a thing he had learned to do on purpose.

“You know country.”

The man kept working the strap.

“I know pieces.”

“Pieces are what a road is before fools improve it.”

The awl went through leather. The man drew the stitch tight without looking at either.

“You were with Frémont.”

“I was near him.”

“There is a difference?”

“There was to me.”

Applegate crouched and put a stick in the fire that did not need putting in.

“A man told me you were present when the Klamaths came in.”

“No.”

“No, they did not come in, or no, you were not present?”

“Yes.”

Applegate turned the stick once in the coals.

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the only one still alive.”

Applegate let it go. He had spent years learning which stones to leave in the road and which to lever out, and this one was set deep and would break the bar.

“You could ride with us as far as the bend. Show us the ford. No oath. No paper.”

The awl stopped.

“That is how dogs are bought. First a scrap, then a name.”

“You think very well of yourself.”

“No.”

The man pulled the stitch tight.

“That is why I am leaving.”

Something shifted then that Applegate recognized and did not care to step on with muddy boots. He got up, and his knees told him about it, and went back toward the wagons.

In the morning Lindsay had the field book open at the tailgate, putting the team list fair.

He looked at Enos.

“Name?”

Jesse said, “E. Short.”

Enos turned his head.

Jesse kept his eyes on the road.

Lindsay wrote it.

Nobody at the tailgate said anything about it afterward. That was the nearest thing to courtesy the road produced.

Later, at the map, Applegate said, "Forty-seven. Or the winter after it. You came in behind a wagon with the tongue split and would not sit down until somebody had seen to the mule."

"That is a long way back."

"It is."

He turned the sketch a quarter turn against his knee and did not look up.

"I keep the ones that work. It is a short list and I do not add to it often."

Enos looked at him.

"You remembered the mule."

"The mule had a legitimate complaint."

"That makes one of us."

Applegate almost smiled and did not quite spend it. He did not ask what the man had been called in the years between. Enos did not tell him. After a while Applegate put the paper away and they went on to the next bad place.

That evening Enos was at the picket line going over the animals when a boy came out from the wagons with a dipper.

"Mr. Short. My father asked I bring you water." The boy stood off at the edge of the light with the dipper in both hands. "Mr. Short."

Enos did not turn, because the name had not finished becoming his yet, and the boy pulled once at the back of his jacket and reared back when he did turn.

"Water, sir?"

"Yes. Thank you. What is your name?"

"Oliver, sir. My father is just there."

"Oliver."

"Yes, sir."

"How do you spell that?"

"I do not know, sir. I am not lettered yet."

Enos took the water and drank it and gave the dipper back.

"Well, it is a fine name, boy. No use spoiling it with letters."

The boy went back toward the wagons carrying the dipper like a commission discharged, and a woman's voice took him in somewhere among the tongues and the canvas.

The first wagon came down the grade sideways. It had been urged and cursed and braked with a dead lodgepole behind it and prayed over by three men and a woman in a bonnet the color of old flour. The off wheel struck a stone Applegate had marked for removal two days before. Nobody had removed it because the country was large and stones were numerous and men got tired.

They set the bar and it slipped and three men cursed in one voice and a child laughed. When the stone came loose it rolled against Applegate's shin and the pain went bright up his leg. He did not say anything. There were children present and, worse, men.

They jacked the axle and the jack sank and they laid a split plank under it and the plank cracked and held long enough. The driver brought the oxen up a step and then another. The wheel dropped, caught, and rolled free.

At the creek they had felled a pine across and split the top flat enough for wheels if a driver kept his nerve. One horse refused and had to be blindfolded with a coat, and a woman laughed and then apologized to the horse. On the far bank the children ran into a patch of grass and threw themselves down in it. One of them held up a flower too small for Applegate to see the color of. Another asked what the place was called.

"Camp Creek," somebody said.

It had another name. Applegate did not know it. He had heard it once from a man who pointed with his chin and said it too fast for an English ear, and the sound had gone out of him before he could make any use of it. Camp Creek would hold. It was plain and wrong and easy to write.

A boy had drawn a road in the mud with a stick. A wheel went over it and flattened it. He looked at the mark, then drew another one beside the rut, longer this time, and straighter. Applegate watched him finish it and went on to the next bad place.

Sarah came up beside him while he was looking at the fill along the marsh edge and the corduroy half laid and the black run of water past it.

"Will this road hold?"

"For some wagons."

She nodded once and shifted the baby higher on her hip.

"Then I expect it will not remember us at all."

Applegate looked back toward the line. The grave was somewhere above it. He could no longer see the stones.

“That may be the best a road can do.”

He had the sketch out against his knee at the noon halt, the one from his hatband, rivers and ridges and distances guessed at by men with boots full of water and reasons to lie. Three crossings marked, two of them wrong by the look of the country. A dotted line ran where no wagon could go unless the wagon had wings.

Enos came by leading his horse and stopped and looked at it upside down, the way a man reads a thing he has not been invited to read.

“That line will kill animals.”

“Where?”

“Here. And here. Then again where the creek turns.” He pointed with two fingers, the way he pointed at everything, as if one finger were an accusation.

“You have not seen the creek.”

“I have seen men draw creeks.”

Applegate looked at the map. Then at him.

“That is why you are useful.”

Something went across Enos’s face and was gone before it finished.

“Working men last until the work changes.”

“Then we had better keep the work changing.”

Applegate folded the paper. Across the fold was the word Lindsay had written that morning.

Grave.

It disappeared when the paper closed.

Enos left in the morning while the second crew was still at the shed with a split tongue. He had shown them a rise the day before, west of the marked line, that carried a wagon over dry and cost them nothing. Lindsay had gone up it twice to be sure and come back annoyed at how good it was.

Applegate had the notebook out.

“What name shall I put,” he said, “if I need to say who showed the rise?”

Enos met the look from the saddle. The rain had begun again so lightly it seemed at first to be only the trees emptying themselves.

“Put the rise.”

Applegate stood a moment with the pencil over the page. Then he wrote down the rise, and where it left the line, and what it saved. Nothing else.

“And if a man comes asking after you?”

“You saw a fellow with no surname. Common article.”

“If I have to call him something.”

“Call him gone.”

Applegate closed the notebook. Enos rode out past the wagons and along the marked line, and the red cloth on the brush moved after him in the wet.

Applegate finished the day’s entry that night under the wagon tongue, sharpening the pencil with his knife when it went blunt. More families expected. Grade filled at marsh edge. Stone removed. Creek crossed on timber, dipping at the downstream end, to be watched. Two miles added west of grave.

He stopped there. Lindsay had already entered the reason.

Grave.

Applegate looked across the camp. The wagons stood in the rain with their canvas tops pale in the dark, tongues down, wheels chocked. Families slept inside them. Names in books. Names on letters. Names spoken across fires and shouted after children. Somewhere uphill a man lay under two stones with none of those things left. The road would go around him. That was not remembrance. It was thirty yards of courtesy and two miles of trouble.

It would have to do.

Across the way the wagons stood quiet in the rain.

They looked like settlers.

Joaquins

In California he worked south of Stockton when the grass was high and east of it when the grass failed.

The work changed names faster than men did. One week it was horses. Another week cattle. Then freight, messages, pack mules, hides, a string of sore animals moved at night because daylight belonged to men who asked questions in English. Sometimes the animals had brands. Sometimes the brands were old. Sometimes the hide under the brand looked too clean and nobody admired it out loud.

Enos did not join anything. Joining required faith or paperwork.

He was hired.

That suited him. A hired man could leave when the pay went bad, the coffee went thin, or the man with the pistol began calling him friend. It did not always happen in that order.

At a corral below the dry hills a man with a red sash and a hat too fine for his horse gave him a rope and pointed at six animals tied short to a rail.

“Those go west,” he said.

“Who owns them?”

“The west.”

“That is a large outfit.”

The man smiled. “You handle horses?”

“When the horses permit it.”

“Good. I am Joaquín.”

Enos looked past him. Two others were tightening cinches near the gate. One had a scar through his beard. The other had a boy’s face and an old man’s eyes.

“Which Joaquín?”

“The one paying.”

The man with the scar lifted his head. “I am Joaquín too.”

The young one said, “Only when asked.”

“And if I am asked?” Enos said.

The red sash handed him the rope. “Then you are Joaquín.”

After that it did not become clearer.

He got their other names over the next two days and only because men grew careless around a man who did not repeat things. The red sash was Carrillo. The scarred one was Val. The young one with the paper in his coat they called John and nothing after it. There was a Muriata who came and went and was small and quiet and looked like a schoolmaster gone to seed. There was one they called Ocho, who had been called that since he was a boy and had never been able to explain why to an American in a way the American accepted.

And there was García.

García was thick through the shoulders and had a laugh you could hear across a corral, and the men called him Three-Finger, and he had all five fingers on both hands. One thumb had gone crooked from a rope years back and sat off at an angle from the rest.

“Why do they call you that?” Enos asked him, the second night.

García held the hand up and turned it in the firelight, counting slowly, the way a man counts for a child.

“Ask them,” he said. “I have stopped.”

The sixth animal in the string was a gray mare who had been tied without water since noon.

Five stood with their heads low and their weight gone soft in the hindquarters. She watched every hand that passed within reach and had not stopped sweating though the evening had cooled.

Enos went first to her.

The brand on her left hip had been worked at. Not cut away. Improved. A half circle had been burned across an older mark and the new flesh had healed shiny under the hair. The man who had done it had known enough to wait and not enough to make the waiting useful.

He laid a hand against her neck. The pulse came hard beneath it.

“She bites,” Val said.

“So do accounts.”

“She kicked a man at Hornitos.”

“I do not know him.”

“He remembers you.”

Enos moved his hand down the mare’s shoulder. The saddle had been put on over a rubbed place and the blanket carried a wet dark patch where the skin had opened again.

"This one does not go."

Carrillo smiled less. "She goes."

"She calls the first horse she smells."

"Then ride ahead of her."

"She goes lame before morning."

"Then she goes lame west."

Enos looked at the horse and then at the man.

John had come near without Enos hearing him. He held a folded piece of paper in one hand and the mare's bridle in the other.

"There is a bay in the far pen," he said. "Short-backed. White at the near coronet."

Carrillo turned. "That one is not ours."

"None of these are ours."

Val laughed once.

Carrillo did not. "The bay has a brand."

"This one has two," Enos said.

John looked at the altered mark. His face did not change, but his eyes went from the mare to the road and then to the lowering sun.

"Use the bay," he said.

Carrillo studied him. "You paying now, John?"

There it was, and then gone.

John folded the paper smaller. "I am advising."

"Advice is a poor coin."

"So is a lame horse."

Carrillo looked at Enos. "Get the bay."

Enos got the bay.

He was most of an hour changing the saddle and redividing the loads, and while he worked a man came up on the far side of the rail and stood there without saying anything for long enough that Enos knew he was being looked at.

He finished the cinch before he turned.

The man was thickset now and gray at the temple and had gone soft along the jaw, and he had a green kerchief at his throat that had been washed too many times, and he was grinning.

“You are still doing that badly,” Jacinto said.

Enos stood with the latigo in his hand.

Six years. He had last seen the man leaning on a rail in the fog at a landing on the American River, with a tin cup of coffee bad enough to count as local government, telling him that there was another one missing and that the answer to horse or man was yes.

“They let you out of the valley.”

“They did not let me. There was nobody left to ask.” Jacinto came around the end of the rail. “The German is dead. The house is a hotel. There is a man selling lots on the ground where the shed was.”

“And you?”

“I move horses for men who do not write my name down.” He looked at the string. “The same as always. It has only got worse paid.”

They shook hands. Jacinto’s grip had got harder, which happened to men who worked into their forties without anybody replacing them.

“Whose outfit?” Enos said.

“His.” Jacinto tipped his head toward García, who was laughing at something across the corral. “He is a bad man and he is good to work for. I quit waiting on both a long time ago.”

“That is a sound arrangement.”

“It is the only one on offer.” Jacinto looked at him a moment longer. “You are thinner. And you have got a face on you.”

“I have had it some time.”

“Not that one.”

Enos went back to the cinch.

They went west in a line that kept changing its mind.

The dry hills went blue and then black. Oak shadows joined across the track. The first stars showed over the low country, and somewhere to the south a dog began barking and continued long after there was anything to bark at.

Seven men and six loose horses. Carrillo rode front. Val rode behind him and turned often in the saddle. John stayed near the middle. García went where he liked. Jacinto took the near flank because he had been doing it for twenty years and nobody had to tell him. Enos took

the rear, because the bay had already tried twice to return to the corral and had not yet exhausted principle.

The job was supposed to be twelve miles.

That meant fifteen.

The first mile went down through dry grass high enough to brush the stirrups. Enos let the rope run out where the ground opened and took it in before the bends, and did not strike anything, and by the end of that mile the two animals behind him had stopped testing the arrangement.

That was most of the work. Men thought driving horses was a matter of pushing them. It was a matter of making the next thing they wanted to do the thing you wanted them to do, and doing it far enough in advance that the horse believed the idea had been its own.

The second mile crossed a creek with no water in it and enough pale stone to remember one.

The third brought them near a ranch house where a lantern stood in one window and a woman's voice came through the dark calling somebody to supper.

Nobody answered her.

They went past at a walk with every man watching the light and nobody looking at it directly, and Enos put a hand flat on the bay's neck the whole way, not to hold him, only so that when the horse came to think about calling out there would be something already there.

The horses knew they were moving wrong.

Animals driven from one place to another knew the difference between travel and removal. They pulled at the leads and turned their heads back and one of them called and got struck for it, which taught it nothing. Enos kept his section quiet without striking. He talked to them a little. It did not much matter what.

The bay's near hind shoe had started to click by the fourth mile.

He heard it before he felt it, one light metallic tick every other stride, the nails gone loose in the wall and the shoe beginning to walk. On a road it would have meant nothing. It meant something now.

He got down.

The others went on past him without stopping. Jacinto slowed and Enos waved him on.

He ran his hand down the near hind and the horse took the leg back and gave it again, and he got the hoof up between his knees and held it. The nail heads had risen a sixteenth on the outside. There was nothing to be done about it in the dark with what he had.

He set the foot down and got back up and rode on, and every time the leg came forward he put his weight into the off stirrup and eased the horse a half step out of its own rhythm, and the click stopped.

It came back inside four strides. He did it again.

He did that for two miles.

John dropped back and rode alongside him for a while and watched.

“How long can you do that?”

“Until he requires the leg.”

“That may be some time.”

“He has three others.”

John’s chestnut fought the bit the whole way. The mouth had been spoiled by somebody else’s hands and the bit sat high in it, and every time John gathered the reins the horse lifted its chin away from the pain and lost the line.

Enos leaned across at a walk and put two fingers under the cheekpiece.

“That horse has teeth.”

“I had noticed.”

“He would like you to notice lower.”

John let the reins fall loose. Enos dropped the bit one hole on each side.

“You ride?”

“I arrive.”

“That is not the same.”

“I have found it sufficient.”

“The horse has not.”

They went on. Inside half a mile the chestnut’s head came down and the walk lengthened, and John sat differently in the saddle without appearing to know it.

“You speak for them,” he said.

“They complain and men dislike hearing it.”

“In what language?”

Enos looked at the horse's ears.

"He is doing it now."

They left the road after midnight.

Carrillo raised one hand and turned them down a cattle track through live oak and buckbrush. Branches scraped the loads. One tore the corner from a canvas roll and a tin plate fell out and went down the slope making more noise than its value justified.

Everybody stopped.

The plate rolled, struck stone, and lay still.

From somewhere ahead came the clink of a bridle.

Not theirs.

Val had his pistol out. John folded forward over his horse's neck and listened. Enos felt the bay gather itself against the lead and put a hand flat on its shoulder.

A horse blew in the dark below them.

Then another.

Carrillo came back along the line.

"Patrol at the ford."

"How many?" Val said.

"Enough to ask."

"That is not a number."

"It is tonight."

They stood among the oaks while the loose horses shifted and breathed. Below, a man laughed. The sound carried up the draw, clear and close. Another man told him to shut up.

Carrillo pointed east. "We go above them."

"There is no track above," Val said.

"There will be after."

They turned uphill.

The slope was shale under dry grass. The horses went sideways, finding their own steps, and the loose animals pulled against one another until the ropes became a single argument running through Enos's hands. The bay slipped, struck one knee, came up with a grunt and tried to wheel downhill.

Enos took a turn of the rope around the horn and let the horse fight leather instead of bone.

Jacinto came back across the slope for him without being asked and got a hand on the nearest loose animal's headstall and held it until the string settled. He did not say anything. He had been doing that for other men since before Enos knew him.

At the top they found no road.

The country fell away on the other side into black brush and pale patches of stone. Far beyond, where the land opened north, a white mountain stood over everything.

It held the little light there was.

"Shasta," John said.

Carrillo rode past. "It will be there tomorrow."

John did not answer.

Enos looked below it. Three lights showed in the lower country, far apart and small. Shasta told a man where north was. It did not tell him who lived underneath it.

They went down through brush until branches took their hats and gave them back wet with leaves.

At the bottom was another creek, this one with water enough to make noise and mud enough to keep evidence. The horses drank before anybody told them not to. Carrillo cursed, then let them, because command had arrived late.

They crossed three at a time.

On the far bank Val's horse put a foot into soft ground and went to the shoulder. The man came off clear. His left leg did not. The horse rolled once and the saddle caught him below the knee.

He did not shout.

That was worse.

Enos got the loose animals tied to willow and went down. John was there first, pulling at the saddle skirt.

"Not there," Enos said.

"The leg is under."

"The weight is forward."

He took the horse by the rein and folded the head toward the shoulder while Carrillo and García put themselves against the saddle. The animal's eye rolled white. Its nostrils drew mud.

"On him," Enos said.

They pushed. The horse came half upright, lost it, came again. Val pulled his leg free and rolled into the water. The horse found its feet and stood shaking.

Val did not.

He sat in the creek with both hands around his knee. The boot had turned outward. The leg above it had not.

"Broken?" Carrillo said.

Val looked at him.

"That is a physician's question."

"Can you ride?"

"That is a stupid man's question."

John crouched and cut the boot down the outside seam. His knife was small and clean. He worked carefully, drawing the leather apart without moving the leg more than it had to move.

The ankle was swelling already.

"No weight," John said.

Val looked at him. "You a physician now?"

"No."

"Then you and Joaquín agree."

The patrol was somewhere behind them. A horse called once in the dark and was answered by one of the loose animals before Enos could stop it.

Everybody heard.

Carrillo looked uphill. "We move."

Val said nothing.

That decided more than speech would have.

They bound the ankle with two slats cut from a box lid. García lifted him onto the quietest loose horse himself, one arm under the shoulders and one under the knees, and did it gently, and swore at him steadily the entire time in a low voice, calling him a fool and the son of fools and a burden to horses.

Val let his head rest against the man's shoulder for a second on the way up.

They tied him at the waist to the horn. His own animal went into the string with the empty stirrups tied up.

The line moved slower after that.

By dawn they had made six miles.

The sun came behind them and put a thin red edge on the lower hills. Ahead, Shasta stood pale above the valley, too large to belong to the same morning.

They stopped in an abandoned sheep camp where a lean-to had fallen against one oak and left enough roof for three men or six liars. The horses were put among rocks where they could not be seen from below.

Val lay under the roof with his coat folded beneath the bad leg. He had gone gray around the mouth and had begun sweating in the cool.

Carrillo went with García and Ocho to find another route.

Jacinto took the horses because he did not like sitting.

Enos stayed because Val's horse would not let anybody else near the saddle.

John stayed because nobody told him to go.

He made coffee in a blackened cup with a wire handle. The grounds came loose and floated in it. He drank them without complaint, which Enos distrusted.

"You read?" Enos said.

John looked at the folded paper beside his knee. "Some."

"You guard that paper better than the horses."

"The paper does not wander."

"It has other habits."

John lifted it and turned it once in his fingers. The sheet had been folded into eighths. Ink showed through where the lines crossed.

"You write?" Enos said.

"Some."

"That is worse."

John smiled then. It altered him more than Enos expected. For a moment the oldness left his eyes and he looked near his years.

"You distrust every trade?"

"Only the ones practiced by men."

Val spoke without opening his eyes. "He trusts horses."

"Horses have not improved him," John said.

"No," Enos said. "That recommends them."

The sun came higher. Shasta lost the red edge and went white.

John unfolded the paper.

The creases had begun to tear at the middle. The writing was small and slanted forward. There were cuts above lines and words crowded into the margins. Enos had seen pages made in Washington and field books made in rain. This one belonged to neither kind. It had been argued with.

John looked at the mountain and then at the page.

"You want an audience?" Enos said.

"No."

"That is a poor start for a writer."

John read anyway.

The first words Enos lost to the creek below them. Then the voice settled. It was a good reading voice. Not loud. It made room around the sentences and expected them to stand there.

The poem called the mountain companionless and cold.

John stopped after that part.

"Cold," Enos said.

John looked over the page. "Not companionless?"

"Not unless you count poorly."

John turned toward Shasta again.

Smoke stood in two places below the mountain. One thin line near the river country. Another farther east, spread low along the ground. Between them lay miles of grass, oak, settlements, villages, roads, graves, cattle, men hunting other men, and women cooking for whoever came back.

"They are not visible from here," John said.

"That does not make them absent."

"The poem is called Seen from a Distance."

"That explains it."

"Explains what?"

“Why the people disappeared.”

Val laughed once and put a hand over his leg.

John looked down at the page.

“You want me to change it?”

“It is your mountain.”

“No.” John folded the paper once along the old crease. “That is the trouble.”

He put the poem inside his coat.

John had newspapers in his kit the way other men had tobacco, worn soft and read past usefulness. He took one out and turned it toward the light.

“The new Superintendent,” he said. “Beale.”

He read the way he read everything, half aloud, testing the joints of it. The column ran the man’s history the way the columns always ran it, and it arrived at San Pasqual the way they always arrived, and John read that part entire: that Lieutenant Beale, whose gallantry on that field was well remembered, had passed through the enemy’s lines by night in company with Christopher Carson and his Delaware servant, and had brought relief to the command.

He stopped there.

He read it again to himself. Enos watched him do it.

“Three men crawled,” John said.

“Yes.”

“Two names crawled.”

He said it the way he had said the thing about the mountains, and he heard himself say it, and Enos watched that arrive too.

“I rode with twelve Delawares once,” Enos said. “A man stopped a clerk’s pen at Bent’s Fort and had them entered as themselves first. Their names, then their work. He said you do it the other way and in six months you have twelve guides and no man remembers which.”

“Who was the man?”

Enos nodded at the paper.

“It says his name there. Spelled correct.”

John looked at the column a while. Seven years of printings, and the sentence had crossed the country and come back and gone out again, and no printer anywhere had spent the half inch the name would have cost.

"The Delaware is not visible from here," John said.

"No."

"That does not make him absent."

He folded the newspaper and put it away with the poem.

The man in the column was Superintendent of Indian Affairs now. The Delaware, if he was living, was superintended.

They sat without speaking. A hawk moved over the lower country, turning without effort. Down among the rocks Jacinto was talking to a horse in a low steady voice about nothing.

After a while John said, "They tell me you rode with Frémont."

"They tell many things."

"Did you?"

"Near him."

"Is there a difference?"

"There was to me."

John waited.

Enos picked up the coffee cup and looked into it. The grounds had settled into a black continent at the bottom.

"What do you want to know?"

"What happened."

"That is a large appetite."

"I have missed meals before."

Val had opened his eyes. He watched the roof above him.

Enos drank what remained and took the grounds with it.

"There was a man named Basil," he said.

John did not reach for paper.

That was why Enos continued.

"He laughed too loud. Played cards poorly. Owed tobacco to a boy at French Camp. Called me mon beau when he wanted to be forgiven before the offense."

"What happened to him?"

"A hatchet."

John's face stayed still.

“Whose?”

Enos looked at the mountain.

“That is where the account starts going bad.”

The details came one at a time, because that was how he carried them.

Three men leaving camp with their boots in their hands. Swanok standing where the road narrowed. A hatchet coming out dark and going back in cleaned on a leg. A folded paper falling out of a dead man’s coat. One word said over a body by a man who had helped make it.

Shovels tied to pack frames the next morning.

Forty miles ridden toward people who had not gone anywhere.

A village by fishing water. Smoke changing color when it got into the mats.

Then south, and a beach at San Rafael, and two young men coming up the shingle carrying their saddles with both hands occupied so that any man at any distance could see neither of them had a hand free.

Frémont above them saying there was no room for prisoners.

Enos bringing his rifle to his shoulder.

The young man with the silver saddle looking first at the barrel and then at Enos behind it.

The sight on his chest.

The trigger not moving.

The young man turning.

Carson’s revolver firing behind Enos.

Two brothers down on the shingle.

The old man running farther.

Carson’s rifle finding him badly enough to stop him and not well enough to finish anything.

Carson cursing because he had shot the man in the ass, then walking downhill replacing cartridges, holstering the loaded revolver and using the knife instead.

Then coming back with the silver saddle over one shoulder.

Enos taking it apart against Baker’s old rig.

The dead boy’s boots tight through the arch and the silver rowels turning clean.

Two mornings later, the old man’s hat on somebody else’s head at breakfast.

John asked no question until Enos stopped.

Then he said, "Who wrote it?"

"Everybody who came afterward."

"Frémont?"

"His name was on it."

"That is not what I asked."

"No."

John drew one knee up and laid his arm across it.

"You saw all of that."

"Some."

"And what did you do?"

Val turned his face toward them.

Enos looked at John. The young face had gone. The eyes remained.

"I raised my rifle."

John waited.

"I did not fire."

"That is something."

"It stopped nothing."

John took that and did not improve it.

Carrillo returned near noon with bad news and no water.

The patrol had moved west. Another party had come up from the valley with a deputy and a paper. They were asking at the roads and ranches. The ford ahead was watched. The route south had men on it.

"What paper?" John said.

"The one paper always carries. Name. Horse. Crimes enough to justify the ink."

"Whose name?"

Carrillo smiled without humor. "Ours."

They moved at two.

Val could not stay mounted without being tied. The leg had swollen inside the cut boot until the leather edges stood apart. Each step of the horse moved the break.

He said nothing for the first mile.

In the second he began to curse, steadily and without heat, working through the saints in order like a man counting fence posts to keep from thinking about the fence.

In the third he went quiet and the others began looking at him more often.

Somewhere in there he said, to nobody, "You will tell her it was the horse."

Nobody asked who.

García rode beside him for a long stretch with one hand on the man's belt, and when the ground allowed it he talked, telling a story about a priest at Hornitos and a bet on a rooster, and it was not a good story and he told it badly and he did not stop telling it until the ground got worse.

The route went down toward a broad dry wash with cottonwoods along the edges. The ground there held tracks. Hooves, wagon wheels, barefoot children, cattle, two shod horses moving north that morning.

Enos saw the ambush because the horses looked left.

Four men came out of the cottonwoods.

Two more came up behind.

The deputy wore polished boots gone gray at the toes and a coat too dark for the heat. He held a paper in his left hand and a revolver in his right. The paper moved in the wind. The revolver did not.

"Hold there."

Carrillo stopped.

The line stopped behind him badly. One loose horse came against another. Val's animal raised its head and the tied man swayed.

The deputy looked over them with the satisfaction of a man finding the world arranged near his paperwork.

"Joaquín Murrieta."

No one answered.

He raised the paper.

"Mexican male. Twenty-five or thereabout. Dark hair. Speaks English. Scar on the left cheek. Commonly seen in a red sash. Riding a gray mare with a worked brand. Armed with silver-mounted pistols."

The wind lifted one corner of the sheet.

Enos looked along the line.

John was near twenty-five and spoke English better than the deputy.
Val had the scar.
Carrillo wore the sash.
The gray mare stood twelve miles behind them, lame in a corral.
Ocho carried a pistol with silver on the grip.
Muriata, who was the only man there whose name was actually on that paper, was fifty-one years old, five feet and four inches, and had been asleep in the saddle ten minutes earlier.
The warrant had found all of them and none of them.
The deputy lowered the page.
“Which.”
Carrillo smiled. “Which what?”
“Which man is Murrieta?”
“Your paper does not say?”
The deputy’s mouth tightened.
One of the men behind him was young and sunburned, with a shotgun held across the saddle. He looked at John. Men who wanted a singular answer often chose the quietest face.
“That one speaks English,” he said.
“So do you,” John said.
The young man shifted the shotgun.
The deputy looked at John more carefully.
“Name.”
Enos answered before he could.
“Joaquín.”
The deputy turned.
Carrillo said, “Joaquín.”
Ocho said it.
García said it, and laughed while he said it, which was worse than the saying.
Jacinto said it from the flank without turning his head.
Muriata, who had every right to it, said nothing at all, and looked at the ground, and let the others have it.
Val opened his eyes and lifted his head against the pain.

“Joaquín,” he said.

John said nothing.

That made the deputy look at him again.

“You think this is clever?”

“No,” Enos said. “Useful.”

The young man with the shotgun came forward and put the muzzle toward Enos’s chest.

“Say it again.”

Enos looked at the bore. There was dust around the rim and a small rust mark where the barrel met the rib.

“Which part?”

The horse carrying Val moved.

Not much. One step sideways because a fly had gone under the blanket, or the broken leg had shifted, or the day had reached the point where animals ceased respecting human arrangements.

Val cried out.

His horse reared. The rope at his waist held him to the saddle and pulled him backward. The animal came down against the loose string. Three horses broke left at once. One struck the deputy’s mount in the shoulder. The paper went out of his hand.

Everybody moved.

Carrillo fired into the air or at a man. Enos never knew. The shotgun went off beside him and filled the wash with dust. John’s chestnut turned under him. Enos caught the bridle and drove the horse through the opening between two cottonwoods.

“Ride.”

John did.

Enos cut the lead on the nearest loose animal and slapped it hard across the rump. It went through the deputy’s men with the rope trailing. A horse went down. Somebody screamed about a leg. Somebody else fired twice and hit nothing Enos saw.

He found his own saddle and got into it without remembering how.

The wash opened west.

Carrillo and three men were ahead. John was among them. García came past Enos at a hard gallop with his hat gone and his teeth showing and blood on one forearm that was not his.

Jacinto was behind them, turning in the saddle, looking back.

Val was not there.

Enos looked back.

The dust thinned enough.

Val's horse stood against a cottonwood with the reins down. Val lay on the ground beneath it. One of the deputy's men had a knee on his chest. Another was cutting the rope from around his waist.

The deputy had recovered the paper.

He stood over Val reading it.

John turned his horse.

Enos caught his rein.

"No."

"They have him."

"Yes."

John tried to pull free. His horse lifted its head against the old pain and did not find it there.

"They will kill him."

"They may."

"Let go."

"If you go back, they have two."

Carrillo shouted from ahead. "Move."

John looked back.

Val had stopped struggling. The deputy's men got him upright between them. The broken leg folded when they tried to put weight on it and he went down again.

The deputy looked at the paper.

Then at the scar.

He touched the left side of his own face.

John saw it.

Enos felt the rein go slack.

They rode.

No one spoke Val's name that afternoon.

They crossed two roads and a canal and went into the oak country after dark. The horses were divided at a ranch whose owner received them without lanterns and counted without asking where the seventh man had gone. Payment came in coin, meat, and one fresh horse.

Carrillo put Val's share aside.

"For who?" Enos said.

The man looked at him.

"His woman."

"You know her?"

"No."

"Then that is a hopeful payment."

"It is his."

"It is here."

Carrillo closed his hand over the coins. "You object?"

"No."

García took the coins off him an hour later without any discussion that Enos heard, and put them in his own coat, and said he would carry them himself because he knew the town, and Carrillo let him, which told Enos something about both men.

They slept in a barn with no hay and a roof patched by daylight.

Jacinto came and sat against the same wall and they passed a bottle back and forth twice and did not say much.

"They will hang him," Jacinto said.

"Probably."

"Under what name."

"Whichever one pays."

Jacinto turned the bottle in his hands. "I have been thinking about the landing."

"That was a long time ago."

"It was two men and a boy and a mule with a white ear." He drank. "I told a Frenchman your name in a shed. Do you know that?"

"Yes."

"I have thought about it since."

"He is dead."

Jacinto sat with that a while.

“That does not make it better.”

“No.”

“I did not think it would.”

Jacinto turned the bottle in his hands, and then reached inside his coat and brought out a half plug of tobacco, old and gone hard at the edges, and held it out.

Enos looked at it.

“What is this for.”

“Tomás.” Jacinto said it carefully, the way a man sets down something he has carried a distance. “He said if I saw you again, you would know.”

Enos took it and turned it over once and did not put it away.

“When.”

“The winter after you all went north. Fever came through the landing and took eleven. He was one of them. Two days.” Jacinto drank. “I sat with him at the end.”

“He waited for you some,” he said after a while. “The first months. He would ask the freighters coming down. Then he stopped asking, the way they do, and he was good with the animals by then and there was work.”

Enos sat with his back against the wall with the plug in his hand.

He had left the boy at French Camp holding a lead rope, and had told him nothing, because the company was moving and there had been nothing to tell that the boy could use. The boy had checked a cinch badly once and been told about it, and had dealt cards badly and won once, and had owed a Frenchman tobacco, and had held half a plug back against the debt for a man who was at that time holding horses in the dark above a lake.

The Frenchman had died first. Nobody had told the boy that either.

Enos put the plug in his pocket. There was nothing else in it.

Jacinto let him not say anything, and after a while he got up and went to see to the horses, because that was what he did instead of finishing conversations.

Before dawn Enos woke to the sound of paper.

John sat near the open door with the warrant across his knee.

He had gone back for it, or taken it during the confusion. Enos had not seen.

A bullet had passed through the lower corner. Dust and somebody's blood marked the fold.

"Scar on the left cheek," John said.

Enos lay under his coat and looked at the rafters.

"Commonly seen in a red sash."

The barn remained dark except at the doorway.

"Gray mare. Silver pistols. Twenty-five years. Speaks English."

"It is a crowded man."

John looked over.

"They had him before they saw any of us."

"Yes."

"They will say they captured Murrieta."

"Yes."

"He is not Murrieta."

"He was yesterday."

John folded the warrant but did not put it away.

"One man can carry a story farther."

"So can a mule."

"I mean farther than rumor."

"I know what you mean."

John looked toward the dark yard. "A hundred men become thieves. One man can become wronged."

"One man can become hanged."

"They will hang men either way."

"That improves nothing."

"No." John's voice stayed quiet. "But a man can be made to stand for what was done to him."

"And for what the other men did."

John looked down at the warrant.

"The story is already being made."

"That does not mean you have to help."

“It means someone will.”

Enos sat up.

The old pain under his ribs had woken before the rest of him. He put a hand there and waited for it to settle.

“You think if you make the lie better it becomes truth.”

“No.”

“That is what all writers think.”

“Is that what happened with Frémont?”

Enos looked at him.

John did not move.

“His wife made the lie better,” Enos said. “His father-in-law made it useful. The printers made it travel. After that it did not need truth.”

John held the warrant by its two edges.

“Then the trouble was not that they wrote.”

“No?”

“The trouble was who wrote first.”

From the yard came a horse striking the wall once with a hoof.

Enos put on his boots.

“You write this Joaquín,” he said, “which one will you use?”

John did not answer.

“The one with the sash?”

“No.”

“The scar?”

“No.”

“The gray mare?”

“No.”

“The pistols?”

“No.”

“The one they took?”

John’s face changed then. Not much.

Enos stood.

“You put one man on the page, all the others go under him.”

“Perhaps that is how he carries them.”

“Perhaps they cannot breathe.”

John looked back at the warrant.

“They cannot breathe now.”

Enos had no answer for that which did not belong to a better man.

They went separate ways after sunrise.

Carrillo headed south with two of the men. Ocho went east. García and Jacinto were taking the string down toward the Panoche country, where García said there was a man who bought without conversation.

Jacinto came over while Enos was tightening the girth on the fresh horse.

“Come with us.”

“No.”

“It is work.”

“It is his work.”

Jacinto looked back at García, who was up and loud already, holding forth to nobody about the priest and the rooster.

“He is not the worst of them.”

“I know.”

“You are going north.”

“For a while.”

Jacinto put out his hand. Enos took it.

“When you come back through,” Jacinto said, “ask at Hornitos. Somebody will know where we are.”

“I will.”

“You will not.”

“No,” Enos said. “Probably not.”

Jacinto laughed and hit him once on the shoulder and went to get the horses, and that was the last of it.

John was at the water trough with the folded poem inside his coat. The warrant was gone.

“You burn it?” Enos said.

“No.”

“That disappoints me.”

“I expect to do that often.”

John held out a hand. Enos looked at it.

“What is that?”

“A custom.”

“I have seen customs.”

“You have survived them badly.”

Enos took the hand. John’s grip was dry and not strong. The knuckle of the middle finger had a dark place where the pen rested.

“What do they call you when nobody is asking?” Enos said.

John held on a moment longer than the custom required.

“John.”

“I heard.”

“That is what they call me.”

“And the rest?”

“The rest has caused trouble.”

“That is the usual purpose.”

John released the hand.

“What name shall I use for you?”

“None.”

“If I write what you told me.”

“I did not tell you anything.”

“You told me about Basil.”

“No. I told the morning.”

“And San Rafael.”

“That was the saddle talking.”

John almost smiled. “Then I will put down a saddle.”

“Make it handsome.”

“Was it?”

“Yes. That was part of the trouble.”

John let the smile go.

Enos mounted.

John stood beside the trough with Shasta pale beyond him.

“You should change the line,” Enos said.

“Which line?”

“The companionless one.”

John looked north. Smoke stood in the lower country again. More than before. Morning fires, brush burns, ranch kitchens, camps without names. At that distance they all appeared peaceful.

“I will consider it,” John said.

“That is what men say before keeping a thing.”

“Yes.”

Enos put the horse toward the road.

Behind him John called once.

“You did not give me a name.”

Enos stopped.

There was an empty bottle standing in the dirt beside the trough where somebody had set it down in the night, brown glass with the cork gone, and it had a little water in the bottom of it from the horses splashing.

He looked at it a moment.

It was the sort of thing a man said to be finished with a conversation, and it cost nothing, and he had been giving away worse for ten years.

“Botellier,” he said.

John repeated it. “Botellier.”

“That is right.”

“That is not a Spanish name.”

“No,” Enos said. “It is a French one, badly.”

“And it is yours?”

“It is as much mine as the others.”

He rode.

Behind him John stood at the trough with the poem in his coat and the sun coming up behind Shasta, and Enos got a half mile down the road before he thought about it again and about another half mile before it stopped being funny, and then he thought about the road, and did not think about it again for fourteen months.

Botellier

He heard about the law in a feed yard at Hornitos in the first week of June, four weeks after it had been signed, from a man reading a Stockton paper out loud to two others who had not asked him to.

The man read badly and enjoyed it.

An act to authorize the raising of a company of rangers. Twenty men. Three months. A hundred and fifty dollars the month, found in horses and arms. Captain Harry Love commanding, who had been in Texas and in Mexico and had been a deputy at Los Angeles and was said to be a hard man, which in that country meant he had not yet been caught at anything.

To capture the party or gang of robbers commanded by the five Joaquins.

“Five,” one of the listeners said. “How is a man five.”

“It says here.”

“Read the names.”

The reader found the place with his finger.

“Joaquin Botellier. Joaquin Carrillo. Joaquin Muriata. Joaquin Ocomorenia. Joaquin Valenzuela.”

Enos was standing at the rail with a hoof pick in his hand and a mule’s foot between his knees.

He did not move.

There were four names on that list belonging to men he had eaten with, and one that had come out of his own mouth at a water trough below Shasta fourteen months earlier, and he had made it up out of an empty bottle because a man was waiting for an answer and it had been cheaper to give him one.

“Ocomorenia,” the second listener said. “What is that.”

“Mexican.”

“It is not.”

“It is on the paper.”

Enos set the foot down.

He knew what it was. It was Ocho—a thing said to a boy in a village in Sonora before any of them were born, gone through four mouths and a deputy’s ear and a clerk’s pen and come

out the far side with a Christian name on the front of it, and now the State of California had made it a man and was paying twenty riders to kill him.

And under it, Botellier.

Which was a bottle, badly, in a language nobody in that feed yard spoke.

“That one is French,” the reader said, tapping it.

“There are no French bandits.”

“There are now. It says here.”

They laughed and went on to the next column, which was about a bridge.

He went out and stood in the yard for a while and looked at the mules.

The thing he kept arriving at was how little it had cost.

Not a decision. Not a lie told to save himself or anybody. He had been on a horse with the reins already gathered, a man had called after him wanting something to write down, and he had looked at a bottle in the dirt and said a word to be finished with it.

Fourteen months. No one had checked. No one had needed to.

Somewhere between that trough and a desk in Benicia the word had been repeated by men who had heard it from men, entered into a report, read out to a committee, set in type, and signed by a governor. Nobody along that line had done anything wrong. Nobody had been required to. It had traveled the way water travels, which is to say downhill, without wanting anything.

He had watched this happen to other people for seven years and had thought of it as a thing that was done.

It was not done. It ran.

And it had picked up a joke off the ground below Shasta and made it worth a hundred and fifty dollars a month to twenty men with rifles.

He did not go back to Hornitos to ask after anybody.

That was the shape of the next eleven weeks and he did not examine it closely at the time. He took work north and east. He moved freight to Sonora and then to Columbia, and slept in a barn at Chinese Camp for a fortnight while a man decided whether to pay him, and did not read newspapers, and did not stop in the towns where the news would have been standing on a corner waiting for him.

He heard things anyway.

That the rangers had been at Ospital. That they had been seen at San Luis Gonzaga. That they were going through the Mexican camps in the coast range and turning out the horse hunters. That two men had been shot near the Merced by somebody, for something.

In July a teamster told him the rangers had taken Joaquín at last, in the Panoche country, and Enos asked him which one and the man did not understand the question.

He came into Stockton the third week of August with a message sewn into a saddle cloth and thirty dollars divided between boot, belt, and hatband.

There was a tent on the levee end of Center Street with a painted board out front and a line of men standing in the sun.

He would not have stopped. He had walked past a good many tents.

But the board had a name on it that had been in his mouth at a water trough, and the line was forty men long at three in the afternoon on a working day, and there was a boy going up and down it selling water at a bit a cup and doing very well.

He stood across the street for some time.

Then he crossed and paid his dollar.

Inside it was hot and smelled of canvas and men and the sweetness that comes off brandy that has been standing in warmth.

There were two jars on a plank table with a rope in front of it and a ranger sitting on a stool at the end with a rifle across his knees, bored past insult.

The first jar was smaller.

In it was a hand.

It had been off some weeks and the brandy had gone the color of weak tea and there were things suspended in it that the men filing past preferred to call sediment. The hand was cut off above the wrist. It was thick through the palm, a working hand, with the nails broken back the way they broke on a man who used a rope.

It had three fingers.

The card in front of it, in a good clerkly script, said it was the hand of Manuel García, known as Three-Fingered Jack.

Enos stood and looked at it for a long time. The man behind him said something about the line.

He had held that hand in his own hand at a corral below the dry hills. He had watched it turn in the firelight while its owner counted slowly for a stranger's benefit, one two three four five, and the crooked thumb sitting off at its angle from the rest.

Whoever's hand that was in the brandy, it had been short two fingers before anyone shot it.

And that was the object in the tent that everyone agreed was certain. That was the proof. It was the deformity that made it evidence, and the man it was named for had not had the deformity, and there were seventeen affidavits sworn on the other jar and none needed on this one because a hand like that could not be mistaken.

The second jar was larger and men spent less time at it and did not talk while they did.

The head had been in the brandy since July and it was August. The features had gone slack and then set, the way a face sets after it stops being asked to do anything. The hair floated. One eye had opened partway. The card said it was the head of the bandit Joaquín Murrieta, taken by the State Rangers at the Arroyo de Cantua on the twenty-fifth of July.

Enos looked at it.

He looked at it long enough that the ranger on the stool lifted his head and looked back.

The forehead was wrong for it. The jaw was wrong for it. Murrieta had been a small quiet man of fifty-one who looked like a schoolmaster gone to seed, and had been asleep in the saddle when a deputy read his name off a warrant in a dry wash, and had said nothing while five other men claimed it for him.

That was not his head.

Enos moved a half step to the left, the way a man does at a window.

The ear.

There was a piece taken out of the top of the left ear, an old notch, healed white, of the kind a man gets from a knife going somewhere else, and he had looked at that ear across a rail in the fog on the American River in 1846 while its owner drank bad coffee and told him there was another one missing.

The line moved behind him.

He looked at the jaw, and at the set of the mouth under the changes the brandy had made, and at the hairline going back on the left the way it had been going back for six years, and he

stopped being unsure at about four seconds and then stood there another twenty for no reason he could afterward name.

Jacinto had gone with García's outfit down toward the Panoche country in the spring of the year before, to a man who bought without conversation.

The rangers had come on a camp at Cantua Creek at breakfast and killed everybody who ran.

The men there had said they were hunting wild horses.

That was true. Enos had watched him do it for twenty years.

The card did more work than the face.

Alive, Jacinto had carried his own name all the years Enos had known him and nobody had paid a dollar to believe it. Dead, the State had put another man's name under him and there was a line down the street.

Enos watched the men come past.

The head did not have to be Murrieta.

It had to be proof.

He got outside and stood in the sun.

The boy came along with the water bucket and Enos bought a cup and drank it and gave the cup back and did not taste any of it.

The line was longer than when he had gone in.

Behind him inside the tent a man was saying to another man that the head did not look like much and the other man was saying that they never did.

What he could do was walk back in and tell the ranger on the stool that the head in the second jar belonged to a vaquero named Jacinto who had worked at New Helvetia before the Americans came and had never in his life been called Joaquín by anybody.

Then the ranger would ask how he came to know that.

And the answer to that question ran back through a corral below the dry hills, a night drive with altered brands, a dry wash where a deputy had read a warrant with silver pistols on it, and a man now hanged or waiting to be hanged under a name that was not his.

They would want a name to write down.

And the one he had gone under in that country for two years was on an act of the legislature between Muriata and Carrillo, worth a hundred and fifty dollars a month to twenty men, and it was his own, and he had made it up himself.

He stood in the street until the shade came round.

Then he went and got his horse.

He learned the rest of it in pieces, the way he learned everything.

That the rangers had taken a head and a hand at Cantua and had also taken a second head, and that the second one had gone bad on the ride to Millerton in July and had been thrown out somewhere along the road, and that this one was said to have been García's.

That Love had never seen Murrieta and had no likeness of him.

That seventeen men had been found who would swear to the face.

That a correspondent had written to the *Alta* from Los Angeles in August saying the rangers had killed an innocent Mexican mustang catcher near Cantua and had paid for the affidavits, and that the paper had printed it, and that nothing had come of the printing.

That the reward had been paid.

That the jars had gone on to Mariposa and then San Francisco and then out through the mining camps, a dollar a look, and had done well.

He heard that Carrillo was in Sonora and that Carrillo was dead. He heard that Ocho had been taken and released and taken again under a different one of the five names. He heard that Val had been hanged at Jackson, and separately that Val had been hanged at San Andreas, and separately that Val had been seen in October near San Luis Obispo, which meant that of the three reports at least two were about somebody else.

He never heard anything about Botellier at all.

That was the strange part and he turned it over more than he turned over the rest.

The other four names went out into the country and came back attached to arrests, hangings, sightings, and rumors, because there were men to attach them to. His had gone out and found nobody, because there was nobody, and so it simply sat on the list where it had been put, unused, drawing no fire.

The safest name in California was the one that belonged to no one.

He did not use it.

He went on giving clerks whatever came to hand. Hayes twice. Pike once. He let each of those go the way he had let the others go, and never once in the four years remaining to him did he give anybody the name that would have held.

He could not have said why with any precision.

The nearest he came to it, later, in a room at Grave Creek with a woman who did not ask, was that he had seen what it cost to be the man on the list, and had seen it in a jar, at a dollar a look, in Stockton in August.

Ah Toy

A bottle, a woman, a bath, a shave.

Three days out of Stockton, that was all Enos could think about as he sat his horse on a small rise above the city.

San Francisco went down the hills beneath him toward a harbor so crowded with masts that from there it was difficult to tell where the city stopped and the ships began. Houses climbed over one another toward the ridges. Smoke came out of roofs, cook fires, foundries and steamers and joined over the lower streets in a yellow-gray cover the wind kept tearing open. Wagons moved along plank roads laid over mud. Men filled every space between them.

Beyond the buildings the harbor stood thick with ships, three and four deep in places, with more riding beyond them in the bay. Some had been there so long they had stopped being ships in every way that mattered. Roofs had been built across their decks. Windows showed in their hulls. Stovepipes came out where masts had been. One sat behind a row of buildings with a painted storefront nailed across its side. Another had disappeared halfway inside a warehouse being built around it, the city taking the vessel apart by construction rather than axe.

The city had reached into the harbor, taken what had brought it there and begun making buildings out of it.

Down near the water another boat came ashore crowded with Chinese men.

Enos watched them climb onto the wharf carrying bedding, baskets, small wooden chests, poles with loads balanced from either end, everything a man might cross an ocean with if he expected to carry it again when he arrived. Other Chinese men waited at the landing and began sorting them almost before the boat was empty. Names were called. Hands went up. Men found one another and moved off. A few stood where they had come ashore looking into the city.

Another boat was already behind them.

There had been twenty thousand through the customs house the year before, according to the papers. From the rise Enos had thought twenty thousand a newspaper number. Down there it looked possible.

English worked badly against Spanish along the lower streets. French appeared near one warehouse and disappeared again. German came out of a wagon yard. Chinese passed through all

of it. Bells rang aboard steamers. Cart wheels hammered loose plank. Men shouted freight from one pier to another.

Enos looked down at it. He had come to disappear. San Francisco appeared built for that too.

The road dropped steeply enough that the horse went careful on the hindquarters. Halfway down they passed a wagon carrying boards uphill and another coming down with three men sitting on barrels. By the time Enos reached the lower streets the city had swallowed the rise behind him.

At the shipping office a fellow behind the counter told him steamers arrived more often than they departed.

“Half these boats hit the harbor and empty. Passengers and crew. Takes captains about a week or so to organize. So if you are willing to wait, ought to leave inside the week.”

“Ought?”

“More folk staying than leaving. Cannot be precise.” The harbormaster put his hands up. “If you buy the ticket now I will guarantee you a spot on the next berth. Just cannot guarantee when it will leave.”

“I will wait with my gold in my pocket.”

“Your call. Maybe just stay. Lots of men trying to find a fortune.”

The horse found lodging three streets back. Enos paid seven days for stall and feed, carried the saddle himself and found his own room farther toward the water.

Room was generous.

The place had once carried passengers around the Horn and now sat permanently in mud, boxed in on two sides by plank walks. The masts were gone. Someone had roofed over the deck and cut windows into the hull. Inside, bunks had been built where cargo once rode. Tar remained in the timber. So did salt. Somebody had used lime against the smell and produced a third smell without defeating either of the first two.

The man at the desk kept a book.

“Name?”

“Enos.”

The fellow looked up. “Christman? From the newspaper?”

Enos looked at him. “You caught me.”

The man looked at him hard. "Thought you were dead."

"They often do."

The pen went down. Christman entered the book. Enos watched the ink dry, paid seven nights in advance and put the saddle beneath the bunk.

Everything in San Francisco wanted seven days from him.

The bath cost more than the bunk. He paid. Soap was extra, and he paid that too.

The first water went gray around him. The second brought back parts of his body he had not looked at closely in months: the white place beneath the ribs, the old split beside the ear, rope marks crossing older marks in his palms. The third bucket stayed clear enough that Enos stopped before cleanliness became introspection.

The barber next door took the beard close and cut the hair at his neck with a razor that had no patience for movement. When he finished, he rubbed something onto Enos's face that smelled like flowers preserved in alcohol.

Enos looked in the glass.

"You do this to everybody?"

"Do what?"

"Make them look recently acquitted."

The barber laughed. "Going somewhere?"

"North."

"When?"

"Seven days."

"Plenty of time."

The bottle came before the food.

There was a place off Portsmouth Square where a man could get rye without explaining what he had done to deserve it. Enos ordered one. The second settled the first. The third found room beside both.

The place was full of men between things. Sailors between vessels. Miners between fortunes. Men waiting on freight and men waiting on money and several who appeared to have stopped waiting for anything but had not yet thought of somewhere else to sit.

Near dark the man beside Enos turned from a conversation nobody had asked him to begin.

“You want a girl?”

“I have known some.”

“Chinese.”

“I have known fewer.”

The man pointed with his glass toward Clay Street.

“Atoy.”

Enos looked where he pointed. “What is Atoy?”

The man smiled.

“Depends what you spend.”

Enos finished the rye.

The Chinese quarter did not begin at a line. The lettering changed first. Then the food in the windows. Shops narrowed. Men carried baskets from poles across their shoulders. Steam came out of one doorway carrying meat and ginger and something sweet. A butcher worked beneath a lamp. A boy passed Enos carrying two covered bowls and did not spill either though three men nearly walked through him.

American boots went among cloth shoes and miners’ mud. Voices crossed one another in sounds Enos had heard at ports and camps but never long enough to keep. Somewhere behind a wall a stringed instrument repeated four notes until somebody shouted and it stopped.

Men on the American side called them Celestials.

There appeared to be a great many kinds of heaven.

The farther Enos went, the better he liked the arithmetic. A man hiding alone in timber could be found if somebody cared enough to look. Here there were too many faces to remember one.

An ant did not hide from an anthill.

It joined it.

The house on Clay Street required no sign. The men entering supplied advertisement enough. Others came out arranging their coats. Light stood warm in the front room.

The man inside had a face other men had tried more than once to rearrange and had failed to improve. He was smaller than Enos. That did not seem relevant.

“Money.”

Enos showed him some. The man stepped aside.

That was China Jim.

The woman upstairs wore a red comb in her hair.

Enos remembered the comb longer than he remembered her name, if she gave one. She laughed when he tried French, laughed harder at Spanish and put one hand over his mouth when he attempted the single Chinese word somebody downstairs had taught him.

There was whiskey.

Later there was something clear in a smaller cup.

Later a pipe.

The smoke did not strike him so much as remove things from consideration.

The room lost its corners first.

Then urgency.

Then sequence.

The woman with the red comb took the glass away when Enos tried to put it on the floor. He said something to her that sounded sensible when he began and lost the far end before it came out.

She had no use for it anyway.

Morning reached him badly.

One boot was beneath the bed. The other stood near the door.

The button remained inside the left one.

That counted as discipline.

The woman slept beside him with one knee over his thigh. Enos moved it carefully. She opened one eye.

“Morning?”

She looked toward the window, then at him, said something and pulled the blanket over her head.

Enos took that for expert advice and stayed another hour.

At noon he went down to the waterfront to ask after the steamer. At two he was back on Clay Street.

The second night was less accidental.

The third required no explanation at all.

By the fourth, China Jim no longer asked to see money. That should have interested Enos. It did not.

China Jim would look at him, at whichever woman had taken him upstairs, then make a mark in a narrow book kept near the back. Another man sometimes made the marks. He was older than China Jim by enough to matter, narrow through the shoulders and dressed with more care, with the composure of somebody who had learned that Americans became more dangerous when they believed nobody understood them.

His name was Apung.

Enos heard it several times before he understood it belonged to the same man.

Apung spoke to China Jim.

China Jim spoke to Enos.

“Drink?”

“Yes.”

A mark.

“Room?”

“Yes.”

A mark.

“Woman?”

Enos looked toward the stairs.

“Apparently.”

Another mark.

One night Enos asked what was being written.

China Jim turned the book.

It did not help. Characters Enos could not read ran beside figures he could.

“What does that say?”

China Jim pointed at Enos.

“That.”

“That has never been my name.”

China Jim looked at the characters, then at Enos.

“French.”

Enos considered objecting. Then thought about Christman sitting in another book near the harbor.

“Fine.”

China Jim closed the book.

The seventh day went missing entirely.

Enos remembered breakfast. Rain beginning while sunlight still showed in the street. The woman with the red comb telling him something with both hands and becoming angry when he failed to understand.

He remembered an opium lamp.

After that he had pieces. A shoe on the table. Somebody singing badly in English. China Jim taking a bottle out of Enos’s hand before it went into a wall.

Then nothing reliable.

He woke the following afternoon on the floor with one boot still on.

China Jim sat in the doorway eating from a bowl and continued eating when Enos opened his eyes.

“What day?”

China Jim lifted the bowl and drank from it.

“Day.”

Enos closed his eyes again. After a while China Jim said, “Boat gone.”

Enos opened them. “What boat.”

China Jim looked at him.

Enos put a hand over his face.

“North.”

“Gone yesterday.”

He remained on the floor a while longer.

Finding the other boot took more time than the boot deserved.

Downstairs he washed his face, drank water until his stomach objected and emptied what remained of his money onto the table.

Three dollars and some change.

China Jim looked at the coins.

“Bill.”

“I imagined.”

China Jim called Apung.

The narrow book appeared.

China Jim put one finger under the figures and moved it down the page.

Enos understood the total.

He counted again.

“No.”

China Jim nodded.

“No.”

“That is not an agreement.”

China Jim tapped the figure.

“Two hundred forty-six dollars?”

China Jim tapped the smaller numbers after it.

“And fifty.”

“Yes.”

“In seven days.”

China Jim held up eight fingers.

Enos stared at them.

“Eight.”

“Yes.”

Then China Jim began down the account.

Room.

Drink.

Drink.

Woman.

Drink.

Food.

Woman.

Opium.

Drink.

Another room.

“Why another room?”

China Jim said something to Apung.

Apung answered.

China Jim looked at Enos.

“You lose first room.”

Enos remembered a hallway.

“Fair.”

Laundry.

Food.

Woman.

Stable.

Bunk aboard the ship.

A second barber charge.

“I paid the barber.”

China Jim moved his finger up the page. The first payment was there.

The second was not.

Enos remembered getting shaved again. His eyes went to the floor. China Jim went on.

A basin.

“What happened to the basin?”

China Jim looked toward one wall.

Something came back to Enos in pieces.

“Fair.”

He took the book and worked through every figure China Jim could explain. Enos had spent years finding what men improved in accounts. A horse entered twice. Flour carried against the wrong name. A dead man’s debt laid somewhere else. *Deserted* where another word might have done. *Discharged* where desertion had happened.

He found nothing.

The book was right.

That was the offensive part.

He looked harder.

China Jim waited.

By the fourth woman Enos stopped asking which one.

He put the book down.

Enos looked at the total once more, pushed the book back and stood.

He made it one step.

Two men caught him from behind, one on each arm, and two others came in front. The first blow folded him at the middle. The next caught his mouth. They held him upright while the other two worked, ribs, belly, face, and whenever his legs went out the men behind him brought him back under himself.

Enos fought at first.

They beat that out of him.

By the end he hung between the two men with blood running from his mouth and nothing left worth saying.

China Jim stood at the table. He put one finger down on Enos's entry in the debt book.

"You owe. You work."

The next morning China Jim took him upstairs.

Enos moved slowly and China Jim did not alter his pace for him.

At the landing the passage split in a T. To the right, doors ran down both sides. Enos had been through every room along the near side during the eight days that had produced the debt and none of the rooms opposite them. At the other end of the passage the laundry stood open, steam moving through the doorway with the sharp smell of lye soap, wet cloth and starch.

China Jim pointed toward it.

"You work."

Enos looked into the steam. Two men had their arms in tubs. Another worked a sheet through his hands and twisted it down into a basket.

"I do not do laundry."

China Jim pointed down the right-hand passage toward the rooms Enos had never entered.

"You work."

Then he pointed back toward the laundry and held his hands toward both passages.

"You work."

Before Enos answered, a gentleman came up the stairs behind them in a dark fitted coat, polished boots and a hat that had never been asked to keep weather off anybody. He smiled as he passed.

“Morning.”

China Jim nodded.

The gentleman continued down the hall, opened one of the doors Enos had never been through and disappeared inside.

Enos watched the door close, then looked at China Jim.

China Jim waited.

Enos went to the laundry.

The laundry lasted three days before China Jim put him on something else.

After that there was water, trunks, freight from the waterfront, packages carried from one merchant to another, waiting beside carts and standing outside doors until somebody came through them. China Jim rarely explained any of it. Enos eventually stopped requiring explanation before lifting whatever had been put in front of him.

He learned which alleys became drains when it rained and which stayed merely filthy. He learned that a Chinese shop could look empty from the street and contain twelve men, four accounts and enough rice to feed a camp. He learned that Apung could stand at the rear of a room saying almost nothing while three men argued in front of him and somehow be the one who had decided the matter when they left.

He learned nothing about Ah Toy.

Her name moved through the work. Atoy says. Atoy house. Take this. Not there. Wait. Tomorrow. No credit.

Apung spoke to her. China Jim worked within arrangements Enos could not see and had stopped trying to diagram.

He saw Ah Toy twice without knowing it.

The first time she crossed the upper landing while Enos carried a chair downstairs. The second she came through the rear yard with two women and Apung beside her.

China Jim stood aside with Enos just behind him. After she passed, Enos looked after her.

“Who?”

“Ah Toy.”

Enos turned farther, but she had already gone through another door.

“That is Ah Toy?”

“Yes.”

“I thought it was the house.”

China Jim looked at the chair. The chair still needed carrying.

Three weeks later Apung spoke to China Jim and China Jim looked across the room at Enos.

“Tomorrow. Horse.”

“I have one.”

“Ride.”

“Where?”

“Sam Fou.”

“Who is Sam Fou?”

China Jim went away.

They left before daylight two mornings later with six pack animals, China Jim, Enos and two other men who spoke no English to Enos and enough to each other that he was not missed.

Apung came as far as the landing, touched one of the cases and spoke to China Jim. Then he looked at Enos.

China Jim handed Enos the lead of a spare animal.

“Ride front.”

“Why?”

China Jim pointed at Enos’s face.

“Men ask you.”

“What do I tell them?”

“Answer.”

That was the whole instruction.

They crossed the bay and took the road east.

Enos rode well ahead.

The first Americans they met explained the arrangement.

Three men came the other way near a crossing, the lead man wearing a deputy’s star badly pinned and a shotgun across his thighs. He looked at Enos.

“Where you headed?”

“East.”

The deputy looked beyond him at China Jim and the pack string.

“Them yours?”

Enos looked back. China Jim sat his horse with the reins loose.

“No.”

The deputy’s face changed.

Enos corrected. “They are with me.”

That was sufficient.

“What you hauling?”

“Freight.”

“What kind?”

Enos looked back again.

China Jim gave him nothing.

“Chinese freight.”

The deputy laughed.

His companions did too.

Nobody rode back to inspect it.

They passed.

Half a mile later China Jim came alongside.

“Good.”

Enos looked at him. “I told him nothing.”

“Yes.”

China Jim dropped back again.

By the second day Enos understood.

The cargo did not require him.

The road did.

Men looked at Enos first and spent their questions there.

At Stockton they stopped near the levee.

The exhibition tent was gone. The board was gone. The line was gone.

A wagon stood where men had once paid a dollar to look at Jacinto's head and was unloading barrels.

Enos rode past.

He did not tell China Jim what had occupied the ground in August.

There was no use giving a place back a thing it had already sold.

Two cases went into a merchant's room. Three came out. Enos could not tell whether they were the same three. China Jim could.

They went north.

At Sacramento men China Jim knew came out before they had fully dismounted. Food appeared. One pack animal changed hands. Cases disappeared through a rear door and others came back marked differently.

Enos watched.

The place was called Yee Fou by the men around China Jim.

Enos assumed this was a person until China Jim pointed at Sacramento.

"Yee Fou."

"That is the city?"

"Yes."

Enos let that remain unexplained until Marysville.

They came into it through streets full of freight. Pack saddles hung from rails. Mules stood with empty rigs waiting to be loaded. Miners came in from the surrounding country with mud dried white on their trousers and left with food, oil, tools, clothing, rice and whatever else could be carried back out.

China Jim said, "Sam Fou."

Enos looked along the street.

"Where?"

China Jim pointed around them.

"Sam Fou."

"I thought we were meeting him."

China Jim shook his head.

"Three city."

Enos looked at him.

“Yee Fou?”

“Two.”

“Dai Fou?”

“One.”

“San Francisco.”

“Yes.”

Enos looked around Marysville.

“And this is three.”

“Yes.”

“That seems unnecessarily organized.”

China Jim ignored him.

The Chinese part of Sam Fou made sense to Enos faster than San Francisco had. San Francisco received things. This place sent them somewhere else.

The case Apung had touched in San Francisco went inside a store.

A merchant opened it.

Tins stood packed close together.

“What is it?”

“Opium.”

Enos looked at the other cases.

“All of it?”

“Yes.”

“That why I ride front?”

“Yes.”

That was all China Jim gave him.

The merchant broke the case into smaller lots. Some tins went with rice. Some with tea. Others into boxes already marked for men Enos had never seen. Gold dust went onto a scale. A miner came in wet to the knee, spoke quickly, took four tins and a sack of rice and left.

By evening the thing they had carried from San Francisco no longer existed as one thing.

Some was going up the Yuba. Some elsewhere. China Jim knew where. Enos did not.

Nobody required him to.

They stayed six days.

On the fourth, a miner came in with one eye swollen shut and wanted money. He spoke hard to China Jim.

China Jim answered quietly.

The man left with rice.

“What happened?”

“He owe.”

“So do I.”

“Yes.”

Enos waited.

China Jim handed him the sack.

“Carry.”

Enos carried it.

They went south with less freight and more money.

That made Enos nervous.

On the road he rode front again.

At a toll gate the man asked whose animals they were.

“Mine.”

The toll man accepted this and took the money.

Once they were clear, China Jim came alongside.

“Yours?”

“No.”

China Jim nodded.

“Good.”

When they returned to San Francisco, rain had begun and Clay Street carried half the hill through its gutters.

Enos went to the debt book.

The figure had improved.

Not enough.

“We were gone seven weeks.”

China Jim nodded.

“That removed thirty-one dollars.”

“Food.”

“I ate very little.”

“Horses.”

“They ate too much.”

“Room.”

“I slept on floors.”

China Jim looked at the book.

Enos looked at it too.

He had meant to give San Francisco seven days.

It took most of a year to get them back.

After Sam Fou the months stopped requiring individual treatment. Rain came hard enough to carry dirt from one street into the next and then stopped for several days and left the city steaming. Ships arrived. Ships left. Enos carried trunks from the waterfront, freight back toward it, packets between merchants and whatever else China Jim or Apung put into his hands.

On the roads Enos rode front because men asked him questions first. He learned that the trick was rarely giving a convincing answer. It was giving one that occupied a man long enough for the pack string to keep moving.

The house fed him, the stable kept the horse, and both charges moved through the account while his work came against them from the other side. He still drank sometimes, though not with the ambition of the first week, and there were women when he had enough credit left for them. Some days the figure went down. Some days Enos managed to make it climb again.

Once he dropped a crate from a cart and broke the side out.

The charge appeared in the debt book the following morning.

“Rotten wood,” Enos said.

China Jim put one finger on the entry.

“Book says good wood.”

Enos looked at him.

China Jim shrugged.

Enos paid for the crate.

By winter he stopped asking the balance every week and eventually stopped asking every month. The number existed whether he looked at it or not. He knew where China Jim wanted

him on the road, how far ahead to ride and when the silence behind him meant he ought to keep an American talking. He knew which merchants wanted a name, which wanted money and which cared only that the marks on a packet matched the marks in whatever book they kept behind the counter.

He still understood little of what Apung arranged, but things went where they were supposed to go. Money came back. The account changed.

Enos worked.

In February he came through the rear passage carrying a basin when Clay Street exploded.

The basin left his hands before he knew he had dropped it.

Enos hit the floor beside the doorway with his knife out.

Another string went off toward Dupont. Then one directly overhead, hard enough to shake dust from the lintel. Red paper came spinning through the open door and smoke rolled into the hall.

Enos stayed down until the firing turned into laughter.

China Jim came through the passage.

“What the fuck was that?”

“New Year.”

Another string went off in the street.

Enos’s shoulders came up before he could stop them.

China Jim saw.

He did not say anything.

That made it worse.

Enos folded the knife, picked up the basin and went back to work.

By March, Apung sometimes sent him alone.

One afternoon he gave Enos a packet and a name Enos could not keep. Enos repeated what he thought he heard. Apung frowned. Enos tried again.

Worse.

Apung took the packet back, wrote two characters on the outside and returned it.

Enos looked at them.

“That will certainly help.”

Apung pointed toward the waterfront.

It did.

A merchant saw the marks, took the packet and handed another one back without asking Enos what he was called.

Enos returned it.

Apung checked the seal.

No translation.

No receipt Enos could read.

The thing had gone where it belonged.

That happened often enough that he stopped being surprised.

Near the end of March China Jim came to the stable while Enos was working dried mud from the horse.

“Come.”

“In a minute.”

“Now.”

Enos looked at him.

China Jim took the brush from his hand and hung it on the peg.

“Come.”

Apung stood at the foot of the stairs with the debt book.

Enos looked at it.

“What did I break?”

Apung spoke.

China Jim answered.

Then Apung went upstairs.

China Jim followed.

Enos stayed at the bottom.

China Jim looked back.

“Come.”

Enos went.

The room above was smaller than he expected.

There was no bed.

A table stood near the window with three books on it, folded papers, a small scale, a covered cup and stacks of coin divided into amounts that looked as though somebody intended them to remain amounts.

Ah Toy sat at the table.

Apung stood beside her.

She looked at Enos once, not long, then at the debt book.

He had spent most of a year owing money to a woman who had scarcely had reason to know he existed.

That seemed fair.

Ah Toy spoke.

Apung opened the book.

China Jim stood at the table.

“Finished.”

Enos looked at the figures.

“When?”

China Jim asked Apung.

“Two day.”

Ah Toy counted coins from one stack and put them on the table.

Enos looked at them.

“What is that?”

“Yours.”

“The debt is finished.”

“Yes.”

“Then why money?”

China Jim put one finger at the bottom of the account.

“Two day.”

Enos counted the coins.

The amount was exact.

Of course it was.

The house had charged every room, every drink, every woman, every meal, every day of stable, every broken thing Enos had actually broken.

Now it paid him for two days he had actually worked.

He put the money in his pocket.

Ah Toy said something.

China Jim looked at Enos.

“Name.”

Enos thought about Christman in the lodging book near the harbor and the Chinese characters downstairs that meant French.

“Enos.”

China Jim translated.

Ah Toy repeated it once.

Not perfectly.

Close enough.

Then she went back to the book.

That was the whole of their acquaintance.

Enos went downstairs.

The house continued behind him.

That afternoon he went to the shipping office.

A different man sat behind the counter.

“North?”

“Yes.”

“Steamer leaves tomorrow.”

Enos looked through the window.

“Actually?”

The man pointed toward the wharf.

“It is tied there.”

“That improves the claim.”

Enos paid.

He settled what remained at the stable, saddled the horse and spent one last night aboard the hulk.

In the morning he went down to the waterfront.

In the spring of fifty-four he was on a coastal steamer going north with a message in his coat.

The vessel smelled of coal smoke, wet rope, vomit, orange peels, stale bread, and men who believed the sea owed them an apology. A crate of chickens objected near the companionway. A woman in black sat with both hands folded over a carpetbag and did not move when spray came over the rail.

Across from him a clerkly fellow read a small book with the seriousness men give to printed lies they hope will become property. The cover had already softened at the corners.

The title stood black when the man lifted it from his lap.

The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta.

One Joaquín.

One name.

One book.

Inside there was a picture. The clerk held it angled toward the light. A single face looked back from the page, grave and improved by ink.

It was not the head in the jar.

It was not the small quiet man asleep in the saddle.

The jar had needed proof.

The book needed a face.

Neither had much use for the man.

It had no notch out of the ear. It wore a red sash. The eyes belonged to nobody Enos had ever watched over a horse.

“Bandit,” the reader said, because a man with a book likes to supply the weather.

Enos looked at the page.

The clerk read a passage aloud to the woman beside him. He did not ask whether she wanted it. The book had reached the mountain.

Companionless and cold.

Enos looked toward the north, though there was only sea beyond the rail and cloud where land ought to have been.

He had heard the mountain before, read off a folded sheet in a sheep camp by a man who had asked him what happened and then had not written any of it down.

The clerk turned the page.

Somewhere further in, if the book was thorough, there would be a list. There generally was. The five, in the order the legislature had set them, because that was where a man would get them from.

He thought about a name sitting in a printed line between two dead men, in a book that would go into ten thousand houses, doing nothing, harming nobody, meaning nothing, and outliving every man who had said it out loud.

“There used to be more of them,” Enos said.

“More bandits?”

“More Joaquins.”

The reader frowned and went back to the book.

The sea struck the hull and made the chickens answer.

He did not correct the face. A man who corrected every printed thing would die before breakfast and still leave errors.

He went on north.

Another message rode in his coat. It was not important enough for history. It was important enough to be carried dry.

That was the work, mostly.

Port Orford

John C. Frémont was being talked about for president.

The paper was three weeks old and had been read by enough hands that it folded soft, like cloth. Charles Foster sat at his usual post by the saloon stove reading pieces of it aloud to nobody, prices, a shipwreck, a hanging in Yreka, and then a column out of the East. Men were arranging parties and trying names.

Enos knew what the C stood for.

He had settled that nine years earlier on a wet road with Basil Lajeunesse's boots tied to his saddle and forty miles of country going underneath him.

Lajeunesse would have wanted the column read twice.

Enos did not ask for it.

It had rained every day Enos had been in Port Orford. If the boat did not come soon, he would have to decide whether to wait for one or build an ark.

He had been there nine days, with a horse he could not afford to feed and a saddle Hostetler had already refused twice.

Hostetler ran the livery at the north end and therefore knew more about Enos's finances than either of them considered polite. The horse was eating his hay. The saddle was taking up space in his tack room whenever Enos could persuade him to look at it again.

Port Orford itself was a customs house, an agency, two stores, a hotel that was a house with a sign on it, a saloon, Hostetler's stable, and about forty buildings that had not decided yet what they were. Below it the ocean did what it did. Above it the hills came down steep and black and full of water.

Enos kept mostly to the north end. That was where the work was when there was any, and it was where a man could stand under an eave without being asked to account for himself.

A faro layout occupied one end of the bar. The dealer had three men around it and not enough money among them to justify his concentration. Hostetler stood at Enos's shoulder with whiskey in one hand and watched a queen come out of the dealing box.

"A man came by the livery yesterday," Hostetler said. "Thin. Blue coat. Beard cut short. Had two horses and a paper. Asked for a man named Enos."

Enos watched the next card.

“Plenty of men named Enos.”

“Not here.”

“That is unfortunate.”

Hostetler drank and said nothing more about it, which was the whole of his position on other men’s business.

Enos looked at the money on the layout.

“What does the bank take?”

The dealer looked at him.

“American money and gold.”

“I have a saddle.”

Hostetler did not turn around.

“Nobody wants your goddamn saddle.”

“It is a good saddle.”

“You told me that yesterday.”

Enos watched the next card come out.

“It was a good saddle yesterday.”

One of the players looked up.

“What kind?”

Enos did not look away from the layout.

“The kind that fits a horse.”

The dealer turned another card.

“Looks like you men just paid me to keep my saddle.”

From the stove Foster spoke too loudly for a man talking to himself.

“Frémont. How about that.”

Hostetler looked toward the stove.

“Was he not court-martialed?”

Foster found the place with his finger.

“Mutiny. Disobedience of orders. Conduct prejudicing good order and military discipline.”

One of the faro players said, “Did he not decide he was governor?”

“Something like that.”

“So treason.”

“Does not say treason.”

The player considered it.

“Looks like everything short of treason.”

“They found him guilty,” Foster said. “President remitted the sentence.”

Hostetler looked at him.

“What does remitted mean?”

Foster went back over the column.

“Looks like the court threw him out of the Army. Then the president decided he had to stay.”

“And?”

“Once they said he had to stay, he quit.”

Hostetler took a drink.

“Now president?”

Enos looked at the stove.

“Paper is good country for some men.”

The door opened to a lean man put together at angles. Narrow through the body and sharp through the face. Rain had darkened his coat across the shoulders. He carried a riding crop in one hand. There was a small movement in the left side of his jaw that came and went without seeming to belong to him.

He was known, and the barkeeper already had a glass down.

“Agent Wright. Rye?”

Wright took off his hat.

“Any cognac?”

The barkeeper looked behind himself as though some might have appeared since morning.

“No.”

“Then rye.”

The barkeeper poured.

Wright laid the riding crop across the bar and picked up the glass.

Hostetler looked at the crop.

“That new mustang I found for you giving you trouble?”

Wright glanced down at it as though he had forgotten he was carrying it.

“Sometimes an animal will not mind itself.”

He drank.

“That is the burden of ownership. Teaching the beast its place.”

Hostetler nodded. Horses had taught him not to argue with theories concerning horses.

Wright looked toward the newspaper.

“Frémont.”

“President, maybe,” Foster said.

Wright gave a short laugh.

“John Frémont found the country. Kit Carson rode dispatch across it. Jes and Lindy Applegate broke trails through Oregon.”

He set the glass down beside the crop.

“I made those trails roads.” Wright knocked back the whiskey. “Nine hundred scalps. Double eagle apiece. Receipts from Sacramento.”

Wright snapped the shot glass down. Before the bar keep could fill the glass he waved him off and reached for the bottle.

The room was quiet long enough for the rain to work against the roof.

Enos knew the men Wright had named.

Not the men in Wright’s sentence.

Frémont flattening the map with one hand and marking the village with a finger. Men ordered to move. Camps ahead of them hostile, because the written account would require them hostile.

Carson taking the hatchet back from Swanok.

Lajeunesse, Denny and Crane put into ground deep enough to feel the cold but too shallow to stay buried.

Jesse Applegate mud to his knees with a notebook inside his coat, measuring what a road cost by the mile. Three graves off another trail entered nowhere.

The names sounded different after other men got them.

Wright had put his own at the end.

Enos looked at the riding crop.

Then he stood.

Wright noticed him.

Enos met his eyes.

“Captain Wright.”

Wright’s mouth pulled at one corner.

He tipped the glass toward Enos.

Enos put a coin beside his coffee.

Hostetler looked at it.

“That for the saddle?”

“No.”

“Good. Still do not want it.”

Enos went outside.

The rain did not come down so much as stand in the air and wait for a man to walk into it. His coat had stopped being a coat around the fourth day and become a wet thing he carried on his shoulders out of habit.

The street was wrong.

Not empty. Wrong.

Men stood under the porch of the second store looking south. A woman had come halfway out of the hotel with a cloth still in one hand. Two boys stood in the mud where the road bent, neither talking.

Nobody appeared to be waiting for anything.

They had the look of people waiting for something to be over.

Enos looked south.

The road bent around the hotel and rain grayed out anything beyond it.

He had seen the woman four or five times.

He did not know her name.

She came through the north end most mornings with a sack folded under one arm, and she moved the way people moved in a town that had decided what they were—not fast, not slow, not looking at anybody long enough to be accused of it.

Once she had put two fingers on a badly tied tarp as she went past and had not fixed it, and Enos had noticed that, because it was a thing he did himself.

He started walking.

The street ran two hundred and some yards from the store to the agency and it was the length of a street in a town like that, which is to say it was nothing, and it took him a long time.

The mud pulled. That was part of it.

But mostly it was that the farther he went the more people he passed, and every one of them had found a reason to be outside without having anywhere to go.

A man on the porch of the second store had come out far enough that one boot was over the edge of the boards and the other was still on them. He had a pipe in his teeth and his mouth was open enough around it to show the stain on them.

He watched south with his head slightly tipped, the way a man watches a thing he has already decided is not his business but is worth seeing anyway.

He looked at Enos going past and then quickly back down the street.

He did not want to lose his place.

Across from him a woman leaned out of a doorway with one hand on the frame. She looked south. She looked at Enos. Then she went inside and shut the door.

Enos heard the latch.

There were children out.

Three of them, standing where they could see.

Nobody had gone and got them.

Nobody had turned them around or put a hand over anything.

They had been allowed to watch and so it was not, in that street, a thing children should not see.

He came around the bend of the hotel.

She was face-down in the mud.

The rain was coming off the roofs on both sides and running down the middle of the street in a shallow brown current, and it had found her and gone around her and made a shape of her, and the shape was wrong, because she was not lying the way a person lies down.

Her clothes were gone.

Not torn—gone, the most of them, and what was left had been the top of a dress and was now around one arm.

She was moving.

Not getting up.

The moving was in the ribs and it was the wrong speed.

Across her back and legs were narrow raised welts. Some ran straight. Some crossed.
Some had opened.

Enos looked at them.

A man walked past her.

Enos saw him do it.

He came out of a doorway with his hat already on, looked at her, went around, and kept going. He stepped wide the way a man steps wide of a puddle, adjusting his line without thinking about it, and then he was gone up the boards and into the next door.

Another one after him.

Two together, talking, and one of them stopped talking while he went past and started again on the other side.

Nobody was standing near her.

There was a clear space around her about the width of a wagon, and the town was going on at the edges of that space.

Enos got there and went down on one knee in the water.

He did not touch her at first.

Her eyes were open. One of them was, mostly. She was looking at the boards of the walk about four feet from her face and her breath was coming in short and fast and stopping and coming again.

"I am going to pick you up," he said.

Nothing.

He said it again in Spanish, which was foolish, and then in French, which was more foolish, and then he stopped talking and got his coat off.

He put it over her before he moved her.

That took some doing with one hand and he did it badly and he did it first, and afterward he was not able to say why that had seemed to be the order of things, only that in that street with sixty people in it he was not going to lift her out of the mud bare in front of them.

Then he got an arm under her knees and the other behind her shoulders and stood up.

She made a sound when he did it.

He held still for a moment and then went on, because there was no version of it that did not hurt her and standing there thinking about it was not one of them.

She was not heavy.

That was wrong too.

He had carried sacks that fought him harder.

He turned around with her and the street was still there.

The man with the pipe had not moved off his porch. The two boys had come nearer. A woman in an apron stood in the door of the hotel with a cloth in her hands and had not put it down the whole time, and when Enos got level with her she stepped back into the doorway without shutting the door, so that she could keep watching from one foot farther in.

Nobody said anything to him.

That was the thing.

Not one of them told him to stop, or asked what he was doing, or wanted to know who he was to be carrying her, and he had been ready for all of that and had already decided what he would do about it.

He got the length of that street with a woman in his arms and sixty people watching and nobody said one word.

Because it was finished.

That was all.

It had been a thing while it was happening and now it was not a thing, and a man carrying her out of it was neither here nor there.

At the north end a boy from the store came off the boards and walked alongside him for a few paces, looking up, wanting to be part of something.

"That is Jennie," he said.

Enos kept walking.

"She is the agent's."

Enos stopped.

"Wright?"

"Mr. Wright. He is the Indian Agent."

The riding crop lay across the bar again.

Sometimes an animal will not mind itself.

The boy said it the way a boy says a thing that explains something.

Enos stood in the middle of the street with Jennie against his chest and the rain coming down and looked at him long enough that the boy's face began to work.

"I only said who it was."

"I know."

"Everybody knows."

"I know that too," Enos said, and went on.

He got her to the shed behind Hostetler's livery and put her down on the straw.

His horse lifted its head at the smell of him and then at the smell of her and moved once against the stall boards.

Hostetler kept a blanket on a peg near the tack because horses had bad nights and men had worse ones.

Enos took it.

He put the blanket over his coat.

Then he went back out and stood in the doorway for a while in the rain with his hands at his sides.

Down the street the town was closing up.

The porch with the pipe was empty. The hotel door was shut. Somebody had lit a lamp in the store even though it was the middle of the day, and it made the window yellow and warm, and men were moving around inside it doing whatever they had been doing before.

The saloon door opened.

A man came out, pulled his hat down against the rain and hurried across the street.

For a moment Enos could see inside.

Wright was still at the bar.

The riding crop was gone from the plank.

The door swung shut.

Enos had spent ten years watching other men begin things in front of him and telling himself afterward that what came next belonged to them.

He looked down the street for a long time.

Then he went in and knelt beside Jennie and started working out what would have to be got and who in that town could be made to give it.

Jennie

The first thing she smelled was cedar.

Not smoke. Not blood. Cedar, cold and sharp, clean in a way that felt like memory rather than a room. She lay under it a while before she understood that smelling anything meant she was alive, and a while longer before she decided how she felt about that.

Her eyes were swollen mostly shut. There was light somewhere on the left. Her lip had split wide enough that the air stung going over it.

She tried to sit up and did not.

Something shifted beside her. A weight, quiet, moving the way a person moves who has been sitting still a long time and does not want to be the reason somebody wakes.

Water dripped into a basin. Then the sound of hands wringing cloth.

“You are safe,” he said.

She did not believe him.

She knew the voice the way a person knows a river’s voice even under ice. Low, steady, cut with gravel. There was no rescue in it. It was not offering her anything. It was a man stating a condition of the room the way he might have said the fire was out.

“You are safe,” he said again.

He did not touch her. Not to wipe the blood off her face, not to move the hair off her mouth, not to find out whether she was cold. He wrung the cloth and set it near her hand where she could reach it if she wanted it, and then he sat back.

That was the first thing she learned about him, and she learned it before she could open both eyes.

The place was a cabin off a station on the road, and it took her some days to work out that much.

She heard wagons. Not many. Enough that there was a road and it was used. She heard men in the yard in the mornings and a woman’s voice twice and a child who coughed for four nights and then stopped, and she did not know which way that had gone and did not ask.

Later she learned it was Grave Creek, a hundred miles and more from the coast, and that he had taken her there because it was away, and because he knew the road, and because a woman in a room at a station was a woman nobody had to explain.

She remembered none of the road between Hostetler's shed and this room.

There was a girl buried on the rise above it. The station boy told her when she could sit up, in the voice boys use for the one interesting thing they own. Sixteen. Came through with the wagons the year they cut the road, took a fever, and her man made the box himself out of boards off somebody's wagon.

They ran the whole train over her the next morning. Oxen and all. So it would not show.

"Account of men digging," the boy said.

Jennie lay and looked at the roof poles for some time after he went out.

She had been walked over in a street with sixty people watching, and it had been done to make her nothing. Out there under the wet grass a girl had been driven over by a hundred people who loved her, for the same purpose exactly, and it had worked, and a decade on nobody had touched her.

There was a difference in it. She could feel the difference and could not have said it, and did not try.

Fever came and went like a tide.

The room smelled of boiled willow bark and muslin and the salt that dries into the seams of an old wound. Some days she surfaced and knew the roof poles by the knots in them. Some days she went under and came up in the street again.

In the delirium Wright's face hung over her. Not alive and not dead. Just there, the way a wound hangs in a body long after the blade has been pulled out of it.

Sometimes she was in the street. Sometimes in the cabin at Port Orford, and Enos was not in that one. Only Wright. Only the crop. Only the open mouth of it.

She heard her own voice calling out, and it was not calling for help.

It was calling for a name.

Not his.

Hers.

Then she would wake with her breath caught between her teeth like something that did not belong to her, and for a moment she would not know where she was, or who she still was, or what she had left to do.

The pain always told her.

That was the use of it. Pain was an anchor and it was a map back, and she came to be glad of the worst of it, because the worst of it was the clearest.

She could not speak for eleven days.

He did not ask her to.

What she did instead was watch him, because there was nothing else in the room and because watching had never yet failed her.

He came in at first light and made the fire and went out. He came back at midday with water. He came back at dark and sat.

He did not talk to fill the room. Some men could not bear a quiet room with a woman in it and would put words into it the way a man puts sticks on a fire, one after another, to keep something going that had no reason to be going. He was not one of those. When he had a thing to say he said it and then stopped, and the stopping was complete.

He never once stood between her and the door.

She noticed it in the second week and then went back and checked it against every day she could remember, and it held. He came around the foot of the bed rather than past the head of it. When he sat, he sat where she could see the door past him.

Nobody taught a man that. A man worked it out because he had needed it himself.

His hands shook in the mornings and did not by evening, and she knew what that meant and put it away and said nothing, because a woman who cannot lift her own head does not begin by correcting the man carrying the water.

There was drink in the room some nights and not others. He did not hide it and he did not offer it.

Toward the end there was none. He smelled like a room where whiskey had been and was being kept out by force.

And she saw, when he did not know she was looking, that he had a way of stopping in the middle of ordinary work—his hands would go still on a strap or a bowl and stay still four or five

seconds and then start again—and that his face in those seconds was not the face he wore for her, or the yard, or anybody.

She knew that one too. She had made it over a wash basin for two years.

When she could finally stand, he did not smile.

She got herself up off the bed and got her weight onto the floor and stayed there swaying with one hand on the pole and her breath going in and out through her teeth, and he watched from the stool and did not come and did not help and did not tell her she was doing well.

He said, “You are not done yet.”

She did not cry.

She did not thank him.

She said, “Bring me a glass.”

He went out and was gone a long time and came back with a shaving mirror the size of his palm, cracked across one corner, got from somebody in the yard by means he did not describe.

She held it up and looked.

She took her time. She turned her face one way and then the other and made herself go over all of it—the ear, the jaw, the place at the hairline, the eye that would open the rest of the way in a month and the eye that would not, the mouth that was going to heal crooked and stay crooked, the marks that would be white in a year and would still be there when she was old.

She had expected to find a victim in it. She had been braced for that since the second day and had decided she would look anyway.

That was not what was in the glass.

What was in the glass was a ledger. A tally. Every mark on her was an entry, and every entry had a date and a hand that had made it, and she could read the whole account off her own skin by the light of one window, and it came to a figure.

Behind her in the mirror he sat with his elbows on his knees, not looking, giving her the room.

She set the glass down.

Nothing in her had gone out. It had gone still, which men mistook for the same thing and would go on mistaking.

That night he sat by the oil lamp and cleaned a fish.

She watched his hands. He worked without hurry and without waste and did not look at what he was doing more than he had to. The knife went in behind the gill and along the bone and the whole business took less than a minute, and he did not wipe the blade until he was finished with it.

She did not love him. Not the way it gets written about. She had been past that particular country some years and did not expect to cross it again.

But she knew then what he was.

He was a man who had been waiting a long time for reason enough. Not permission—he had never needed permission and would not have taken it from her or anybody. Reason.

She did not know what he had been carrying and did not ask. She knew only that it had weight and that he had been holding it a while, the way a man holds a thing he has stopped setting down because setting it down takes longer than carrying it.

She had known men who talked about what they would do. This one had not said a word about Port Orford since the day she woke. Not one. He had brought water and made fire and sat where she could see the door.

The knife made its small sound against the board.

“Ben Wright will not stop,” she said.

His hands did not stop either. He finished the cut he was on.

Then he set the knife down and looked up.

She had not seen the whole of his face turned to her since she came awake. It had been at angles, at three-quarters, in the dark, behind a cup. Now it was straight on and the lamp had all of it, and there was nothing in it that was tired.

“You know what he is,” she said.

“Yes.”

“I want him to feel what he has done.”

The lamp put a line of light along the flat of the knife on the board between them.

He did not ask what she meant by it. He did not tell her she was hurt and would think differently in the spring. He did not say that he had thought about it himself, though she knew by then that he had, and had thought about it every day since he came down that street.

He did not agree either. Not out loud. Not that night.

He picked the knife back up and finished the fish and put it in the pan, and after a while the smell of it came up into the room, and it was the first thing since the cedar she had wanted.

She ate about a third of it.

That was more than she had eaten in three weeks. Neither of them remarked on it. Outside, the wind came up off the creek and moved through the cedar, and the roof poles ticked once as the cold set into them.

Blood

They could hear the dance from the ridge.

It came up the canyon in pieces, carried badly by the river and better by the wind: a fiddle for half a minute, the steady skin-thump of a drum, then every so often a whole floor of boots coming down together hard enough that the sound reached them as one soft blow. Somebody had brought a horn and did not know what to do with it. It would rise above the other music, search uselessly for somewhere to belong, and disappear. Between gusts the canyon took everything back and there was only the Rogue below them, black beneath the trees and shouldering rock somewhere beyond sight.

By Washington's birthday, Grave Creek was behind them and the lower Rogue had closed around them again.

They had been dancing since dark and would keep at it until daylight.

Half the Guards were down there.

That had been the arithmetic when Enos sent the word. Washington had been born in February and the Americans could not let the date go by quietly. Ellensburg had been building toward the celebration since Christmas: a floor laid, a barrel hauled up from Crescent City, a woman sewing bunting from three flags that had each failed in different weather. Men had talked about it in every store and drinking place along the lower river until the night itself became common knowledge. A man could have written the date on a wall and nobody would have wondered why.

Enos had sent another kind of word upriver.

Jennie. Wright. Tonight.

He had not asked for men and had not thought much about what would happen after the word left him. He told one man, sent another toward the upper river, gave a place and an hour, and returned to whatever work was in front of him. That was how words usually traveled in the country. A man put one loose and learned later what had survived the distance.

The first answer was a man beneath a cedar at a creek crossing where nobody had been standing the last time Enos passed. The man watched him approach, stepped away from the trunk and fell in behind without speaking. Two more appeared farther down. Near evening there was

movement across the river where no trail showed, only a shoulder passing through fir and then the straight dark line of a rifle barrel before the brush closed over it.

Enos noticed another man behind them when a loose stone turned under his foot. Then another foot avoided the same stone.

By the time they entered the canyon, the trees had begun to move with him.

A figure came out of a draw and disappeared among the others. A man crossed a gravel tongue below with his rifle held above his head, entered the Rogue nearly to the hip and vanished into alder on the opposite bank. Shapes moved ahead now as well as behind, dark figures slipping between cedar and fir, sometimes visible only because rain-heavy leaves moved where the wind did not.

For perhaps the first mile the trail happened to put Enos at the front. Then the canyon opened enough for him to see men already moving below along both banks, and farther down two more shadows crossed a pale bar of gravel and disappeared beneath the trees.

Enos called to nobody.

The land's native sons were coming down out of the country that had made them, and they carried more with them than Jennie. They carried daughters who had gone into mining camps and returned with their eyes changed, when they returned at all; boys shot beside roads and described afterward as threats by the men who killed them; mothers who knew which settlements their girls could no longer pass through; old people moved from winter ground because somebody with a seal and an office had decided another place was better. They carried families counted into camps and counted again at ration, children becoming quiet from hunger behind fences built for their protection, elders who stopped asking when they would be allowed home because home had become something officials discussed in rooms far away.

Nobody recited those things as they traveled. There was no need. Every man moving through the trees carried his own version, and some carried several: a sister, a boy, an old woman who stopped eating, a man who went to trade and never returned, a girl whose name had never entered any American book and never would, a child counted into a camp and counted again at ration and never counted when the grave was filled.

Enos had sent word about one woman.

The word had come back carrying the dead.

As they moved down the canyon with shadows filling and emptying the shores of the Rogue, Enos rode inside it, a dark current that had been gathering in that country for years and had needed only a break in the bank to find direction.

Tonight it had found the river.

By the time they reached the ridge above the cabin, Enos had stopped trying to count them. Men slipped into the timber and ceased appearing as men at all. A hand showed around a rifle stock. A cheek rested pale beyond fern. A boot shifted once beneath salal and became still. Each time Enos thought the ridge had swallowed them, he looked somewhere else and found another shape waiting.

The volunteer camp lay four miles upriver on the north side, perhaps a dozen men in it. Four miles downriver Ellensburg stamped plank to fiddle music, and between the two Enos sat with his back against a fir while the last rain emptied slowly from the branches.

Water gathered at the tips and fell in irregular knocks that sounded like somebody moving carefully through brush. Sometimes it was only water.

Sometimes it was not.

His left boot had rubbed the top of his calf through most of the descent. He shifted the leg and felt a small hard pressure beneath the leather, and for a moment he could not place it.

Then he remembered.

Enos pulled the boot off and laid it across his knees. It was not the boot where the hiding place had begun. There had been several pairs since then, and each time one failed he had cut open the inside of the next and made the same narrow pocket between lining and upper. He had never exactly decided to continue doing it. By then there was simply nowhere else the thing belonged.

He loosened two stitches with the knife and rolled the button into his palm.

Bone or horn.

He had never learned which. A little of the old thread still passed through the shank, and one edge had gone smooth enough to catch what little light reached beneath the trees.

Ten years.

For something worth nothing, it had traveled remarkably well.

The first thing it brought back was the coat.

Hudson's Bay wool dark with rain, the shoulders gone thin and the Company stripes still bright enough to tell a stranger more about Enos than Enos wanted strangers knowing. He remembered looking at them beneath the laurels and understanding, perhaps for the first time, how far a color could carry.

Then Baker.

Baker had been dying when Enos found him.

Nothing done afterward changed that.

He had cut one button from his own coat before taking it off.

Why one, he could not have said. Perhaps leaving every piece of the Company behind had felt too much like letting somebody else decide he had never worn it.

Then he took Baker's hide coat carefully because there was no reason to hurt a dying man for a sleeve.

He put the Company wool around Baker.

The dying man caught the stripe in one hand and held it.

Then Enos did the kindness.

It took longer than a man would think.

That had been his first. Not the first corpse and not the first killing he had seen, but the first time the final distance between a living man and a dead one belonged entirely to Enos.

Enos had believed that then.

He believed it still.

That was what made the rest harder.

The dance came wandering back up the canyon and found him there beneath the fir, turning the button between finger and thumb.

After Baker, killing had refused to remain one thing.

At the lake there really had been horses in his hands. Four ropes tightening across his palms while darkness came apart around camp. Basil went down. Denny went down. Crane ran with paper coming out of his coat. Enos held the animals because turning four frightened horses loose into gunfire would have made another disaster, one a man could understand while everything else was happening beyond understanding.

That had been true.

Two days later, at the village, there had been no horses in his hands. There had been a rifle. He had gone down one side with the others, loaded when they loaded, reloaded when somebody told him to. Much of the morning refused him afterward, but the barrel had been warm and a ramrod had ended in his left hand. There were things a man's body testified to even after the mind declined to appear.

Still, for years, when the memory came near, he returned to the sentence that had once been true.

I held horses.

A true sentence carried into the wrong place could do the work of a lie without becoming one.

Then they went south.

Enos went on too.

For years he thought that was the accusation: that he had never stopped.

San Rafael taught him something worse.

San Rafael had sunlight.

That was what he remembered when he let himself enter the morning now. The lake had darkness in it. The village had smoke. A man could lose things in either.

San Rafael had been clear.

The boy shifted the saddle and the silver caught the morning.

Enos had liked it.

That detail remained.

Frémont looked down toward them.

"We have no room for prisoners."

Enos raised his rifle.

That part had taken him years to stop moving around. Frémont had not touched his arm. Carson had not put the stock into his shoulder.

Enos had.

The young man with the silver saddle stood close enough for Enos to see the dust on his knees and the shape still held by his nearly new boots. The front sight settled over the chest. The boy saw the rifle, and then after a moment seemed to see the man behind it.

Something passed between them for which Enos never found a word.

Not mercy yet.

Not trust.

Only the discovery that a trigger had not moved when it should have.

Hope was small enough to get inside that.

The young man turned.

Carson fired.

The first shot hit him while he was moving, another before he finished falling. His brother ran and Carson carried the revolver across him.

The second young man folded.

Enos lowered his rifle.

Nothing happened to him.

That was the thing he had walked around for ten years.

Nothing.

Frémont did not shout. Nobody took Enos's weapon. No man demanded to know why he had not fired. The machinery passed around his refusal so smoothly that it scarcely registered the missing part.

Then memory brought Talbot.

Not because Talbot had killed anyone.

Because Talbot had understood what men did afterward.

The old ledger had been dark from hands and thick with names that outlasted the men attached to them. Enos had existed in it more than once, eating and drawing supplies under identities Talbot had understood perfectly well belonged to one useful man.

Talbot found somewhere.

Dead men could carry a balance more easily than a living man disappearing west, and Washington wanted the columns reconciled more than it wanted months-old flour, tobacco, saddle leather and coffee recovered from Enos. Talbot moved the numbers until nothing collectible remained against the man standing in front of him.

Then he did the same thing with a word.

Hudson's Bay had called what Enos did *deserted*.

Talbot knew perfectly well what Enos was doing at San Rafael and wrote *discharged*.

One clerk had preserved the offense.

Another preserved the balance.

Talbot closed the book.

Enos never saw him again.

The button lay in his palm beneath the fir, and the small thing seemed heavier for all the words that had accumulated around it.

Deserted. Discharged.

Mercy. Murder. Held horses. Did not fire.

Something without a word written on it.

He had spent years trying to decide whether he was guilty of the things he had seen, and the question seemed thin now. Guilt had too much shape. Innocence had even more.

At San Rafael he had stopped.

His finger had not moved.

The boy had turned because of it.

Then Carson fired.

Those things did not cancel one another. Neither did what came afterward. Enos took the saddle, put on the boots, ate supper and stayed with the expedition.

He had refused the shot without leaving the thing that produced it.

Below him the Rogue moved through darkness, taking rainwater off the mountains and whatever else the country gave it—branches, mud, dead things, flecks of gold too small for a man to see until enough gathered in one place.

Enos closed his hand around the button.

Across the ridge, men waited among the trees. Their presence felt like pressure in the country. If Enos looked directly at one place there was often nothing there, but when his eyes moved away something shifted at the edge of them.

He had sent the word.

That part was his.

What had answered belonged to more people than he could count.

He could already imagine how easily someone might improve it later. Paper preferred a single name to a hundred causes. Somebody would put Enos at the top and everything beneath would acquire him as explanation.

Enos had given the anger an hour.

It had arrived carrying its own dead.

The dance came back from Ellensburg, fiddle first, then drum, then the wandering horn.

Enos put the button into the hidden place inside his boot and pressed the leather down over it. He did not stitch it closed. There might be another night for that.

There might not.

He pulled the boot on.

He had not had a drink in eight days.

On the second morning he had walked from the station room to the trough, put his head into the water and kept it there until cold hurt more than wanting. By the fourth day his hands shook too badly to roll tobacco. On the sixth they began returning to him in pieces, and now there were whole hours when his fingers belonged entirely to him.

The wanting remained. He knew it would. It lived behind his back teeth and low in the gut, in that particular emptiness late in the day when every bad decision a man had ever made began presenting itself as hospitality.

But tonight his hands were steady.

Baker had already been dying. Frémont had opened the space at San Rafael. Carson had supplied the shots. Talbot had chosen the word afterward.

The cabin below the ridge offered none of that distance.

Whatever happened there would belong to Enos before it belonged to anybody's account.

He picked up the pine club.

The wood was damp and heavy in both hands.

Below, the cabin remained dark.

Jennie came down the trail a little after ten.

Enos heard the men first. One slipped in the wet and swore, and Poland laughed. The laugh moved through the trees farther than either man would have wanted if he had understood what occupied them.

Jennie made almost no sound. The river caught enough light where the trail opened to show her shape and the dress, too good for that path because it had been chosen for exactly what Wright expected the night to be.

Poland followed her.

Wright came last, coat open, no hat, talking steadily in the low easy voice of a man drunk enough to believe every woman listening to him had already been persuaded. The pistol showed beneath his coat when he turned.

Neither man looked into the trees.

The whole country around them was full of men.

They saw none.

Jennie opened the cabin door and went inside. Poland followed her, then Wright, and after a moment the lamp began to rise behind the window. Jennie let the oil catch slowly until yellow filled the room and threw the two men's shadows across the mud outside, much larger than the men who made them.

Enos stood.

His shoulder gave one bright pulse.

He waited until the body finished arriving.

Then he went down.

The door was on the latch.

He came through fast and low with the pine in both hands.

Poland was nearest.

Back turned.

Hand at his belt.

He heard the door and started around.

Too late.

The club caught him at the base of the skull.

The sound was wet.

Poland went down hard and caught the table on the way. The lamp jumped sideways.

Flame guttered.

Held.

Wright turned.

Slow.

"Wait—"

Enos hit him.

Again.

Wright got one hand up. The pine found it. He tried the other and lost that too, and after that there was no fight worth calling a fight.

Enos worked.

The room narrowed around the blows until there was only Wright, the pine, Enos's breath, and the river moving outside the wall. Somewhere in it Wright tried to say a name. It might have been Jennie's or his own.

Enos no longer knew.

For the first time in ten years there was nowhere inside the act where he could stand aside from himself and watch it happen.

Then he understood he had to stop.

That was the part he had not anticipated.

Not the doing.

The stopping.

He had to reach for it the way a man reaches for a horse's head in a bolt, and it took him three or four strokes longer than it should have. Jennie stood against the wall with the lamp behind her, neither moving nor looking away, and somewhere through the red narrowing of the room Enos became aware of her waiting.

He stopped.

Wright's face was no longer a face and the breath had gone wet in his throat.

The pine hung from Enos's hands.

They shook.

Not fear. He knew fear. This was what came after carrying something too heavy too far and finally being allowed to put it down.

He took Wright by the collar and belt and dragged him through the door and down the bank.

The Rogue ran black with snowmelt.

Enos put him into it.

Cold came through his boots in seconds. He held Wright under and counted, then brought him up and listened to the body gasp because bodies kept working long after the men inside them had lost the ability to make sensible decisions.

Again.

Under.
Up.
Again.
Wright knew.
That mattered.
Enos never pretended otherwise.
On the fourth time he brought him up and held him half against the stones, leaving the mouth clear of the water.
He let him breathe.
Let him look.
Something entered Wright's face.
Hope.
Enos watched it happen.
The man began arranging a future. He would live. Bring men. Come back. Turn the wounds into a story and the story into something that enlarged him.
Enos had seen men do it before.
He crouched where Wright could see him and said nothing. There was nothing he wanted remembered as a speech.
He waited.
Recognition came.
Then the future went out of Wright's face.
Jennie came down the bank and crouched beside his head.
"Look at me."
Wright's eyes found her.
Barely.
"You remember that night," she said. "The one where you called me yours."
Nothing in him could make an answer.
She leaned close.
"Ts'ixee-daa-na," she said.
To remember.
"Lhii-shu."

For silence.

“Ne-dan.”

For your fall.

Then she said something longer in her own language, low enough that the river nearly took it.

Enos never asked what it meant.

She drew the knife.

There was nothing ceremonial in what followed. She opened Wright with the quick economy of a hunter opening meat, hands sure and blade doing only what the work required while the Rogue carried off the smallest sounds.

The heart came free.

It moved in her hand.

Not beating.

Moving.

Jennie looked at Enos.

He looked back.

That was all she asked of him.

Then she bit into it.

Enos watched because turning away would have been another judgment she had not requested from him.

When she finished, she placed what remained among the stones, washed her hands and mouth in the river and stood.

Enos put his right hand into the water. Blood had dried into the seam at the base of his thumb. He scrubbed at it.

“It is not mine.”

“No,” Jennie said. “It is not.”

The Rogue took the blood.

Not all of it.

Enough.

Enos went back to the cabin.

Poland was dead where he had fallen.

He had walked four miles through darkness because Wright told him Jennie wanted him there, and had believed Wright without ever needing to ask Jennie.

Enos had known men like that all his life.

Most of them had been standing nearby.

Outside, the trees were full.

Not visibly. Never all at once. But the shadows had come down from the ridge, men showing where the cabin light reached and disappearing where it did not.

Enos stepped through the doorway.

Nobody asked him to speak.

Good.

He had nothing.

There was only a moment when the men saw one another.

Then they moved.

The wave turned upriver.

Jennie remained in the doorway, the lamp behind her and the dress ruined past any use.

"The camp first," Enos said.

"I know."

"Then the crossing."

"I know."

He stayed there a moment longer than the work required. Something might have been said, but it did not come, and Jennie let him fail without helping.

Women had died helping men reach the words for what men had done.

"North bank," he said. "Not the road."

Then Enos went into the alder.

The others moved with him.

They covered the four miles at a walk. There was no need to hurry. The Rogue took much of their sound, and what it did not take the wet country softened: boots over gravel, brush drawing across wool, the single touch of metal against stone that did not happen twice.

Sometimes Enos could see only the man immediately ahead.

Sometimes the trees opened and shadows moved across an entire slope.

Then the picket turned.

Too late.

The first volley went into men still in blankets.

Men came awake inside gunfire.

One got up with a rifle.

Hatchet.

Down.

Another ran toward the horses.

A shot folded him before he reached them.

Somebody shouted from the west side, and suddenly men were gathering behind wagons and timber and firing answered firing. Wood splintered. A horse screamed. Smoke settled low between the trees.

For perhaps a quarter hour the camp became a fight.

Then the west side broke.

Men ran into the timber.

Nobody chased far.

The wave had somewhere else to go.

The man who had held them together went down with six others.

Enos never learned which one he had been.

When it was finished, fire took the canvas first, then dry boards, oil, blankets. A wagon wheel began to burn around the rim before the spokes caught. Men moved through the light gathering powder, rifles, food and whatever else the next days might require.

No one cheered.

No speech was made.

The dead remained where they had fallen.

Enos stood at the edge of the fire.

His hands had stopped shaking.

Four miles downriver Ellensburg was still dancing.

The fiddle reached him first.

Then the drum.

Then that foolish horn still searching for somewhere to belong.

For a little while the burning camp and the dance occupied the same night, and the Rogue carried the sound of both.

Around Enos the shadows gathered again beneath the trees, sons of that river country, each walking with somebody the Americans had already taken from him.

Enos had sent a word.

The country had answered.

Then the wind shifted and the dance disappeared.

The fire breathed behind him.

The Rogue kept moving.

Ellensburg

The crossing went first, because the crossing was the thing that let people leave.

They came down out of the alder onto the ferry landing well after midnight. The tide was near the bottom of it and the sand was cold and hard underfoot and gave off that low-water smell that coast had, kelp and salt and something older under both. The river went past black and fast with the ebb behind it. Off to the west the bar was breaking, and it broke the whole time, under everything, the way it always did, so that a man who had been on that coast a season stopped hearing it and only noticed when it stopped, which it did not.

There were four men at the landing who had been left to hold it and none of them were looking upriver. The trouble had come from upriver twice that night already and men do not learn a country in one night.

It took about the length of time it takes to unload a wagon.

Enos went along the rope line to the capstan with his knife out. The rope was new hemp, five inches, tarred, and it had swollen with the wet and lay hard in the drum groove. He had to worry the blade into it and put his weight behind the second stroke, and the strands came apart wire by wire with a sound like something eating, and then it went.

It went fast and heavy. The far end lifted off the surface halfway across, hung there a second in the dark, and dropped.

The flatboat swung out on the current and struck the bar sideways and stayed there.

That took the far bank away from them.

Behind him men were already moving down the strand. He could hear them going through the wet sand and then onto the dry, where the sound changed.

Ellensburg lay along the south side of the mouth in a line of shanties, stores, drying racks, a smithy, two warehouses and one hotel with a board front built up square above its own roof, all of it on sand and pitch and green board in the last three years, and behind it the ridge went up steep and burnt-off with nothing on it but stumps.

There was no high ground. That was the whole of the town's arrangement. Everything faced the water because the water was the business. Behind the water was a bar that broke hard in fair weather and worse in February, and to the north was a river three hundred yards across with the boats now on the wrong side of it.

Enos had been in that town eleven times.

He knew the second store's door gave at the hinge side, because the wet came in under the eave there and had been coming in for two winters and nobody had fixed it. He knew that the hotel's kitchen shared a stovepipe with the back room and that the pipe went up through a dry board ceiling patched twice with tarred paper. He knew which shanties had a back door and which had a window instead, and that the window in the fourth one from the end was nailed shut because a man had lost a coat through it.

He knew where the powder was because he had helped carry it in September for a dollar.

He knew that the plank walk in front of the stores had eleven loose boards between the smithy and the hotel and that if a man ran on it at night he would go down at the fourth or the seventh.

None of it had been learned for this.

Tonight he came down off the ridge with the intention of a winter wind off the bar, every band of warriors another gust off his back, shaking everything loose.

Men moved like smoke through the burnt ground, taking the stores, lighting the powder. The men moved without hesitation or direction.

Ellensburg became ash, smoke, and sand around them.

The drying racks went up first.

Two years of fish oil had soaked down through the fir poles until flame ran their length before the wet wood seemed to understand it was burning. One rack took another and then another, orange moving low beneath the black before the whole line lifted. The wind came off the water and shoved the smoke across the shanties.

Gunfire started somewhere above the town.

Then somewhere below.

The sounds crossed without belonging to each other.

Enos came off the ridge through the back of the buildings with his pistol in his hand.

A door stood in front of him, swollen at the bottom and red with rust around the hinges.

He kicked it beside the latch.

The first kick opened a crack.

The second tore the lower hinge out of the frame and the door went inward crooked.

A figure moved behind it.

Enos went through with the pistol already forward and punched the barrel into the man's chest.

His finger settled against the trigger.

Then the face came clear.

Hostetler, down from Port Orford for the dance, stood wide-eyed at the end of the barrel.

"Enos, what the hell is going on?"

"A reckoning."

Hostetler looked past him toward the street. Firelight moved across the wall and went away again.

Enos looked at the man he had known at Port Orford, then at the door at the back of the room.

"Ride. North, then east, and do not come back."

Hostetler stared at him.

"There will not be anything to come back to."

Something struck the outside wall hard enough to shake dust from the rafters.

Hostetler went for the back door as Enos lit the room aflame.

The lamp sat on a shelf beside a crock and a folded newspaper. Enos took the chimney off, tipped the oil across the counter and put the wick to it.

Blue first.

Then yellow.

The flame followed the oil beneath the newspaper and caught the dry edge. Print blackened, curled, and disappeared.

Enos went out through the broken door.

Hostetler was already gone.

The town had changed while Enos had been inside.

A wagon stood burning beside the plank walk, canvas gone and one wheel taking flame slowly around the rim beneath the iron tire. Grease ran from the hub and burned blue where it struck the sand.

The second store was open.

Not the door.

The wall.

Boards had been pulled loose beside the frame and men went through the opening carrying powder, flour, blankets, rifles, whatever the dark inside gave them. One came out with a keg under each arm and blood from the heel of his hand running over the hoop.

Nobody looked toward Enos.

They disappeared toward the ridge.

A horse came through the street dragging half a hitch rail behind it.

The rail struck the walk, jumped, struck again, and tore three planks loose before the rope finally slipped free. The horse ran on with the halter under its jaw and vanished behind the racks.

A man came barefoot out of the hotel kitchen with a rifle.

His first step struck wet sand.

His foot went sideways.

He caught himself against the wall and tried to bring the rifle around.

Enos was close enough.

He crossed the space and struck him with the pistol before the barrel came level.

The man went down beside the kitchen door.

One bare heel was cracked open deeply from salt and dirt.

Enos saw it when he stepped past.

The hotel kitchen had begun burning overhead.

Smoke came through the crack where the stovepipe entered the ceiling, thin enough at first to look like something the lantern was doing. Then the tarred paper around it curled inward. A strip fell, burning at one end, onto the table below.

Inside, somebody shouted.

A chair came through the window before the glass had all fallen.

Two men came out the hotel front together, one trying to pull a boot on while moving.

A shot came from the burnt ground behind them.

One dropped in the street.

The other ran north.

He hit the plank walk badly and recovered.

Four boards.

Five.

Six.

The seventh tipped.

His leg went through to the thigh.

He caught himself with both hands and began hauling upward.

Another shot came.

His arms gave.

The powder went somewhere behind the stores.

The concussion struck Enos in the ribs before the sound reached him.

The side of one building bellied outward and opened. Boards flew through smoke. A piece of window frame crossed the street turning end over end and landed in the sand still burning along one edge.

Men came out of the dark coughing and went back into it.

Fire traveled up the hotel wall.

A woman stood in the doorway of the second shanty from the end with both arms braced across the frame and a child behind her.

Enos saw her.

She saw him.

For a moment the whole street reduced itself to that doorway.

Then a body crossed through the smoke between them.

When the view cleared she had taken the child by the wrist and was moving south along the low ground, bent over as she ran.

A dog came down the plank walk on three legs, all four sound but terror having taken one out of the arrangement. It cleared the bad fourth board, scrambled across the fifth and sixth, then dropped through the seventh with a yelp and vanished beneath the planks.

Smoke swallowed the walk after it.

The Americans came out of the buildings half dressed, shirts hanging open, boots unlaced, blankets caught around shoulders. A rifle flashed from a doorway and splinters jumped from the walk. Fire answered from the burnt ground and the shooter dropped back inside.

The night lost whatever edges the town had given it.

Men Enos had seen come down the river separately crossed one another in smoke without slowing, Takelma and Tututni and Chetco and men from farther up the Rogue whose names the

settlements shortened or never learned. Some carried rifles. Some had clubs of green hardwood. A man with a hatchet passed so close Enos smelled rain in the hide of his coat.

Fire took the hotel upstairs.

For several seconds the windows showed the rooms entire: bedstead, wash basin, coat hanging from a peg, a chair pushed against the wall.

Then the glass broke outward and the rooms disappeared.

The wind kept coming off the bar.

Ellensburg burned with it.

People began moving toward the river.

A family came first with bedding gathered against their chests. Behind them two men dragged a trunk through the sand while a woman kept a child beneath her coat. Others saw them moving and joined them, because north was where the ferry had always been and fear used the roads it knew.

The strand filled.

A crate of hens was dropped and left shut. The birds went mad inside it, wings striking wood and each other.

They moved north through smoke and firelight toward a crossing that no longer existed.

Enos climbed the low sand ridge behind the fish racks.

From there he could see them arriving at the landing.

The front of the crowd stopped first.

Those behind did not.

People packed toward the water until the whole thing moved sideways along the bank.

Calls went up for the ferryman and the boat.

The capstan stood exactly where it had stood yesterday.

The rope was gone.

Three hundred yards out, the flatboat sat sideways on the bar.

One man began pulling off his coat.

Another was already in the water.

The Rogue at its mouth in February does not permit that, and it did not permit it that morning.

The first man swam hard enough to throw white water behind him. For perhaps twenty feet it looked like effort might matter.

Then the current took his legs.

He turned sideways.

His arms kept working.

The far bank did not get closer.

Firelight caught his face once when he turned toward shore.

Then the river took that too.

The second man made less distance.

He went under and came up much farther down than he should have been, both hands out of the water as though he had found something to climb.

He had not.

A woman screamed from the strand in a register Enos had heard twice before in his life, and both other times had been in villages.

The scream carried across the water.

The bar kept breaking underneath it.

Enos stood above the landing.

He could see the end of the ferry rope in his mind, tarred hemp parting wire by wire beneath his knife.

The actual rope was somewhere below him in the river.

Behind him part of the hotel roof collapsed.

The crowd broke sideways, people spilling south along the beach or back toward the burning town, while those pinned nearest the bank stood until enough space opened behind them to move.

Enos went back down.

The barefoot man still lay beside the kitchen.

His heel showed beneath the soot.

By first light there was not much left standing on the south side.

The wind came around near three and went up the line of shanties one to the next. The front of the hotel went over into the street about an hour before sunrise and took part of the plank

walk with it. The stores were down. The racks were ash and pole stubs. Two boats had burned on their sides at the waterline where somebody had tried to launch them and been shot away.

The ridge behind the town was black where the fire had run up into the old burnt ground and found nothing left to eat.

Men went through what remained. Things came out of buildings and disappeared toward timber. The gathering that had descended together began vanishing separately.

The country received them the same way it had sent them.

Enos stood in what had been the street. The dance had stopped sometime in the night, and now only the quiet of the sea and crackling of dying fires remained.

The smell had changed by then. The grease had burned off the fish racks and what remained was tar paper, wet wool, lamp oil, green wood burned sour by salt air, and beneath it the other smell he had known beside the Sacramento and again forty miles from a campfire.

The tide had turned.

He thought of Battle Rock north along the coast, dark and steep with the sea breaking white at the foot of it. Men had talked about that rock for years. They said it had held white men once, nine of them, against a great number, and that powder and height and God had turned it. They told the story in stores and plank rooms all up that coast, and it got better every year, and men bought whiskey to hear it.

The rock offered nothing.

Water struck it.

Gulls went over.

He chose the night, the crossing, and the hour.

The moment was his own, and he had not been a long time coming down.

Enos put one hand on the saddle horn and mounted. He turned the horse north, sea to his left, a frontier unrecognizable from the one he had first explored to his right.

Behind him Ellensburg smoked.

By noon somebody would begin telling it.

Tichenor

Dayton Oregon Territory, July 1856

They had the man.

The Superintendent read the note twice and then set it on the desk and looked at the window for a while. Rain went down the glass in separate lines and met at the sill. Below in the street a wagon was stuck and two men were disagreeing about the reason for it in the way men did when neither of them intended to get out and push.

The papers on his desk agreed on that much. What followed was less useful.

One description gave him: Dark. Not tall. Forty, or some other age. He looks like a man who works.

The only detail that made a person of him was that he had asked whether anybody was feeding his horse.

His condition had been recorded with greater precision.

Taken hard. Face not right on the one side. Stood crooked.

Tichenor's report was cleaner.

Secured.

The Superintendent looked at the word for a while.

Secured. He wrote nothing down. A prisoner damaged before custody was nobody's expense and nobody's paper, and a prisoner damaged after custody was a court's problem, and the trick of the calendar was that the night between belonged to no one at all. There would be laudanum at Vancouver if the surgeon was in funds, and irons regardless, and the man would arrive at his trial healed enough to be presentable, which was the whole of what the proceeding required of his body.

The difficulty was this, and he set it out for himself on paper because that was how he thought.

The man had been taken. That part was finished. There was no doubt anywhere in the district of his having incited the Indians of the lower Rogue to take up arms, nor of his personal participation in the murder of Wright and Poland. Three separate accounts had him striking the blow himself.

If he had been taken in February, or in March, or at any time before the surrender, the thing would have been simple. Hostilities had existed. The military would have been competent to try him and would have done it inside a week and nobody in Washington City would ever have heard the name.

But hostilities had ended. Peace, in the language of the department, had been restored. And a man taken after the restoration of peace might have to be tried by the civil authorities, in a civil court, in a territory whose courts sat when it suited them and were four hundred miles from the coast.

He wrote whether a special term of the Court may not be called and looked at it.

Then he wrote or whether in your opinion he may properly be tried by Court Martial.

He read the two together. They were, he was aware, the same sentence asked twice in the hope that one of them would come back yes. He left them both in. A man who offered only one road was told to take it; a man who offered two was generally allowed to choose.

The clerk came in with the copy book and set it on the corner of the desk and stood.

“Sit down, Mr. Rand.”

He sat.

“We are writing to the Chief Justice.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Take it plain. He is a plain man and dislikes being handled.”

The clerk dipped and waited.

We have recently arrested on the Coast Reservation the notorious Eneas or Enos—

He stopped there.

“How is it spelled.”

“Sir?”

“The name. In the reports.”

The clerk turned back three pages and ran a finger down. “It is Enos in Captain Ord’s return, sir. Eneas in the Port Orford papers. There is an Aeneas in one of the affidavits but I take that for the same man.”

“You take it for.”

“The description agrees, sir. And the dates.”

The Superintendent looked at the wall for a moment.

“Put both.”

“Both, sir?”

“Eneas or Enos. Let the court settle it if the court cares to.”

The clerk wrote both, and did it neatly, with the or small between them so that it looked like a matter already considered.

—who has been regarded as the first cause and controlling spirit in the outbreak of Indians against the whites in the Port Orford District.

He said it aloud as it went down and did not stop it.

It was not, strictly, established. It was what men in that district had come to believe, and what the newspapers at Crescent City had printed, and what the surrendering bands had been given to understand—that the trouble had an author, and the author had a name, and the name was in custody. Whether it was true was a separate question and not one the department was equipped to answer. What was true was that a great many people needed it to be true, including several who had lost family in February, and including the department.

He went on.

—and who it is alleged made the assault in person and killed by his own hand Capt Ben Wright and aided in killing Capt Poland.

“Alleged,” the clerk said, and then reddened. “I beg pardon, sir.”

“Say it.”

“Only that it does not sit with the other. First cause and controlling spirit is put as a fact. The killing is put as an allegation.”

“Yes.”

The clerk waited to be told which one would change.

“Neither,” the Superintendent said. “Leave them as they are.”

There was the matter of the surrender, and he came to it with less comfort than to the rest.

When the bands of that district had come in, in the spring, they had been given to understand that this man would be excepted. He had not been at the surrender himself. It had been done by men on the ground under pressure, with winter behind them and the whole coast waiting, and it had been done in the only way it could have been done, which was by telling the people who were surrendering that the price of their lives was this one.

They had come in on that.

He wrote it down because a court would want to know how the man had been got, and because leaving it out would look worse in three years than putting it in looked now.

In the surrender of the Indians of that district, they were given to understand that this man would be excepted.

The clerk copied it without any change in his face.

The rest went quickly, because the rest was practical.

There was no fort at the Grand Ronde. That was the first thing and it governed everything after it. He had upward of a thousand people on a reservation with no walls and no guardhouse and a single company that was needed for other work, and now he had a prisoner in the middle of it whose presence was its own kind of weather.

We have no fort and his presence may cause trouble on the Reservation.

If the trial were delayed they would have to send him up to Vancouver for safe keeping, which meant an escort, and an expense, and a request through channels that had never once moved faster for being marked urgent.

The chances of escape being so great, it would be wise to dispose of it at the earliest possible moment.

The wagon in the street had been got out. Somebody had put a plank under the wheel.

The evidence was the problem and had been from the beginning.

There was no white man alive who had seen the inside of that cabin. Foster had been in a thicket four miles down and had seen the camp burn and nothing else. Everything the department had about the killing itself—the blow struck in person, the hand it was struck by—came from Indian witnesses, out of the same district, some of them from bands that had surrendered on the understanding.

It was good evidence. He believed it. He would have hanged the man on it himself in February without troubling a court.

But he did not know whether it could be brought in.

He went back and sat down and put it to the Chief Justice in one line, because it was the only question in the letter he did not already know the answer to.

Will Indian testimony be regarded as good against an Indian? This question may have an important bearing in this case.

The clerk wrote it and blotted it and looked up.

“Shall I fair-copy it now, sir?”

“Yes. And prepare a duplicate for the Commissioner.”

“To Washington?”

“To Washington. He will want to be told, and it is better that he is told by me.”

The answer came back inside the week, in a hand that had not paused anywhere.

Had the man been taken during the time of actual hostilities the military would undoubtedly have been competent to try him. Now, after the restoration of peace, it might be a question whether the court would not require a trial by the civil authorities. There was no doubt of his having incited the Indians to take up arms nor of his personal participation in the murders. Whether such evidence could be brought before the court to convict was yet to be ascertained.

And then, on the last line, without any argument attached to it and without so much as a comma before it, the thing the Superintendent had spent a morning working himself up to ask: Indian testimony would be received.

He had asked in real uncertainty. He was aware, sitting there with the answer in his hand and the rain going down the glass, that he had asked in real uncertainty about a thing that had never once been uncertain, and that this was the condition of the whole country and not only of himself.

The testimony of those witnesses would not have been received against a white man in any court in that territory.

It would be received against this one.

He folded the letter and put it in the case with the other and told Mr. Rand to make the necessary arrangements, and Mr. Rand made them.

The arrangements had a vessel in them.

There was no road to Port Orford. That was the whole of the town's argument for existing. The prisoner went north first, downriver under guard to Vancouver, where there was a room with a window too high to use, and he stayed in it while men in two territories decided what he was to be tried under and by whom. Then in the fall the trial was set for the coast, and the coast could be reached one way, and the way belonged to the man who had taken him.

Tichenor brought him down himself, because it was his capture and his vessel and he was going that way regardless, and a man who had signed for a thing liked to deliver it.

The escort was a sergeant and three soldiers off the Vancouver garrison, and the sergeant counted his prisoner aboard the way a man counts freight, once at the wharf and once at the rail, and signed a paper for him. The crew was a mate with a split thumbnail gone black, two deckhands, and a boy who did whatever was shouted. Nobody aboard was idle except the cargo.

Tichenor was broad and short-necked and gray coming in at the beard, and he wore a shore coat on the water, good wool with the salt worked into it, dressed for the town he was always arriving at. His voice was pitched for weather decks and did not come down for distance. He used it on the crew, the soldiers, the coast, and the prisoner without much adjusting among them.

They tied Enos to a bench aft of the house, wrists to the rail of it and a line across his lap, which was called a precaution and functioned as a seat at a lecture. The swell came up from the southwest and the bench took every foot of it. The soldiers stood either side of him for the first hour and then found reasons to be elsewhere, because Tichenor had begun to talk.

He had a way of asking a question and answering it himself, so that a conversation with him required no second man and suffered from one.

“You will wonder why I chose this coast. I will tell you. Harbors. A man who owns the deep water owns everything that has to cross it.” He pointed with his chin at the gray running shore. “My harbor. My town. There is not another anchorage worth the name between the Columbia and Crescent City, and I took it off a map before I ever saw it.”

“Do not feel the need to fill the silence on my account. I am content with quiet.”

The nearer deckhand made a sound and buried it in the rigging. Tichenor looked at Enos long enough to register the insolence, then resumed.

He had been pricing the coast all afternoon. Town lots. Wharf timber. Powder. Cannon. Near the middle of the afternoon he reached the capture and named the figure too, another expense entered against the country on its way to becoming his.

Once he paused to have a soldier give Enos water. He stood over the cup with the mild attention given an animal still expected to work.

Off a point of rocks he nodded toward the sea.

“Lost a steamer along here. The Sea Gull. Finest vessel on this coast and the coast took her.”

There was no grief in it. Only inventory.

“Built the town anyway. A harbor that has wrecked you is a harbor you know.”

“She knew it better,” Enos said.

Tichenor stopped.

He came aft along the rail without hurrying, and stood in front of the bench with his legs taking the swell, and looked at the prisoner for a while the way he had looked at the anchorage on the map.

“Gag him,” he said.

The sergeant looked up from the hatch coaming. It was not his order to take and it was not his vessel to argue on, and he nodded at one of the soldiers, and the soldier did it with a wad of oakum and a lashing, not roughly, embarrassed, the way men do a thing they would rather not have been standing near.

Tichenor waited until it was done. Then he leaned down with his hands on his knees, confidential, his voice lowered for the first time all day.

“Your condition, Mr. Enos, was recorded at Dayton in July. Taken hard. Face not right on the one side. Stood crooked. Entered and copied fair.” He straightened up and took down the length of rope with the end whipped hard and knotted, and weighed it, unhurried. “The next time your condition is recorded, they will be cutting you down. Between the one paper and the other there is a good deal of water”—he looked at the sea as though counting it—“and no clerk on any of it.”

He looked forward to where the rock would come up off the bow in an hour.

“Now,” he said. “Where was I. Nine men.”

He told it whole, and he worked while he told it.

He did not beat the way the young beat, from anger, from everywhere. He used the rope’s end the way a master starts a slow hand, measured, on the shoulders and the back and the arms, choosing his places, keeping his feet under him against the swell, and he kept the story going the entire time, the numbers arriving on the strokes. Nine men. Fourteen days. The cannon and what the cannon had cost and what the powder had cost. He had put the nine ashore himself and sailed for reinforcements, and in his telling the sailing away had been the plan’s finest part—the fourteen days were what his foresight had provisioned the men to withstand, and their fight belonged to him the way the harbor did, by right of having drawn it on the map first. He had not been on the beach.

Enos understood, somewhere in the middle of it, with his teeth in the oakum and the salt of the rope coming off on his shirt, that the best telling on that coast was the one man's who had watched none of it.

The sergeant watched the sea. The soldiers watched the sergeant. The mate found something in the rigging that wanted looking at, and the boy was sent below for no reason that was ever given, and no man aboard said one word.

It went on for the length of the story and stopped when the story did.

Tichenor coiled the rope's end and hung it back on its pin, breathing through his mouth, and put his coat right. Somewhere east of the mountains two men in a room had already settled what the prisoner was and how he was spelled and what his presence might cause, and had done it without requiring him, and Enos had thought that the far edge of what could be done to a man without touching him. It was not. The far edge was a man who had read the entry.

The rock came up off the bow.

Tichenor looked at it with satisfaction, the way a man looks at a well he dug. Then he looked back at the bench, and something in him wanted what every telling wants, and he made a small motion at the soldier.

"Take that out of his mouth."

The soldier undid the lashing and pulled the oakum free. Enos worked his jaw once. His mouth was cut at one corner and he could feel his back beginning to stiffen against the bench, and the rock stood off the bow dark and steep with the sea breaking white at the foot of it.

Tichenor waited, at the rail, in the shore coat, for what was owed him.

"What was on that beach," Enos said, "before your nine men came ashore?"

Tichenor considered the question.

"Indians," he said. "That was the difficulty."

He said it helpfully, the way a man corrects a small confusion, and went forward to tell the mate what the cannon had cost.

Enos sat lashed to the bench and watched the rock go by.

It stood off the shore dark and steep, and it did nothing, and it would still be there in April doing nothing, and by then it would have his story too, and would tell that one exactly as well.

Enos

The last time Enos had waited nine months to leave, it had ended in his birth. His mother had done the waiting that time. He had done it this time, and the same thing was coming at the end of it, depending on how a man counted.

The guardhouse at Port Orford was drier than the room at Vancouver had been, and quieter than the deck. He came into it with his mouth cut at one corner and his back gone stiff in long stripes, and the guardhouse did not ask about any of it, because the report said he had been secured and a guardhouse does not argue with a report.

In the guardhouse nobody laid a hand on him. He was fed. A corporal from Ohio taught him a card game in February and lost eleven cents to him over five weeks and paid it.

Nobody came.

He had not expected anybody and was not disappointed, and it took him some part of that winter to work out that those were two different things and that he had only the first of them.

In the end the question the superintendent had asked in July was answered in a courtroom in March, and the answer was yes. Indian evidence would be regarded as good against an Indian. Four men said what they had seen at the mouth of the Rogue and the court received it, and it would not have received a word of it against a white man in that territory and every man in the room knew it.

He did not hold that against the four. They had been given the same arrangement everyone in that district had been given, which was to say some of them lived.

The gallows stood above the beach in April of 1857, close enough to Battle Rock for the sea to be heard when the crowd went quiet.

It was not large. Four posts, a beam, a trap, a rope, and steps nailed on the side with more care than mercy required. Rain had darkened the new wood along the grain. Mud had been tracked up the first two boards. A deputy had thrown sand over it and made the steps worse.

Enos came between two deputies with his hands tied in front.

The sheriff had allowed that much. A man with his hands before him could climb without being hauled like freight. The rope on Enos's wrists was old and damp and had the smell of horses, weather, and prior business.

He looked up at the thing from the bottom of the steps.

There had been a question standing in the room with him since he was about nineteen years of age, and he had answered it the same way every time it came up. At a lake in the dark with four ropes in his hand. On a bench above a beach at San Rafael. In a dry wash with a shotgun eight inches off his chest. In a street at Port Orford with sixty people watching and the man who had done it drinking forty feet away. On a bench aft of a wheelhouse with his teeth in a gag and the numbers arriving on the strokes.

Not today.

He had said it so often that it had stopped being a decision and become a kind of weather he carried.

Today the answer was different, and he stood at the foot of the steps and turned it over once and found that it did not frighten him.

That surprised him more than anything else that morning.

Battle Rock stood beyond the town, black and plain against the water. Gulls worked over the surf. Smoke from cook fires dragged sideways through the morning and into the faces of those who had come early for a good place.

The clerk waited at the foot of the gallows with a paper folded in thirds.

"Name," he said.

Enos looked at him. "Still?"

"For the record."

"You kept one this long, you can finish it without my help."

The clerk colored and bent to the page. His pen scratched.

A boy in the crowd laughed once before his mother took him by the shoulder and turned him sideways. Merchants stood in their coats. Two soldiers stood with their hats low. A priest had one hand tucked in his sleeve, keeping it warm for mercy. A drunk near the back asked a question nobody answered and was told to shut his mouth by three men who had come to watch a hanging with proper manners.

The sheriff climbed after him.

He was a narrow man with a clean beard and careful boots. He held the warrant in one hand and kept the other free for the rail. The paper snapped once in the wind.

"Face them," he said.

"I had hoped for a better view."

“You will get the sky.”

The sheriff looked at him and decided not to answer.

Enos turned.

The crowd settled. It did not become solemn all at once. It adjusted itself. Men stopped shifting their weight. A woman pulled her shawl tighter. Someone coughed and then looked angry at his own throat. The sea struck the rock below and withdrew with stones turning under it.

The sheriff read.

His voice was not cruel. That made it harder to hate him. Cruel men gave a man somewhere to put his last temper. Careful men lent the proceeding a clean coat.

The words came out in order. Sentence. Territory. Authority. Lawful judgment. Public peace. April date. Witnesses. Murder. Battle Rock.

Enos listened until the words became weather, and then, because there was nothing else to do with the time and because he had never once tried, he counted.

Enos, which his mother had used.

Eneas, which the fort had made of it and which had gone into three books that way.

E. Walker, from before the Arkansas, which Talbot had got from somebody and had carried for eight months without asking.

All three of those ruled through with one stroke at San Rafael by a man who knew perfectly well they belonged to one man and had known it for some time.

E. Short, which he had given to Applegate in the rain in forty-seven and which Applegate had given back to him years later without being asked.

E. Childs, off a drover he had cut in the mud at a landing, on a slate in a plank room, spelled careful.

Hayes.

Elias Pike.

Ward.

Webster, handed to him at a way station by a man he later held under a river until the man understood.

Henry when needed.

Joaquín, in a dry wash, along with five other men who had said it in the same minute and one who had every right to it and had looked at the ground.

He got to eleven and was not certain of eleven.

There were two or three from the California years he could not bring up at all—given to a clerk at a ferry, to a man buying horses, to somebody at a fire—and they were gone entirely, and men were still using them somewhere or had stopped and either way it was no business of his now.

Thirty years of making sure no man could put him down correctly, and standing on this in the wind he could not do it himself.

There was one more and he had kept it apart from the others.

Botellier had never belonged to anybody. That was the whole of its virtue. It had gone out of his mouth at a water trough below Shasta as a joke about an empty bottle, and had traveled without him, and had come to rest on an act of the legislature of the State of California between two men who were dead, and had sat there four years drawing no fire, because there was nobody behind it to shoot at.

It would have held. It was the only one that would have.

He had thought about that in the guardhouse at Port Orford more than once and had never got past the first difficulty, which was that claiming it would have required explaining where he had been in fifty-two, and the second, which was that he did not want it.

A man could be kept alive by a name that was not attached to him.

He had watched what that cost. He had paid a dollar in Stockton and looked at it in a jar.

He saw her on the bluff.

She was a long way off and above the town, at the edge where the grass stopped, small against a sky the color of dishwater. He could not have said it was a woman. He could not have sworn there was anybody there at all.

He did not look again to make certain.

That was the thing. He had spent his whole life unable to prove anything about anybody, including himself, and had got out of the habit of requiring it. She was there or she was not there, and he had decided which some time ago, and no further evidence was going to be admitted.

It steadied him considerably.

The sheriff finished reading and folded the paper.

“Have you anything to say?”

The clerk lifted his pen.

Enos looked out over them. The merchants. The two soldiers. The boy turned sideways by his mother. The priest with his hand in his sleeve. Men who had come from up and down that coast and would tell it for thirty years and get it wrong within the week.

He thought about what he was going to be able to stand behind, and found it came to two things.

He had killed a man in a cabin above the Rogue who had earned it every day of his adult life, held him in the river until he understood, and had not hurried any part of it.

And he had burned Ellensburg after he had watched another town on that coast stand on its porches and in its doorways while a woman was beaten the length of a street with a riding crop, lift no hand, and go inside out of the rain.

Nobody had ordered either. Nobody had made it necessary. No paper had come from anywhere requiring it.

They were his.

He would have done both again that morning if the day had been given back to him, and he was aware that this ought to have troubled him, and he waited to see whether it would, and it did not.

“Enos Thomas,” he said.

He said it plainly and not loudly, the way a man gives his name at a counter.

The clerk wrote something. The sheriff waited a breath for the rest of it. The crowd did not stir, because a name was not what they had come for and it told them nothing, and up on the bluff nothing moved either.

The deputy came forward with the hood.

“No hood.”

“It is customary.”

“So is bad coffee.”

The deputy looked at the sheriff. The sheriff said, “Leave it,” and the deputy stepped back with the hood in both hands, suddenly useless and unhappy with the promotion.

The rope came next.

It was plain hemp, thick enough for the work, rough against the skin. From the wear it had pulled other things before him. Wagons, loads, animals, timber. A rope did not become

special because a man's neck was in it. The sheriff set the knot behind his left ear and drew the loop snug.

Enos swallowed once and felt every fiber.

Wind moved through the crowd. A hat lifted and was caught. The drunk at the back tried to speak again and thought better of it. A mule somewhere behind the buildings gave a long sour complaint, and two men near it turned as if the animal had made a legal objection.

The sheriff put one hand on the lever.

"May God have mercy," the priest said.

Enos did not answer him.

He was looking at the far end of the bluff, where the grass stopped against the sky, and past it, and at nothing, and the whole of it came together in him at once and held.

The sky opened to the sound of rope.

Je te vois.