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THE STEER HORN THRONE

By

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I set myself up on the little knoll where I could watch both the man and the little log cabin. I was well back in the brush and behind a rocky outcropping, my rifle resting on the outcrop, pointed in the general direction of the man.

The man was a nester, he was not on Blanchard's range, but he had one of Blanchard's cattle and he was working on it. First, he sawed off both of the long horns, then he opened the animal taking out the guts and burying them. Now he was carefully removing the hide, finishing the belly cuts, working along the legs. I was thinking, but I would have thought better if I could have a smoke, but I didn't dare sometimes a man could see even a thin line of tobacco smoke. The thought kept nagging me - shoot the fool, get it

over with. I had a Winchester 45/70 the same caliber I used when I was and I'm a great shot, if I say so myself.

I saw his woman coming out of the back of the cabin. She moved swiftly into the brush and I lost sight of her.

I wasn't afraid to shoot the man from ambush; I done it before, in the army. Sure, it would be fairer, maybe more moral to get my horse, ride around the knoll, tell him what I was there for, and put a neat hole right between his eyes with my pistol. Or I could tie him on his horse, and take him to the sheriff in town, but that wasn't what Blanchard hired me for. On the other hand, I hadn't seen him kill the steer personally.

Hell, I just wasn't that sure. So I went back down the knoll and got my horse. I got back on Blanchard's property, noted the pool of blood where the steer was killed, and followed the drag marks to where the man was carefully cutting pieces off the beef and placing them on the skin.

"Howdy," I said. "You're doing a right smart job with that beef. Do you belong to that cabin over there?"

The man straightened up the bloody butcher knife held down against his apron. The man's Sharps leaned against a tree about twenty feet away, he started to move in that direction.

"Yeah, I own that cabin."

I rested my hand on my Colt and he stopped. "That your beef there?" My words were cut off by the hiss of the butcher knife as it passed close to my face, knocking my hat off.

The nester lunged toward the oak tree and his Sharps; I spurred my horse so it collided with him. As he sprawled on the ground I said, "Not very friendly. I just want to talk to you."

As he started to get up, I tossed a loop around him, pinioning his arms by his side. I rode a good cow horse and she backed up as he tried to move; keeping the rope taught. "That's one of Blanchard's steers ain't it?"

He didn't answer and as I dismounted I could see his woman approaching through the corner of my eye. As I picked up my hat, she stopped about 30 feet away. She was thin, fine boned, her light golden hair was tied in a tight fist bun, and hands were at her sides tight against a long flowing dress. I thought she had her hands in her pockets as was the custom of many women. Suddenly she raised her right arm, the folds of the dress fell away revealing a double barreled shotgun. She simply motioned and I quietly got off my horse.

They took me to their cabin. On the outside it looked like any other nester's place, rough hewn logs chinked with mud and a flat sod roof. Inside it was a palace compared to others I'd seen; a colored rug on the floor, curtains on the windows, and stained pine furniture knocked together with wooden pegs. In pride of place a half finished chair made of steer horns.

The man took the shotgun and motioned for me to sit. "You're one of Blanchard's men aren't you?"

"Well, he's paying me, so I guess I am."

"My name is Johnson. My wife's name is Helga." He motioned towards her with the shotgun.

I nodded at her. She was in her mid twenties, blond, very sparse and lean. There was certain hardness about her face. I nodded, "Ma'am."

"Wife's from Germany, her English ain't so great."

"She's pretty good with that shotgun."

"She wouldn't have fired at you. I will."

"Wer ist das Man?" she asked suddenly.

"Folliard, Ma'am. Tom Folliard."

Johnson said something in German and then turned to me. "I told her you're one of them stock detectives. You think I'm a rustler."

"I haven't made of my mind."

She pointed at the crossed sabers on my hat. "He is soldier?"

"Cossack," he spat.

That got her attention. "Nein," She said.

"She'll kill you now. Cossacks are a big deal where she comes from - East Prussia."

Her eyes blazed for a moment.

Johnson looked at his wife, "He hunts rustlers for Blanchard, the man who thinks he owns this land. That's Blanchard's cow; he'll burn us out, kill us."

This surprised me, after hearing that she had trouble with English, first I thought he was talking to himself, but then I saw understanding in her eyes. I took a chance and rattled out a sentence in German, one my old Sergeant had me practice when he was trying to teach me German.

Suddenly she spoke, "Surely a man with so much cows would not miss one. Especially if peoples who took it did so because they were hungrig-hungry."

"Well, maybe not."

Johnson leveled the shotgun at me again. "All right, her English is ok, but that won't help her with Blanchard. They say he hung twenty so called rustlers over in Wyoming."

"That's what they do to rustlers. I can't help that. Why do you think he's after you?"

"He doesn't like homesteaders. This was part of his land until the government divided it up, it cut off some of his water."

I didn't listen to his reply, I knew what it would be; Blanchard didn't actually need the water, he had another source closer. Of course, that didn't keep cattle from following their noses and wandering off the ranch. I looked again at the armchair made of steer horns, it had a leather seat stretched over a polished oak frame. Man, that's something old man Blanchard would sure like that. The armchair looked like a throne and would fit Blanchard who thought he was a king of all he surveyed.

Johnson broke into his thoughts, "You counting the God damn horns there? You want to know how many steers it took to make it?"

"Just admiring it, neighbor."

"Yes. Them steers wandered onto my property, others died before I found them."

"That one out there didn't die, or wander you're your homestead."

Johnson's face twitched and I could see his hand tightening on the grip of the shotgun. Where I was

sitting, I have a hard time reaching my gun, but I thought I'd try anyway. Suddenly, the little cabin filled with the explosion of the shotgun.

I had ducked down in the chair and shifted to the left. And after a bit of hard yanking I came up with my Colt. No pain! I realized I had not been hit.

The woman stood in the center of the room, her fingers were closed around the barrels of the shotgun, and she had directed it to the ceiling.

"Karl!" she said sharply. "This man is now our guest."

It had started to rain hard outside, and I got a great feeling, I was breathing and hearing rain instead of hearing harps or shoveling coal

"Woman, you're crazy, this man is a killer for Blanchard."

"You said he was a stock detective, that is a lawman, is it not?" She tossed the shotgun over in the corner, got a knife at the kitchen sink, and then walked over to the steer meat Johnson had brought in. "I will make some steaks. You will offer our guest some German brandy."

"We ain't got enough. Anyway it's expensive," Johnson said sullenly.

Without a word, Helga went to the cupboard and drew out the dusty bottle of German brandy and got two glasses

and put one in front of me, and the bottle and the other glass in front of Johnson. "You will not embarrass me further with your rudeness. Please pour Mr. stock detective a drink."

I think both Johnson and I would have preferred the good honest rotgut I had in my saddlebags, but we didn't protest. This was a formidable woman. I guess steaks in a warm cabin were preferable to trying to start a campfire in the rain. I wondered what Blanchard would think.

As we ate, Johnson tried to explain his position, "I got the paper for this land; I homesteaded it, it's mine legally. I tried to raise some cattle, but I couldn't keep them off Blanchard's land. Now I can't afford any. I tried to put out some barbed wire, to keep his cattle, but I got shot at.

"Blanchard?" Before he nodded I knew the answer. And I also knew what Blanchard would be thinking. When the rain stopped Blanchard would expect to find a dead body near the dead steer. If not, he would finish the job, maybe include me.

"Blanchard ain't one of them English gents who learned to run their ranches back in old London town," I tried to explain. "He was born in the West, knows the country and the people. He was here when it was all open country, no

nesters, no fences. A man like Blanchard don't like change."

Johnson and his wife exchanged a glance, and I knew it wasn't going well. Outside I could hear a crash of thunder and windows of the cabin lit up with lightning.

"I need to take care of my horse, that's quite a storm. He won't do well out there in the rain."

Johnson stared at me; I could tell he was considering something. Behind me to my left was the steady ticking of an old grandfather clock. They hadn't taken my gun, but if it happened I didn't want it done in front of the woman.

"You wouldn't ride on would you? I mean after the rain. If I let you stay in my barn till the storm clears, then I don't find you around in the morning, could that be it?"

"I can plead your case with Blanchard. He's a hard man, but he might excuse it if you were mighty hungry."

"We sowed a kitchen garden in back. But we don't get a lot from it I do carpentry for folks, most of whom pay me in eggs and stuff. She deserves better; I can't see her starve any more"

He hesitated, picked up shell and reloaded the shotgun. "But, that said, I ain't gonna beg no man."

I hadn't let go of my Colt. "I can't make any promises. I might ride out in the morning, and I might not. That there steer's pointing right at your place though."

"All right", he started to move the shotgun barrel towards me when the woman broke in, "Let him sleep in the barn!"

There was no more time for talking. I stood up and moved to the door. "Mr. stock detective, don't you come in the house at night, or I'll kill you."

I woke suddenly about three o'clock in the morning, lying in the hay, my saddle for a pillow. The rain had stopped, but I could hear it drip, drip, dripping off the eaves of the barn. And I knew that I wasn't alone. I had awoken lie this occasionally out on the prairie or in the silent mountains with that feeling. It could be a cougar, a rustler who was sick of being followed or renegade Indian... or my imagination.

I reached under the saddle for my pearl handled Colt, slowly eased the hammer back and listened. My horse nickered softly in the dark. There was some moonlight came through the loft and the view of my horse was partially blocked, then I heard some soft breathing. I rolled out of

the way, and the shotgun blast tore into the hay where I had been lying.

As I rolled away I saw the figure from a new angle and instantly recognized the tight fist behind the woman's head. My finger had already closed on the trigger, so I threw my hand to right and the barn lit for a moment in the orange flame of my .45. I stepped forward and wrenched the gun out of her hands.

I struck a match, and saw the soft tears running down the woman's face. "Why?"

"Mein husband says you will kill him and burn the place for killing this cow. We haf tried so hard..."

"Shoot, ma'am. Maybe I talk old Blanchard into forgetting a steer. You can't help it if'n your hungry."

"But it wasn't one or two. He said when you saw that steer horn chair; you must have counted the horns of seven animals there. He didn't kill them all, some were already dead. He just took the horns.'

"He wanted...I wanted that chair so badly, that I...I."

Suddenly it all came together for me.

"You killed that steer didn't you?"

"I...yes. I couldn't stand the look in my husband's eyes. We went to bed with pains in our stomachs."

"Then the steer horn chair didn't matter."

She stared crying, "That was all he thought he could do for me. I don't care about the Gott damn chair, I love my husband, and I wanted him to feel successful."

I heard the door of their cabin slam, and I knew what that meant. "Listen, you talk to your husband ma'am. There's no need for a killing over one dead steer."

"How can we survive here? He can't just give our land up. It is important to him."

I came out of the barn in the morning, and she had fried up three steaks. We spoke little. I don't know what she told her husband about the night before, they both ate silently. I made up my mind to ride off after breakfast, let them and Blanchard handle their own problems. In fact, I was grateful to be riding off at all.

We had just finished breakfast, when Blanchard rode up. He had two men with him, and one was loosening a rope from his saddle. Johnson ran to the corner of his cabin where his Sharps stood. I drew my Colt. "Settle down. We don't get nothin' done this way. Step out on the porch with me."

"I see you got 'em," Blanchard said. He was a big gruff red faced man; his two hands rode on either side their hands on their guns.

One of the hands rode to the oak and tossed his rope over a branch. I shifted my gun to rest on Blanchard when one of his men started to draw.

"Your man pulls his pistol; my first shot goes into you, Blanchard."

"What's going on?"

"Get down! Shed your gun! You two drop yours."

He dismounted and walked up to the porch. "Have you gone crazy?"

"You want to hang somebody, Blanchard?" I pointed to the woman. "There's your culprit."

Johnson spoke up, "No, Me! I did it!"

"No, her! It was something you said last night, Helga, about helping your man."

"We were hungry. The cow came on our property. I couldn't let my man starve."

"Well, Blanchard?"

"I can't hang a woman. But I can't let this continue."

"We'll leave." Johnson said. "I...I didn't realize how hard it was on her."

"Come inside, Blanchard"

I put my gun up, and we walked through the door. When Blanchard saw the steer horn chair and his eyes lit up.

"You seen anything like that any side of Cheyenne?"

"No, I haven't. It's beautiful."

"It should belong to a real cattleman, Blanchard."

"I got most the horns from dead steers, Mr. Blanchard." Johnson cut in, "Sometimes your men must have killed one to eat during roundup, other times, they died naturally."

"I killed two," Helga followed up her husband, "I thought that you had many, and we were hungry."

"I can't hang a woman," Blanchard said, his eyes still on the steer horn throne.

"You can't have this one, Blanchard; it's for the woman, a throne to remind her of the old days. Johnson's a carpenter, I'm sure he'll make another just for you."

"Ok, my butt's too big for one, anyway." Blanchard smiled.

"He'll make you another, and you'll pay him out of my salary, take the dead steer out of there too. Does that make sense?"

"Johnson's a good carpenter; you must have something around the ranch that needs fixin'"

"You found the 'rustlers', so I'll pay you as agreed. This man I'll pay in beef; maybe a few cows so he can start his own herd."

I holstered my gun started for the door.

"How can we thank you?" the woman asked.

"Build him a good chair."

"I'll see you at the ranch?" Blanchard asked.

"Yeah, you can give me my pay, what you think is fair, then I'm going to find me an army post and see if they need a scout. This stock detective business is too dangerous."

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