

## The Dance

Jake walked from the bunkhouse across the hard scabble dirt to the corral to saddle his horse. It was a beautiful spring day. The sky was blue. Not a cloud to be seen. The hills were golden brown, with the grass gently bending southward with the breeze. Jake was in a great mood. Saturday night was the barn dance and Jake was going to ask Jolene to go with him. Jake was in his early twenties. Lean, good looking kid with blonde hair. He wore a wide brimmed Stetson and carried a forty four on his right hip. He had ranched with his family in Montana until they sold everything and came west to California years ago. Pa gave up ranching after Mom died of small pox. He took more to being a lawman and even spent a bit of time as a bounty hunter. Mostly trying to hide from her loss. That left Jake spending a lot of time with his Uncle on his ranch in California. Fact is, that's how they came to be in California now. A small town on the Delta was looking for a sheriff and Pa's reputation as an honest man with a quick hand made him a likely candidate. Uncle Rupert talked him into settling down a bit and offered to take some time with Jake.

Jake liked ranching and was glad to stay on as a hired hand with his Uncle at the Bar M.

The foreman there liked Jake too and had given him permission to use the extra wagon to take Jolene to the dance.

All he had in mind now was to run up over Coyote Hill and pick some flowers to take to Jolene so he could ask her proper.

Cochise was in a frisky mood this morning also. He pricked up his ears when Jake approached and snorted some, but he loved Jake. Jake had raised him since he was just a colt. He would always come up and bury his nose in Jake's chest to get a rub behind his ears. They were a happy pair this morning.

The saddle strapped on, Jake's six foot, hundred and sixty pound frame swung up easily onto Cochise's back. Cochise was part Tennessee Walker and part quarter horse and he stood a good seventeen hands high. He was a fine animal.

A beautiful chestnut brown with a white star on his forehead.

Reins in hand, Jake swung Cochise around toward the ranch house. He could already smell Wyatt's coffee and biscuits cooking. He'd ask for a

couple and a cup to take with him. Wyatt was always a good natured man. Had been a top hand years before, but got thrown from his horse in a stampede and suffered a lot of broken bones. Truth is he was lucky to be alive. Wyatt was thankful to have a job as a cook. Lots of broken down cowboys had to go to a town for work, and be darned lucky if they could find any at all. No, Wyatt knew he was a lucky man and was always thankful for whatever came his way.

“Good morning Jake” he greeted him. “Lookin’ to take Miss Jolene to the barn dance Saturday huh?”

“Mornin’ Wyatt,” Jake replied. “Yeah, I was going to get some wild flowers over the hill first. Her Mama’s not too keen on me and I thought Jolene would like it better if I took some to her when I ask her.”

Wyatt said, “Probably not a bad idea there Jake. Women are difficult to please as it is”, he smiled.

Wyatt then obliged him with some biscuits and a canteen of hot coffee. “Why don’t you stop over to Somersville and pick up a side of bacon for morning. Just have the butcher send his bill to the ranch” Jake agreed. “Sure thing” he replied and took off, heading into the hills. All the ranches did business in the surrounding towns this way. It kept things friendly and made life easier for everyone. Only once did a ranch get behind in payments.

Years ago during the drought, the Double T Ranch, southwest of the Bar M, lost most of their herd and just couldn’t make ends meet. Most of the boys left to work wherever they could find it. The local stores stood behind the Double T and he finally pulled through and paid everyone back. It took some time, but it sure made some good friends.

Jake rode Cochise for miles into the golden hills of Northern California. His horse was in top shape and could run forever here.

Jake was going through the small town of Somersville to get where he was going. He would stop by the butcher and place the order and pick it up on his way back.

Jake rode in as the stage was pulling up to the Wells Fargo Office.

“Howdy Andy”. Jake hollered. “Hey, who’s that riding shotgun with you this morning?”

“Howdy Jake.” Andy greeted. “That’s Cliff from over Sacramento way. We

been having some problems lately on the line". Cliff nodded to Jake, and he waved in reply.

Andy continued, "Cliff's with the Railroad and Stage Association. That ten gauge he carries oughta do some persuasion to somebody if'n they think they can jest take whatever they wants from us'n". Andy proudly suggested.

"Hope you don't run into any problems Andy. I gotta go, have a good trip, see ya' next time yore in town". Andy waved as Jake rode off. He stopped by the butcher, took care of business, and then headed up the trail to Coyote Hill.

There were Oak trees and Manzanita shrubs, grass as far as the eye could see. If you went farther down the trail, it would eventually lead you right out to the Sacramento River. Jake had done his share of swimming and fishing in that river since he was just a kid.

But today, Jake was on a mission. There was a little spot up the hill and down a canyon that was shaded all year long and had a spring that ran right through it. This was the place Jake had in mind to pick flowers for Jolene. Not very many folks knew about this place, but Jake had found it a particularly pleasant place to be alone. He discovered it one day rounding up cattle. There were about two dozen head here just lying about. They were so lazy they didn't even grumble when he got them to their feet and marched them back to the corral for market.

He reached his favorite place and stepped down out of the saddle. He had no need to hobble Cochise. He wasn't planning on going anywhere without Jake and certainly not in any rush to leave this good grass and water.

Jake went off looking for just the right flowers for a bouquet.

There were Buffalo Burrs, Fringed Gromwells, Lupines and Bluebells everywhere.

He had brought Jolene here a few times. She thought the place was beautiful too.

Jake got to daydreaming about Jolene and the times they have spent together. She was a beautiful brown eyed girl. Thick, dark, almost black hair down to her waist. Eyes that were so black they would stare right through you. She was honest, loving, had a great sense of humor and Jake just couldn't imagine his life without her. They had met a couple of

years ago in town but Jake felt like he had known her his whole life. Jake could tell she felt the same way about him. Just the way she looked at him made him feel weak. Jolene was from back east. Her Mother, felt quite differently though. She didn't think any young man in the west was suitable for her daughter. As far as she was concerned, they were all barbarians.

Jake was in his own world, picking hands full of flowers and having such a time of it all, he barely noticed the gunshots that rang out from above the canyon.

Suddenly alert, Jake looked at Cochise who was staring back with his ears at attention.

"That's enough of these I reckon". Jake said to Cochise. Grabbing the bouquet of flowers Jake stuffed them behind his saddle and threw some latigo around them to hold them in place. He sprang to the saddle and rode off toward the gunshots. He reached the top of the hill and looked below. There were three masked men holding up the stage. Andy's stage. That fellow named Cliff was nowhere to be seen. Andy held his hands high and was throwing down the strong box, while the passengers were standing with their hands above their heads. Jake sat atop Cochise, under an oak, looking and wondering his best option.

If he just ran down there shootin' and a hollering it might scare them, then again, they may take hostages. Jake thought it better to wait and see what developed.

About twenty minutes passed. The robbers let loose all but two of the stage's horses, fired in the air a couple of times to scare them off and then they headed east down the trail.

Jake hurried down the hill.

"Andy, is everyone OK"? Jake hollered, looking for wounded. "Cliff's shot up pretty bad Jake. The passengers are alright, just a bit shaken".

Jake looked about then asked, "Can you make it back to Somersville to get Cliff some doctoring Andy?" "I think so" Andy said. "Can you give me a hand with the horses?"

Jake helped Andy carefully re-strap the harness on the remaining two horses while the passengers got back on board. Then he and Jake picked up Cliff and carefully helped him inside the coach.

When they finished loading Cliff, Jake turned and said, "I'm going to track those fellas and bring 'em in Andy. Tell the Sheriff to send a few men my way".

"Shore 'nuff Jake. Thanks fer yore help."

Andy climbed up to his seat and turned the rig around. They lumbered their way back towards town. Jake mounted Cochise and they bolted down the trail after the robbers.

He kept just a bit off the trail, not wanting to raise up dust in case they should be keeping an eye behind them. He followed them for about seven miles before he got close enough to slow his pace and be able to see them clearly. They headed into the hills. Jake followed behind. Then, suddenly, they disappeared! Jake was looking and suddenly they were not there.

"I wonder if there is a buffalo wallow they have slipped into and are sighting me in right now?" Jake asked Cochise. Carefully, Jake proceeded.

He knew this area pretty well and was fairly certain there were no wallows out here.

Nothing that deep. But there was just no sign of these fellows.

Staring at the hills, Jake remembered an old trail hand in town, years before, talking about a secret passage through these hills. He was an old rustler and was saying that was where they kept their herds until the trouble wore down.

Jake had heard about it, but had never seen it.

In the wild country, men tell others about places, and give them sign to go by.

Those tidbits of information are kept in the minds of wise men. You never know when a memory of a map could save your life from a flash flood, or a quick place to get away. As was the case with these robbers!

Following a faint trail, Jake kept heading toward the hills. Trailing what he could barely see for several hours, just following his instinct. Then, as suddenly as you please, the shadows covering the arroyo drifted aside and Jake could see the opening through the hills.

There was the trail those boys had followed! Jake spurred Cochise, who was as excited about the chase as Jake, and they galloped down the arroyo after them. Coming into a clearing Jake slowed up. He could hear voices. He slowed Cochise to a walk. Then, there they were, sitting among a group of rocks. They had dismounted and left their horses grazing while they broke open the strong box. They seemed disappointed, but they were deeply involved in the counting of bills and coin when each of them looked at each other and froze.

“Move and you’re dead boys”. Jake told them. He held his Colt steady on them. They had not seen Jake approach, but here he was.

The fellow on the left was skinny with a bad complexion, greasy hair and wore a bandolier of bullets across his chest. The other two looked to him.

He turned and smiled at the kid and said; “Hey, we don’t want no problems. Come an join us. Have some coffee, have some ...”

He spun and drew his Colt throwing lead at Jake. Jake was faster. His Colt fired and split the greasy hair down the middle. The next shot went between the bandit’s eyes.

The other two were scrambling to get their weapons drawn. Jake fired at the one in the middle. Shot him in his right hand as he was about to aim. His gun flew from his hand. The third man threw his arms up. “Don’t shoot mister. We don’t want no trouble.”

Jake glared at the men and said, “You’ve already got more trouble than you can handle. Get on your feet. Drop your gun belts.”

They did as they were told. “Back up. Get your horses, you’re coming with me”. They again, did as they were told. Jake picked up their weapons and the loot from the stage.

Jake continued, “You two ride out in front. I’ll shoot the first man that makes any sudden moves. Don’t turn around if you want to be eating supper tonight. Anything tricky and you’ll be eating more lead than you can stomach.”

It was getting dark by the time they were in sight of Somersville. Jake could see the stage, in front of the Wells Fargo Office.

Jake led the bandits to the Sheriff’s Office.

“Sheriff Murphy”, Jake cried out. The door to the office opened and out

walked the Sheriff. Six foot two, weighing about two hundred pounds, Sheriff Murphy was a big man. Tall, bronze, clean shaven, with thick brown wavy hair. Too big for most rascals around these parts to mess with.

"I've got the two men that held up the stage this morning." Jake said.

"Hi ya' Jake, Andy said you'd probably be around sometime tonight. I thought he told me there were three of them?" The sheriff replied.

"There were three Sheriff. There are only two now".

The sheriff walked over and got the two men off their horses and Jake helped lead them into the jail cell.

"There is a reward for this Jake. Hey, I still have my men out looking for you. Don't know how they missed you". Sheriff Murphy said.

Jake remembered the hidden arroyo and decided to keep that information to himself.

Walking back outside to his horse Jake said, "Well, we're here now. Guess I'll see you later for that reward." Jake smiled. "Right now I'm heading over to Jolene's. I picked some flowers for her."

Jake looked at the Sheriff, who was looking at the back of his saddle when suddenly, Jake realized, the bouquet behind his saddle had become pretty bare in all the ruckus.

Jake and the Sheriff looked at the scrub stems then looked at each other and started laughing.

"Good luck son", The Sheriff told him, smiling.

"Thanks Pa, I'll talk with you soon ..." Laughed Jake.

Cochise took his time winding down the trail toward Jolene's ranch. Finally in sight, he trotted on toward the house.

Once on the porch, Jake knocked at the door. He heard the voices inside quiet, and then heard someone approach.

"Why Jake!" Jolene smiled as she opened the door, "What are you doing out here so late?"

She swung the screen door open for him to enter.

“Come on in. Mama’s got supper on. Mama? Is it OK if Jake sets and has some supper with us?” Jolene asked. Mama scowled at Jake, as was her usual greeting.

Then she said, “Come on in here Jake and set down.” Mama continued, “Jenny? Grab another plate and setting, Jake’s joining us.” Jake thanked her, and then smiled at Jenny. She smiled back bashfully. She was just about ten years old now. Tall, skinny and blond but with a smile that lit up her face.

Jake held out the chair for Jolene to sit.

Still standing, Jolene asked; “Jake Murphy what are you holding on to so dearly?”

“Oh,” Jake replied, looking sheepishly at the floor, “These are for you Jolene. I mean they were for you. I mean, I went and picked flowers up the hill for you, but the stage got robbed and Andy was in trouble and ...”

Jolene, just put her hands on her hips and looked at her Mama who scowled and turned away. Jolene surprised Jake with a scowl just like her mama’s, and then she grabbed his hand and winked. They looked at each other and started laughing.

Written by: Robt. & Melody Nelson

With special ‘Thanks’ to: San Francisco’s Finest ... Officer P.F. Makaveckas

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