

INCIDENT AT CASA VERDE

Monroe heard the noise of the guns from a distance and broke away from his tasks to find out what happened . Sporadic gunfire meant an Indian attack but who they were attacking was a mystery. He knew of no outfit in this part of the Plain except the Casa Verde and they were miles off.

Following an arroyo which led towards the sounds, he reached the massacre as it occurred. There was nothing he could do but he waited, hoping maybe he might help any survivors. As the sun went down he approached the silent wagon. All around lay the corpses of the butchered animals -wagon horses, two cattle and a dog. The stench of carrion caught his throat although this was not the first time he had seen such a sight. At first sight, there were no bodies of men. But in the faded light he realized something was tied to each wheel of the wagon. Even Monroe bit his lip as he saw what had been done to the men who died at the hands of the savages.

It was next morning at sun up he made his mistake. If the raid was over, he reckoned, the war party would be miles away. A cook fire gave little smoke and hot food was essential after days of hard rations. He had almost finished up and dowsed the fire when the arrow thudded into his thigh.

In a rush he reached his horse and half dragged half mounted in a second. A lone Apache had returned to the wagon for some reason and surprised him. The blood from the wound dripped inside his boot so he eased his leg out of the stirrup. The pain went on but the warm trickle seemed better than the stiffness he had gotten used to.

After an hour he left the hard stone path and slowly weaved between the mesa trees and clumps of cedar wood to the lower plain. The hard trail jarred his wound and he was glad to reach the pampas where the going improved. He broke off the feathers and managed to pull the arrow through. The pony was ringed in sweat and foam streamed from her mouth as she struggled on. His guess was she would never make Casa Verde without a rest. They had to stop. Faint and in pain he slumped from the saddle and slipped down into the shade. Just ten minutes -just a short break for himself and the horse.

Something jerked him awake. A warrior in full paint was searching the scrub about 30 yards away. His pinto grazed nearby but neither seemed aware of the cowboy or his horse. The sun was high and he knew he lost precious hours in sleep. Could he reach his rifle in time? He moved slowly towards the saddle pack but the Apache ran screaming in his direction. With trembling fingers, the cowboy levered a shell in to his rifle. Before he could fire, the Indian was clawing at his hands and grappling for the gun. Releasing the weapon, he drew his skinning knife and rammed it into the naked gut of his attacker.

The Indian fell, turning on the knife as it thrust into his belly. He screamed like a wild animal as blood streamed from his body splashing over his attacker and down into the ground beneath him.

Monroe had worked for Casa Verde for three years now, riding the edge of range looking for strays. The solitary life suited him and he stayed out for days on end -living off game and the meagre rations he drew when he went back to the Ranch. The Apache didn't bother him normally, they grazed their herds and lived like him.

But now things were changing, a war party had formed and begun to roam the frontier between Casa Verde and Mexico. Magwa, son of the Ogarro Apache chief, spent too long herding mustangs for the tribe and watching for wolves. He was twenty two years old and still unblooded by combat.

Why did the Chief believe a warrior would exist like this? If the Elders could not see the weakness in herding like whitemen, then he must set out himself and bring others with him to master the Plains as they had done for many years. His brother Chaqua joined him and several other young men who had horses. The band took pride in living outside the village and foraging their own supplies. For days the band hunted buffalo along the High Mesa and honed their killing skills by challenging the great beasts of the prairie.

One morning, they fell upon a solitary wagon making for the Mexican border. Surrounding the party, they stayed out of range until the guns stopped firing and the whitemen stood silent. One of them came forward unarmed as if to speak with him. He rode him down before the man said a word. The others took this as the sign to move in and within minutes the group of pioneers was dead. From the wagon they picked up food and took the rifles as trophies.

That had been two days before.

Monroe's Appaloosa ran for more than six hours but at last dropped exhausted. The pony could not carry him further and he had to end it. For a long minute he reflected how she served him well for three years and he owed her his life. With regret, he slowly drew his knife and cut her quickly, not daring to use the rifle.

Sitting beneath the narrow shadow of a tree cactus, Monroe pondered his options. He had to move on, but which way? He checked his rifle and water bottle -there were shells and water. His wound was now old and crusted with a scab of blood, painful in a dull way but he reckoned he could walk for a bit. The only thing to do was to keep going east towards Casa Verde. He hoped to come across some strays trapped in one of the culverts along the way.

The sun stood high above him as he trudged forward. The heat struck down like a hammer on his head and shoulders. After an hour of slow agony he knew he would never make it to shelter. Dropping down behind a granite outcrop he gave himself to the wonder of sleep, free of pain. He remained there till dusk when the cool air from the Sierras began to blow away the heat of the day.

Waking with a start, he sensed another presence nearby. Nuzzling in beneath the rock, a mustang was searching for feed or water. Monroe knew full well these wild horses were herd animals and never roamed alone. He opened his flask and poured a little water onto the flat rock surface. He kept stock-still as the animal nuzzled then scooped up the liquid. Monroe talked quiet words to the horse such as every wrangler knows and slowly he handled the beast till it stayed quiet in his company. Stiffly, he rose and with his hand on its mane and leaning on its flank, he stepped out from the rocky shelter.

In the moonlight he saw other horses, some grazing and others still. As he appeared, some raised their heads in alarm but the mustang with him seemed to calm their instincts. From the centre of the herd a voice shouted a curse as the horses shifted.

Monroe hollered: "Be easy, help me."

A figure rose out of the ground some twenty feet away. "Keep still-drop your gun or I'll drop you" A harsh voice and a dark figure moved slowly towards him. Light shimmered on the silver barrel of a handgun. Monroe showed him his wounded thigh and told of his Indian encounters. The wrangler was a lean tall man called Wyatt.

"Sure as hell you're the luckiest man in New Mexico-I only came over here to graze and move 'em straight down to Fort Victory. Not stayin' more'n one night in this damn'd place."

Wyatt looked at the wound and saw the arrow head had passed clean through the thigh.

"My, My" he said "nothin' I can do -best clean it and leave it alone."

He poured water from his canteen over the wound.

"What you goin' to do now?" Monroe asked "Apache is scouting me for real."

Wyatt scratched his beard and sniffed the wind.

" Let's us get the hell away from here leastways"

They decided to strike out for Fort Victory at once. Their direction took them south east away from Apache country. Monroe kept the mustang who found him---he reckoned it was a lucky charm and its easy action spared his leg somewhat. It followed the lead mare willingly. He carried his rifle on a sling across his back and held on with a neck strap. Bareback was no pleasure but he had no choice. The two men hardly exchanged one word as the day wore

on. Wyatt was everywhere, hazing in the young and chiding the lead mare as he moved them on. Monroe kept looking at the plains behind them, straining to see any dust.

That evening, they staked out the leaders near a thin stream running down from the Sierras. Monroe took first watch. He felt glad to do some duty for this laconic man who spoke few words but had shown kinship with him.

Apart from the cries of the night jar and the yap of coyotes, the night seemed still. The mustangs were his best alarm -if any animal approached -human or beast -they would spook at once.

By midnight he switched places with Wyatt and snuck under the blanket. He slept deeply and woke with the cold of dawn seeping into his bones. There was no sign of Wyatt. The mustangs were scattered and just the lead mare stood tethered nearby, with wild eyes and straining at the hobble.

He knew what the Apache had done. They intended to hunt him in their own special way -by torment and slaying every means of survival. The loss of Wyatt meant that poor man had suffered torture just because he helped their enemy.

Monroe screamed and swore with anger but within minutes faced the hard fact that his survival now lay in his own hands and he gave little more time to the man who died. He took the mare away from his location. Her whinnying for the herd was a constant danger to him. He walked her with difficulty to the rocky outcrop above the camp. He circled the rocks, leaving no prints.

Below him the rest of the small herd had returned to the spot they shared the night before.

There was a gap in the stones where he got a sighting of the camp and waited. The day grew long, the shadows moved slowly. By late evening he dozed upright but a small sound from below brought him back to life instantly. Below him were three Apache warriors, shining with war paint and sniffing the air near the dead fire.

Only three? Monroe realized the hunt had become personal, not a contest for the general tribe. He took his rifle quietly in his hands and caressed its walnut stock. One shot and a painted warrior was spinning downwards into the dirt. Before he could reload the scene below transformed. Mustangs scattered and two Indians dived into the scrub. Monroe fired again and one of the men stopped moving for a second then snaked away into the shadows leaving a trace of dark blood behind him.

He reloaded and turned to examine the cold rocks all around him. Any attack would show in silhouette above him so he pointed the rifle that way. Time passed and the silence of the prairie was suffocating. Like a leopard, Magwa sprang down on him in a mighty leap from above. Monroe's gun barked and the shot hit something but did nothing to stop the rushing attack. Knife in hand, the warrior flung himself at Monroe and lifted him off the ground with the force of his leap. They skidded together down the slope, the cowboy under the body of the Apache, twisting in a spiral of hate as they each tried to free an arm to strike. Monroe felt the slime of blood on Magwa's right arm and twisted it to force it down. His gun had vanished and he could not reach his knife. All his strength went into gripping his enemy in a strangle hold with one arm round his neck and with the other grasping for the Indian's knife. Gradually the strength drained from the arm of the Indian as he struggled for

life, but Monroe still locked him in a death embrace for several minutes.

Shaking with exhaustion, at last he relaxed and the body of the Apache slid lifeless to the ground.

He climbed back to his hideout and recovered his rifle. The Repeater was still loaded. He limped down to the floor of the canyon. The blood trail snaked like a dark ribbon in the moonlight. It stopped at a brush cover some twenty yards from the campsite. He flushed out the last of the Apache brothers, Chaqua,. His eyes pleaded for mercy and he spoke in a tongue which seemed to beg for his life. Monroe shot him twice; once for Wyatt and once for the joy of it. He did not bury him, knowing that the Apache believed a warrior unburied never reached The Great Prairie. Their bodies would be picked clean by coyotes.

He took the mare and turned slowly eastwards. Within a day he reached the Casa. As he limped into the hacienda there was a commotion but he got down by himself and half fell into the bunkhouse.

"Where in hell have you bin?" they all wanted to know, but he was too weary to relate it all to the crew. He just said "I met some Injuns and got away."

It was three days before he sat astride a horse and his leg always gave him gyp when it rained, but he went back to the range without another word. He looked for the body of Wyatt, as a Christian should, but he never found a bone of his body to bury.