

Buzzards hovered in tightening downward spirals above the cemetery two miles north of town, signaling to the dirty little settlement of Picture Rock that there had been yet another killing. The sinister silhouettes swooped silently through a shimmering haze to keep their pact with death, while a milling and frightened knot of onlookers gathered in the dusty street to try and determine which of them was missing.

"Another killing! Sheriff, ain't you going out there?"

Ivor Campbell wheeled to face the speaker. His six foot frame carried half a hundred pounds too many, most of the excess evident in the prodigious paunch that strained at the once-white apron at his waist. The big, rumped Scotsman's unmanageable shock of sandy hair, now matted with sweat and dust, bounced crazily in springy spirals as he moved. His sun-peeled button of a nose seemed too small to fit the red slab of his face. His eyes were a deeper blue than the cloudless, sun-bleached sky. Florid cheeks, cobwebbed with tiny purple veins, trembled as he spoke.

"Blast it, Hester. Quit callin' me 'Sheriff'. I'm a storekeep, not a lawman. And no, I'll not go out there. Not by myself, I won't."

Hester Biggers' face, reddened by the oppressive heat, took on an even deeper, vermilion cast. She stuck out her lower lip to send a blast of air chasing an errant tendril of graying hair from her eyes. A large, matronly woman, Hester placed a work-callused palm across her brow to shield her eyes from the insistent rays of the sun, squinting again at the circling vultures.

"We did appoint you Sheriff, Ivor... after a fashion." It was Honeycutt, the banker. Already half-soused at midmorning.

Campbell glared at the sagging little man in the rumped, three-piece suit and saw him shrink visibly under his steady gaze. Honeycutt's yellowed, red-rimmed eyes watered continuously, reminding the big Scotsman of a stray dog that had haunted the gates of the fort where he had been mustered out.

Ivor Campbell wiped a stream of salty sweat from his eyes with a furry forearm as big as a lamp post. He wondered whose body lay out there, attracting the ghoulish squadron of scavengers in the steely, heat-bleached sky. Hester and Honeycutt were right here, of course, as were pretty Molly Ashton, Hester's hired girl, Floyd Longtree, the sallow-faced gunsmith with the pained eyes, and Jimmy Washburn, the strapping young man whose body had outgrown his mind. Who all did that leave? Ivor's son, Con, who he thought was in the saloon. Ruta Pinder, the gorgeous saloon owner. Tempest and Lorene, the young

women who worked for Ruta. Cobb, the big, good-natured colored man who tended bar at the Klamath Nugget. Old Emily Foley, probably laid up in her home with the vapors. And Rink Latigo, the card sharp. Only stranger in town was the boarder at Hester's rooming house. Hawker, his name was. Big bearded galoot wearing buckskins.

The macabre killings had begun almost a year ago and, to date, the people of Picture Rock had buried four of their own. Four men. Five now, if the buzzards were to be believed. All the victims had been brutally murdered in the same heinous and horrible fashion: each with his throat slit, the jugular severed; the flesh of each face methodically carved away, leaving a bloodied, staring skull. The appalled survivors had noted how very much people tend to resemble one another without their features. Such insane butchery, they agreed, robs a corpse of its individuality, its uniqueness.

Despite much collective agonizing over the situation, no pattern, rhyme nor reason had been discerned regarding the deaths. It had been thought, when the first mutilated corpse was found, that Indians were responsible— but, as the murders continued, it became evident to them all that these were the acts of a madman. The entire community stood gripped by the grisly fist of fear. Who among them would be the next to die?

"I'll go with you to fetch it, Mister Campbell," Jimmy

Washburn offered. The young man was smiling brightly, his eyes as vacant as curtainless windows in a deserted house.

The storekeeper looked at the boy with a strange envy. *Don't even have sense enough to be scared*, he thought.

"All right, Jimmy. Go fetch my hand cart from in back of the store while I grab up my shotgun. You and me will go and get the poor bastard."

Picture Rock was a dying settlement, a town that should never have come to be. The tiny town was peopled, for the most part, by men and women who had stopped short of their goals and surrendered their dreams.

A dozen years had passed since the crippled and struggling convoy of five wagons had crept creakingly westward across the Great Basin in the southeastern section of the new state of Oregon. The travelers had crossed the vicious and forbidding high desert, with its desolate volcanic landscape, bedeviled by Indians, tortured by the harsh demands of the barren land. When the axle on the Washburn wagon had broken in the shadow of the Winter Rim peaks, near a cluster of abandoned, weather-worried buildings, the trail-weary members of the abbreviated caravan had taken it as an omen. They had voted to stop here, rather

than to face even one more day of enforced hardship and travel. Ahead, the fierce warriors of the Modoc and Klamath tribes lay in wait, as did the intimidating heights of the mountains. This dreary station must do. They would trudge no further. Picture Rock was born as bastards are generally born— unexpected and unwanted.

At first, this dismal community born of convenience had prospered, capitalizing on the trade of the influx of refugees fleeing the aftermath of the Civil War, washing through in a westbound wave on their hopeful journeys to the fertile valleys beyond the mountains. Eventually, though, the traffic lessened, then ceased, and Picture Rock faced a slow and painful death.

The arrival of the Castle gang had postponed the town's demise. The rapacious band of raiders was plundering and terrorizing the populated valleys and settlements to the west. They had chosen to headquarter in a mountain fortress near the little community. The outlaws spent their leisure hours and stolen dollars here. Picture Rock was saved.

Or was it now captive to an even greater peril?

Jimmy Washburn came running at breakneck speed down the dusty trail from the cemetery. His bounding form seemed to dance

like an apparition above the surface, distorted by the shimmering heat waves that accentuated the miserably hot day. He was yelling something, but no one strayed from the protection of the cluster of people watching from the street in front of the bank. As he neared, the small crowd moved forward to meet him. The youngster was gasping for breath.

"It... it's a lady. It's a woman this time. Mister Campbell says it figgers to be Miz Foley. Wants some of you ladies to bring a blanket." Jimmy blushed under his heat-reddened cast. "She ain't wearin' no clothes."

A disturbed murmur traveled through the gathering. Hester Biggers and Molly Ashton rushed to gather a pall for the victim.

They buried Emily Foley next to her husband Caleb, the murderer's first prey. Obligatory tears were shed as a hastily composed eulogy was read, but all those present were too terrified to grieve with sincerity. The small collection of mourners moved somberly back to town, avoiding the eyes of their neighbors, each caught up in his own doubts and fears.

"We'd best have a town meeting," Campbell stated as they reached the town limits. "Tonight, my place, after it cools off a mite. Eight o'clock. Something has got to be done. We got to decide."

No one disagreed.

Promptly at eight, the citizens of Picture Rock filed into

Campbell's store and stationed themselves in the aisles among the pickle barrels, harnesses and bolts of brightly colored cloth. Campbell stepped to the front, turned and bent to wipe his brow on the hem of his apron. He cleared his throat.

"Anyone else wants to hold this meeting is mighty welcome."

The gathering stood mute. No sound was heard, save the buzzing of flies. The smell of human fear hung heavy in the room, transcending the pervasive odors of spices and leather and sour sweat.

"All right, then. I'll grant this is a subject none of us relishes discussing. But I know you'll all agree that we're going to have to do something, before we all wind up in the churchyard... without faces to present to our Maker. Has anybody got any suggestions?"

Heads turned as bewildered townsfolk looked to their neighbors for guidance and help. Frightened faces went slack and gray around the mouth as Campbell's searching gaze met each in turn. Some could not keep their hands still. The silence grew more awkward.

"Come on, folks," the Scotsman insisted, "somebody say something. We're all in the same fix, here. We're all friends. We need one another. Make a stab at it. Nobody's going to think less of you, nor laugh at your ideas. We got to start somewhere."

"I... I got one notion," Honeycutt offered meekly. His fingers fidgeted like ten little sausages sizzling in a cast-iron pan. "I think the killer is one of that Castle bunch. I think one of us ought to go to Mister Castle and ask for his help in rooting the bloodthirsty monster out."

"Jesus H. Christ!" It was Floyd Longtree, the gunsmith. "You lookin' to get us all butchered, Emile? You piss them ol' boys off, they'll swoop down on this town and wipe us out."

"Maybe not. That old man runs his bunch with a tight rein. He might not know what has been going on down here."

"Who's going to ask him, Emile... you?"

"N-no. Not me. I just thought..."

"You didn't do no such thing. Besides, this town depends on that bunch. If they quit coming to town, how are we going to make a living?"

"You're talking money, Floyd," Hester Biggers said. "You can't spend it if you're next on that madman's list."

Several others offered lame suggestions and the meeting disbanded with nothing decided. There were no unlocked doors or darkened windows in the lonely town of Picture Rock that night.

The burly guard gently pulled the massive, polished ma-

hogany doors closed and assumed a parade rest position in front of them. His bulk obscured the brightly buffed brass plate proclaiming that these were the offices of the Governor of the sovereign state of Oregon—the honorable La Fayette Grover.

Inside the chambers, Governor Grover paced back and forth before the window overlooking the capitol city of Salem, in the fertile Willamette Valley. He puffed fervently on the shortening green cigar clenched tightly in the corner of his mouth, seriously putting the luxuriant mustache on his upper lip at risk. He stopped abruptly and turned to regard the rustic figure that lounged loosely on the overstuffed leather settee against the walnut-paneled east wall.

Trace Savage epitomized the man every boy wants to be when he grows up, and wishes he had been when he becomes an old man. He was tall, six feet, and lank; a lonely figure of a man with powerful, broad shoulders tapering to a slender waist and hips; the rangy build of a man who has spent much of his time far from the structures and restrictions of civilization. His tousled mane of ebony hair glistened almost blue in the shaft of bright afternoon sun streaking through the office windows. The three-day growth of beard on his cheeks did not hide the granite set of his jaw. Savage wore a black, closely-cropped mustache. The steel-gray eyes that now showed a lively sparkle were equally capable of displaying the cold glint of iron-willed purpose.

Savage's long legs were crossed at the ankles, and he appeared to be completely relaxed. The Governor knew, though, that the man was a coiled spring, ready to leap instantly into explosive action.

Trace Savage was, indeed, a handsome man. Governor Grover had summoned him because he was a deadly man.

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It was old Joe Meek, the famous mountain man and former U. S. Marshal of the Oregon Territory, who had urged Governor Grover to recruit Trace Savage to fill the state's need for a manhunter. Meek had been a friend of Stalkin' Sam Irons, and though he had never met Savage, he knew that the young fellow had been Sam's protégé— and, too, he had heard of the exploits of "Killer-Of-All-Killers", as the man was called by all the Indian tribes of the Northwest.

On Meek's recommendation, the Governor had used the contacts and powers of his office to delve into the history of Trace Savage, learning of the young man's successful vendetta against the band of seven who had murdered his parents at war's end, of the branding of each killer with "the mark of the

serpent", of his wilderness and tracking prowess and of his deadly skills in battle. Grover's investigators had discovered, too, that since leaving his ranch in Idaho's Salmon River country, the manhunter had been solely responsible for the capture or death of more than a dozen of the most vicious desperadoes in the West, working sometimes as a representative of the law, a citizen's group or a government agency, sometimes in direct defense of the outlaws' hapless victims. Savage was fast becoming a name known and feared across the West by men who chose to ride the owlhoot trail.

The Governor shuddered slightly while mentally reviewing the credentials of the man before him. Savage was definitely the man for the job he had in mind.

"Well, Mister Savage, can you do it? Can you find and eliminate this Castle gang?"

"Don't know, sir. I can give it a try, I reckon." A slight drawl betrayed the manhunter's Missouri upbringing.

"When we first talked of this matter two weeks ago, I was reluctant to send troops," Grover said. "To be quite frank, I do not care to have any more attention drawn to the situation than is absolutely necessary. A politician prefers as little emphasis as possible on the problems of his administration. But since then, the murderous scoundrels have struck again, down on the Rogue. Made off with a freight shipment and killed the guards

and drivers. The populace is up in arms, demanding protection. What do you think, son? Should I call in the militia?"

"That must be your judgment, Governor. The folks elected you to make decisions, not me. But I'll say this... some of those Castle boys raided with Quantrell, and the whole damn Union Army never caught up with the ones raising this ruckus here. They're mighty crafty, from what I've been told. They see troops coming after them, they'll likely crawl back in those hills so far you'll never find them. Even with the best scouts pointing the way, a small force such as they have can outmaneuver any army. They are guerrilla fighters, and damn good ones. You could lose a lot of men, and look pretty damned foolish in the process."

"M-m-m. I believe you're right... can't have that."

Governor Grover walked back to the window to stare out at the lengthening afternoon shadows.

"Son, I need to ask something that might not set too well with you." Grover turned back to look into those steel-gray eyes. "I know that you fought on the side of the Confederacy. Shelby's Raiders, I believe. And I know that Union soldiers butchered your parents. This rabble we're after now... they are mostly Rebels, too."

The Governor dropped the cold stub of his cigar into a shiny brass spittoon beside his desk.

"Mister Savage, where do your sympathies lie?"

There was no change in the expression on the manhunter's face, but the air in the plush chambers seemed suddenly charged as his eyes flashed with suppressed anger.

"If you don't know that, sir, you've got the wrong man." Savage spoke softly, but coldly. "No *soldiers* killed my folks. They were murdered by Red Legs... jackals that preyed upon innocent folks wearing no colors. Quantrell was the same, and Bloody Bill Anderson. Their kind are trash, whether they wear blue or gray. Cast from the same warped mold.

"I make no distinctions. Red skin or white, or black... blue britches or gray blouses... I measure a man by what he is and what he does. Does that answer your fool question?"

"Yes, yes it does. My apologies, young man. I have made my decision. I want you to do the job... for me, for Oregon and for your country."

"I make no promises but that I'll give it my best. Not for those reasons you named, Governor, but because their kind of scavenger has no right sharing space with decent folks. I know I can't change the whole world, sir, but I can damn sure do what I can to clean up the part of it that rubs up against me. You got yourself a hand."

The Governor walked briskly across the room and seated himself behind the massive oak desk. He reached into a drawer at

his right and extracted a prepared document, laying it in front of him. Looking up at Savage, he pulled a caddie containing pen and ink to the center of the desk.

"I took the liberty of drawing up these papers, prior to our discussion." Grover explained the sheaf of documents as he affixed his signature at the bottom of each page. "They name you, Trace Savage, as a Special Deputy of the Office of the Governor of the State of Oregon, empowered to employ whatever means deemed by you to be necessary in the completion of your mission. It instructs all State officers, employees and agents to cooperate fully, and asks the further cooperation of any Federal officers you may encounter. It stipulates that ten thousand dollars is set aside for whatever expenditures you might make in the performance of your duties. Get whatever you need, keep a record, have a bill sent to the State. Anything else you require, son, feel free to call on me directly."

Grover folded the papers, affixed his seal of office and handed the packet to the manhunter. They clasped hands. The Governor walked the younger man toward a rear exit. Their relationship was to be kept secret, at Savage's insistence. It would not do to have the Castle gang watching for the Governor's hired gun.

"You met my partner, Ben Hawker, at our last meeting, Governor. I took the liberty of sending him on down to nose

around. I'm to meet him at a place called Picture Rock."