

Part One

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Hell, I reckon most stories oughta start right off with a humdinger, so you'll be glad to know this story begins with a end: the overdue demise of one Samuel J. Perrault.

I can't say as I was overly wrung-out when Ol' Man Perrault died. Can't say I was even upset in a passing, polite sorta way. I can say, though, I had to laugh when word got out that his own horse had shot him; I sure as hell reckon there's better ways of dying. Couldn't happen again in a million years, Sheriff Agnew said. As near as we could figure it, a rattler worried Perrault's horse and, being a consummate snake hater, the old man cocked his rifle to blast the poor reptile on back to the devil. The horse reared; Perrault fell off and dropped his rifle; the horse, also being a consummate snake hater, thrashed about as horses do and stepped on the rifle. The stock was broke clean in half and the snake was, in a literal way of speaking, quite beside himself. And Perrault, he had a bullet smack dab between his eyes which, they said, had one of them *Et tu Brute* looks in 'em.

At the inquiry, some joker wanted to hang the horse. Even though the critter had a guilty look about him, I came to his defense. I showed Sheriff Agnew the spur scars on the beast's flanks which quickly brought in a verdict of innocent-based-on-justifiable-homicide with a tinge of temporary insanity tossed in onaccounta we all wanted this case sealed up tighter than Wondrous Wilhelmina of Winnemucca's corset (which I can tell you first hand is damn tight).

Folks came from miles around for Ol' Man Perrault's funeral, but mostly just to hear Pastor Dennison's piece. He managed to find a few good things to say about Perrault, but when it came time to reconcile how he died (which was sometimes the highlight of funerals in those parts), well mosta us liked to have bust a gut trying not to laugh. Womenfolk was lucky: they had hankies and veils to hide their smiling tears. Ol' Perrault's horse never even let on, though. He just stood there, his back foot hipshot kinda casual-like, swatting flies with his skimpy, Cayuse tail. I was the one saddle-broke that horse, so I knew there was a grin behind those dozy eyes of his. But other folks made comment to me they thought the horse held up just fine and with remorse befitting a horse in his position. Naturally, I kept my quiet

Nope, can't say as Perrault's death bothered me much. But I did commence to worry about where all this left me

and the other boys who worked Four Arrows. Naturally, as foreman of the ranch everyone looked to me for answers, as though just being ranahan made me privy to Perrault's personal affairs.

Oh, now there I go, getting aheada myself. You're looking a little adrift, son. Maybe I'd best back up a piece so's you can understand just how things stood back then, the summer of 1892.

The only reason I'd gotten the dang job as ranch foreman in the first place—let's see, that was in '84—was I was the first range hand that Perrault ever set eyes on that had him some education beyond first or second grade. I could write and cipher, so even though I was only twenty and considerable younger than the rest of the crew, Perrault gave me the job. Well, what with me being a tall and scrawny stretcha water and having a voice that never quite finished pubertating, I remember me having one awful time riding roughshod in those early days.

Anyway, Samuel J. Perrault was what we nowadays marvel at and tend to elevate in our conversations: the self-made man that somehow is only available in these United States. I know right now you're thinking about them Morgan, Weyerhaeuser, Rockefeller, and Carnegie boys. Well, drop down a few dozen pegs and then you might stub your toe on ol' Perrault. I've seen me plenty of them moving pictures, and them folks in Hollywood these days

seem to have a good bead on the likes of ol' Perrault: short, cocky, bull-faced, and mad as hell about it. Kinda like ... what's that kid's name? Cagney, Jimmy Cagney.

Perrault's story wasn't so special in the early years, 'cept when he told it in the later years. He woulda told you he led a wagon train along the Oregon Trail (he was a cook for some eastern nymphs du prairie heading west to share their wares), that he fought the Indians with his bare hands to lay claim to his land (he stole it plain and simple), and that he built his empire with hard work (of other men), honest sweat (he sweat only when he drank), and constant prayer (that his competition would fail). Hell, the way he told things, no doubt he's setting 'round heaven to this day waiting to be offered a shot at sainthood. That is, if he hasn't stole the title by now.

Well, whether you take in his story or mine, what you gotta remember is his kingdom, Four Arrows, was one of Oregon's largest and finest spreads. Even his brand—four arrows all pointing to face each other—was a good example of his power and conceit. Like he was center of everything. Yep, that's what it was: conceit. Just remember the Four Arrows brand and that's all you need remember about Perrault.

So if I was so smart, having got through eight grades and all, what was I doing under Perrault's stubby, little thumb? Well, I was only twenty when I signed on, don't

forget, and ol' Perrault seemed to me like God Almighty Hissself. Oh, we had us a few years of lean back then, when nobody had nothing and Perrault was always borrowing it. But mostly we did just fine, onaccounta ol' Perrault was damn shrewd. Too shrewd. I reckon that's why it didn't take me long to cultivate me a strong dislike for him, and I always planned to move on. But things got mighty confusing by '87 and . . . well one thing led to another, and before I knew it that dang horse shot Perrault before I could ever tell the old fart where to go.

I remember that first night after the funeral. We alla us rode back to the house at Four Arrows. At first us wranglers was quiet, just watching our horses' feet and listening to our saddles crunch and our bridles jingle, which was music, pure and simple, to any cowboy's ear. Zeb Hardy started first with that damn contagious chuckle of his. Then Jay, the kid, started in. Well, before you knew it, we was all laughing so hard that ol' Perrault probably heard us from his grave down by the Walla Walla River. Cripes, by the time we got back to the bunk house, we'd decided to pull the shoes off Perrault's horse and retire him to the greenest pasture we could find at Four Arrows. Saint Cayuse, we'd call him, Redeemer of O-pressed Cowhands.

Yes sir, we all concluded that was one redeeming horse.

We passed the bottle and, though I never held much with me and my men all drinking together, I allowed it onaccounta it was a special occasion. After several rounds of the bottle, talk got kinda serious, as whiskey-talk eventually does.

“Come on, Roy,” Jay—he was our youngest hand—prodded. “You gotta know what’s gonna happen.”

I looked acrost at him through our feet on the table and said, “What am I, a swami or something? I can’t see the future. Your guess is good as mine.”

Hardy said, “Yeah, but Roy, you’re the foreman, it’s your job to know these things,” Hardy added as though saying it made it so.

“All I know is the boss died on Tuesday, today is Thursday, and Monday is payday,” said I. I declined another shot outa the bottle, which was looking a little blurrish by then.

Then another hand leaned outa his bunk and asked me, “You mean you can set there and tell us Perrault never told you what would happen if he kicked off?”

I unfolded my legs down from the table top and stood up. “Meaning no unintentional disrespect for the dead,” I began, “Perrault never planned on dying. Ever. Leastwise he never talked about it to me. I reckon he planned to go on just about as long as the Columbia River herself.” My voice cracked even more than usual under the effects of the

coffin-varnish we called whiskey in those days, and I remembered why I never drank to impress women.

“But what happens to Four Arrows? Everyone knows Perrault don’t have any living relation,” Young Jay persisted, a very sincere look of concern spreading over his fuzzy, sunburned face.

I unplucked my starched collar to let my Adam’s Apple settle back down some and replied, “I’m not so sure he has a dead relation.” I tried to hold in a smile. Then, more seriously, I lied: “Hell, for all I care, Four Arrows can go back to the Indians.”

Well, Hardy took a immediate exception to that and shot me with a: “I’d sooner die!”

“Careful now, Zeb,” I cautioned, hoping my smile would put him at ease as I added, “think I heard ol’ Perrault say that same thing just last week.”

Hardy straightened up some and said, “Yeah, but my horse loves me.”

Well, we all laughed, and then I reminded the men that work the next day would be as usual and I advised them to save some whiskey for the reading of the will in the next coupla days. There was no doubt in my mind that we would all need a stiff belt that day.

I had me a set of rooms that Perrault had built off the main house. I could come and go as I pleased, yet at the same time I was at Perrault’s constant beck and call, which

over the eight years of my service at Four Arrows had proved to be annoying, taxing, and a damn nuisance. But Lord, since he'd died, it'd been a blissful kinda quiet. I had the whole house to myownself, with only Anita, our plump Mexican cook, to run into now and then, which, depending on how long it'd been since I'd been to town, wasn't a altogether displeasurable experience.

Looking back on that night, the night after we buried ol' Perrault, I guess I thought I was a pretty big gun. I sat in the burgundy leather chair and ran my fingers down the fine brass tacks. A painting, some ten feet long and six wide, graced the mantle. It was of a fine herda Four Arrows cattle as they made their way down to the Walla Walla River, which paraded through our land. And as near as I can recall, it was about as pretty a artwork as I ever saw, including those I seen in a Portland museum.

Am I talking too fast? 'Cause if I am, I can slow down some.

Yep, I sure as hell thought that horse had sealed my future . . . me, Royal R. Leckner, cattle baron at age 28. Maybe after all those loyal years, me, the meek, had a right smart chance of inheriting the earth or at least a damn nice chunk of it.

I took a snort of Perrault's finest brandy, tidied up his desk a bit, and went to bed, thinking on how glad I was I'd stuck it out long as I had.