

PART 1

one

So there we was, late summer of 1897, me and my bride and all my charges. My charges, may I remind you, was alla the Four Arrows Ranch, including alla its critters, working men, affiliates, and more sleepless nights than a young man of 29 oughta have. Sleepless onaccounta there was always something for me to worry about. We'd had some hardscrabble years following the Panic of '93, which was not so-named as a tribute to my wedding. Cattle prices was just about at low tide, forcing me to cut the herds back and take more serious the feed markets. 'Course, wheat, oats, and alfalfa was looking real good to me by '95. Other outfits from Pendleton to the Palouse was making out right equitable with feed crops. Problem was, my boss, the owner, Leviticus Perrault, was a animal lover and he fought me tooth'nail'n'hide the notion of selling off more beeves to make way for wheat fields.

You see, he didn't think too much about the money part. 'Course, he didn't like selling the critters off just to become steaks either, but at our annual sell-offs we'd distract him enough to get the cows to market. Onct he'd started working the herds like one of the regular hands and started seeing how worrisome and downright stupid a cow can be, well he dropped his notion of naming each one, and by '95 he even worked up the grit to scorch a brand all by hisself. Bawled louder'n the calf did, but he did it.

By '95 we'd pretty much settled down to normal life on the Four Arrows. 'Course, what's normal to most ranches and what was normal to us is two entirely different things, as you are quickly being reminded. Normal is one of them words that really ain't got a standard of its own. I mean, my normal and your normal is pretty much just opinions, and there's just no way many people could pin the word 'normal' on Leviticus or his wife Lou(ella).

They'd come to be on the ranch by that peculiar set of circumstances which is still referred to as the Four Arrows Fe-As-Ko. Well, to refresh your memory, Leviticus and Lou(ella) was ... to say it kind-like, they was ... well, mentally outa sorts. Which ain't saying they wasn't the nicest, politest human beings ever set down on earth. 'Member? They was sorta short-sheeted in the intellectual department. Lou(ella) had her a real anxious fascination with numbers — she could work numbers inside, outside, upside down and inside out, and she was never happier'n when she was doing just that. She was just a itty-bitty hop-o-my-thumb — about as tiny as a fully growed woman can be and not be a midget. Sweartagod, she was so short she'd have to stand on a box just to spit, but she didn't care, especially when she gave her height in millimeters, which any way you calculated it made her still only four-and-a-half feet soaking wet. Lou(ella) is spelt that way onaccounta when we first met her we all thought she was of a masculine gender and thusly called her Lou. We added the (ella) onct it come to our attentions she was a fully-growed lady and not a raggity rough-scuff boy.

And Leviticus? 'Member him? He looked normal enough — even handsome to some, tall and straight and strong. Taller'n when you first come to know about him, onaccounta onct he became rightful heir to Four Arrows we all swore he grew a few more inches, like well-fed and happy young men can. The

boy was mild as sweet milk. He was about as comeatable as a feller gets, and if you ever hear me refer to him as short a hat size, it's — well, it's because he was, and he'd be the first one to bring it to your attention. But I have learnt to not judge the frog by the size of his legs, so you will also hear me refer to Leviticus as one helluva nice yap and about as blowed-in-the-glass honest as they come, and that right there made him quite a commodity. And I don't know about you, but I'll take nice and honest over smart and fox-like any day. But, I am sad to report, him being honest and nice also made him quite a bulls-eye on the target of foul play.

So Levi and Lou was owner and wife, and my legal employers and my charges all in one. Well, I always speculated as how if they was each working independently, they wasn't totally present in the here'n'now. But put 'em together and get 'em working on one thing at onct, and you had yourself a right savvy coyote.

We had us all the regular hands we needed, depending on the season. Had me Jay Smyth, one of our top hands. Best natural horse wrangler I ever knew. Good kid, a little jumpy. Snorty and impatient, like all kids. 'Course he wasn't no kid no more — he musta been all over 20 — but he acted like a yearling, and so like a yearling we treated him. Then I had me ol' Zeb Hardy. Wise and calm and slower'n a glacier. 'Course, he was getting on — not sure of his exact vintage, but he musta been 45 by then — and even though he complained more'n he shoulda, he was also there to ease me down when I needed it, and I spent alot a my foreman time diplomating, of that you can be sure. Well, that was just one plight in this poor ol' cow waddie's life and, when I look back on it, settling hashes and standing up for those who can't quite stand on their own was right pleasurable work. 'Course, ain't all work pleasurable with a backward glance?

Oh, we'd have us a hullabaloo nowanthen — like keeping their minds on ranch work and such. Fact is, as I recall it, I worked real hard keeping the men's minds on things cattleish. Especially come spring, when a man's mind, or a man's half-mind, turns to things more naturish. Like sunny afternoons, warm breezes, fermented hops, roasted peanuts, and all in the accompaniment of a fascination new to us in the town and outskirts of Idlehour, Oregon. Base-ball.

Yep, things would go alongst fine till we'd hit us one of them fe-as-kos which my wife would foretell with the conviction and passion of a traveling preacher low on conversions.

Good ol' E.M. — my wife, my keeper, my fortune maker and breaker and teller all rolt into one. Remember, she was a accountant back in the days when women wasn't allowed to count past their fingers, and if they did, there damn well better be a few 'ummmms' involved. 'Course, now that I think about it, early on E.M. did utilize them fingers more'n onct to calculate a sum. I recall her onct telling me she hated numbers and the feeling was reciprocal. Some accountant, I remember thinking. Then, when Lou(ella) comes into our lifes, well, all need for fingers, toes, or abacuses flew out the window, for Lou(ella) was a walking, chattering, computating wonder. With E.M.'s nose for profit and trouble, both of which she could sniff out in a hurricane, and with Lou(ella)'s number fascination, I have no doubt they coulda cornered any market for any commodity up to and including the cattle market, if I'd been smart enough to encourage it. Fact is, it was E.M. and Lou(ella) who ran those cattle versus wheat figures under my nose.

'Course, being tied to the snortin' post with E.M., I was treading light, of that you can be damned sure. And Leviticus, onct he married Lou, we knew all hope of control was out the window. He had such a full barrel of love for her I don't recollect even onct he told her no. That didn't get me very far as

foreman and overseer of things, but I did the best I could. And E.M. was only sometimes on my side of the fence. That sure made matters worse, and our marriage from the get-go was a rocky ride.

Like I told you, it was 1897 when all this started. None of us could make no holler about the real soft winter and, being as our corner of Oregon could be damn troubling sometimes, we alla us at the Four Arrows counted our blessings with the bawl of every calf and the swish of every foal's tail and the blossom of every bud. Our second crop of winter wheat came in strong and fine and none the worse for wear, the momma cows had wintered fat, and we even had us a barn-and-a-half of hay left over, which Leviticus decided to send, free of charge, to some friends of ours up at the Spokane Indian Reservation, onaccounta he'd heard they'd had a barn fire and was low on chewables for their stock. Now, this here is basically a good trait — sharing leftovers. In fact, Leviticus got the idea from me. I was always saying that having alota money or extra hay or too mucha God's plenty is sorta like a pile of horse apples — don't do much good unless you spread it around.

Then ol' E.M. calculated that if we was to sell off three fourths of the herd, let the pastures winter over, till 'em next year, then drill oats'n'wheat (maybe peas), we could show a better profit within three years. Course, first I put up a fuss. Me? A gully-jumping, dust-raising granger? Me? Farm? Then she allowed we shouldn't hang everything on one nail. But I put my foot down on the pea-idea, telling her I'd be damned if I'd be a farmer of peas, for cryinoutloud. Well, shortly thereafter E.M. was setting in Idlehour when it was pea harvest time, and when she got a noseful of what them sunned-out pea shucks smelt like, well, profits be damned, says she. That smell changed her mind about farming peas, fast'n'forever.

Well, then Leviticus had wanted me to start up some sheeping, which, being a good cowman and something in the way of a traditionalist, I fought hoof'n'tooth. Sheeps is nothing but hooved locust, real hard on land. But he was boss and showing initiative, so I caved in and bought him a small herd of starters. I still smile when I see Leviticus riding herd on the bunch that first day, singing 'Bringing in the Sheeps' loud and clear, the sheeps a-scattering all directions at onct, and bringing all the other hands to their knees in laughter, even spooking a few novie cow ponies. Cute little critters, sheeps is, but dumber'n barnacles and just about as easy to organize. And then sheeps leads to dogs, of course, to unionize them.

Now, I had me a fascination of my own: quarter horses. Racing quarter horses. I'd bought me a coupla brood mares and a stud, and even though a quarter horse looks perfectly natural on a spread like ours, I knew I was a helluva lot more interested in cutting quarter-mile times than I was in cutting a calf from a crowd.

So, with such a grand-looking tally on our books that year, I bought three more mares and another daddy with great running potential and thought, hell, if you could make money racing horses, why follow herds or cut wheat? So, I had a sizable investment in those horses — including the making of a quarter-mile track and plans for a training barn the likes of which no one in those parts had even seen.

So, betwixt Levi's dreams and my dreams, Four Arrows was getting to be a regular zoological society. I was bemoaning my zoo keeper status to E.M. one day towards The Fall. Now, you may think I'm referring to 'the fall' as in autumnal harvest, apple cider, and the colors gold, amber, and brown. But the fall of which I refer I have come to think of as 'The Fall' — as in Roman Empire, from grace, House of Usher — and all in the accompaniment of the colors of black and blue and deficit red.

So, how could a year which began blessed with so easy a winter, a healthy herd count, a good three-year plan for the ranch, work for everybody, giveaway calves and hay, and even sheep for cryinoutloud, take such a tragic turn towards disaster in just a few days' time?

I can tell you in one simple sentence:

Jack was a sucker for dreams.

Don't look so damned confused. I got me a whole book to explain it in, don't I?

two

Now, I know you been to writer's school and have your own way of putting together a story. But I'll help you some and offer you this in the way of a plot-thickener:

"What you mean you wanna go to Portland?" I asked my wife, Elijah Marie, but known as E.M. to everyone wanting to keep their heads attached. "You mean to see your daddy?"

"You know perfectly well Daddy's in Salem," she said, combing out her long, black Italian hair.

I caught her reflection in the vanity mirror. She stopped her brush, mid-stress, and looked at me. Even though we'd been married four years, I still worried that suddenly I would be walking blind-like upon terra incognita and brushes would go flying. We both knew her daddy'd been sent to the Oregon State Prison for extortion, but E.M. always dared me to make any flash of wit about it. *She* could, but heaven help poor Royal if *he* did.

"Well, ain't your momma still working the Mississippi?" That also was a risky subject for Royal, speaking of her momma taking up a gambling career so late in life.

She set the brush down, so I relaxed some. She turned around and said, "Now, Roy, I don't want you to get all in a pucker about this. I know you're going with Leviticus and Lou(ella), but you know how you hate contracts and I thought ..."

“E.M., this here’s just a cattle sale, not some highfalutin’ big-city corporation contract. Leviticus and Lou need to know how these things is done. So alls I’m gonna do is stand over their shoulders and make sure they do it right.”

“Well, I just have this *feeling*...”

“Now, things is all arranged in Portland. My agent’s got range delivery all lined up. I’m just gonna walk ’em through the whole sell-off process. Easy as dammit. Ain’t no need for you to come, E.M.” She turns and looks at me, and I’m getting edgy so I add, “E.M., if you and me are ever gonna get off Four Arrows and get on with our lives, then...”

She then looks a little mother-henish and says, “But Portland’s such a big city. What if they get lost?”

I set down, onaccounta her ‘what ifs’ was like gum drops — one just naturally led right on to another. “I won’t let ’em outa my sight,” I said.

“What if Leviticus eats too much candy?”

“He’ll air his paunch like he always does.”

“What if Lou starts counting something like telephone poles and wanders off like she did in Spokane that time?”

“Tell you what, E.M. I’ll have Jay do nothing but follow Lou, and I’ll have Hardy do nothing but follow Levi.”

“Jay? Ha! He’s just as much a worry. What if he finds some rantankerous female?” She turned and looked about as pretty as she ever did — hair all undone, mouth sorta pouty, and all in all looking real motherish. “Seriously, Royal, I’m worried. They’re just like children. Even Jay.”

“What you gotta remember, E.M., is they gotta learn how to handle things on their own. If we’re priming Jay to be top hand someday, then he...”

“Yes, but why Portland the first time? I *know* Portland. Dens of iniquities, chippies, swindlers!”

“I’ll tell ’em to stay clear of law offices,” I said.

“Why not Pendleton or even Spokane? At least they’ve been to those places.”

“E.M., I’m gonna be shadowing ’em every step of the way. What could go wrong?” I started brushing her hair for her and added, “Now, E.M., it was you convinced me to sell off so many head. Portland’s got the best price.”

“But if I don’t go, I just *know* something will go wrong.”

“How do you know?”

I stopped brushing and looked at her in the mirror. Think my heart thunked a few unscheduled beats. She wanted the brush back but I held it higher and re-asked my question. “E.M., what makes you *know* something’s gonna go wrong?”

“Well...” she attempted, her eyes a-settling on her top dresser drawer.

I knew what she thought she was hiding. I pulled the drawer open and, sure enough, there it was — her Wee Gee board.

“Didn’t I tell you to get ridda...?” I said, pulling it out.

“I did. It’d gone stale anyway.”

“Then what’s this?”

“My new one,” she replied logic-like.

“You went out and bought a new one when I expressly told you to get ridda that last one?” (Oh, what I had yet to learn about women!) “All this is hogwash, E.M.! All this stupor-natural cocky pock!”

“That’s *supematural*, Royal.”

“Not when you believe in it, it ain’t,” I said.

“Well, it may interest you to know, Royal dear, that I consulted Ouija when you proposed!”

“You mean to tell me you planned out a whole life together based on a parlor game?” How come, I was thinking, I’d come in to talk to my wife about who-the-hell-remembered-what and now I was hollering about her marrying me onaccounta some Wee Gee board told her she might as well!

She just continued to brush her hair, looking fondly at herself in the mirror, and said, “Yes.”

“Well, it’s a damn good thing for you I wasn’t no villain or murderer or worse, E.M.! Or, oh, I suppose Miss Weee Geeee there woulda mentioned that in passing!”

“Fine. If you don’t believe me when I tell you there is trouble in Portland, then check for yourself.” She plopped the navigator thing on top of the board.

“Here, I’ll even warm it up for you.”

So she puts her fingertips on this pointer on pegs, closes her eyes, and says real high-pitched, “weee-geee-weeee-geee-weeee-geee-weeeeeeeeeeeee-gee!” No kidding, sounded like she was defending her pig-calling title at the Umatilla County Fair.

She musta got her connection, because her calling stopped and her fingers sorta got real light on the communicator thing. “Will there be trouble if I don’t go to Portland?”

I watched her eyes and it looked like they was keeping closed tight. “Watch what it says,” she whispered outa the side of her mouth to me like she didn’t want to break her spiritual connection. I looked down at the board and her hands traveled fast-like to the big “YES” printed in the upper-left corner.

“There, you see?” E.M. concludes.

“You did that, E.M!” I said.

“I did not!”

“That’s nothing but a toy!”

“Is not!”

“Is too! And you’re too old to play with toys, E.M.,” I finalized.

That was a risky one and we both knew it. She glared at me and growled, “I’ll take *that* under advisement!”

“Well, for sure you ain’t going to Portland now, E.M.! You mighta talked me into it for a million reasons, but ain’t one of ’em onaccounta that stupid Weee Geeee says so!”

She shot me a mean one, got up, said what I'd heard her say on many a occasion: "Mark my words!" and left the room with a right sturdy slam of the door. I hated when she prophecized me that one. It had come at the turning point of many a fight betwixt us. I didn't see as all this foofaraw called for marking her words or slamming doors and such. So I set on the bed, wondering what the hell I should do. I locked the door and set the weee-geee board on the bed. I got my long fingers on the traveler thing'majig and whispered weee-geee-weee-geee-weee-geee sorta like E.M. did, only without alerting every pig in the state.

My fingers began to move and I asked out loud: "Should I let E.M. go to Portland?"

Three times I asked, changing my voice each time. I got yes, yes, and yes. Well, I didn't care what it said, I was gonna stick to my guns on this one. And I did. Stuck to 'em right up to bedtime that very same night.

E.M. and her damn mystics, I remember thinking when she informs me she had verified her findings with her horoscope in some ladies' magazine she got. Well, the lights was low and Lord how her hair did shine so blue-black and oh the flash of her big brown eyes...

So, before falling asleep I informed E.M. she could go to Portland (which she already knew) but just to shop and maybe see old friends. She wasn't gonna get no say in any matters cattlish — that was all up to Leviticus, owner of the cattle, and Lou(ella), wife to the owner of the cattle. And with me overlooking the details, things was all gonna turn out just fine, and 'don't you worry your pretty smart head about anything, E.M.'

Apparently she didn't.