



*the PHANTOMS
of
METOTOTOOTSJE*

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“We’ve been makin’ good time, Bob,” Thad “Spider” Webb said to his riding partner, Bob Taylor, as they and two other Box X cowboys, Mort Sullivan and Pete Hollings, rode along. The four men had been riding herd for five days, on their way to Fort Huachuca, the Army post only fifteen miles from the Mexican border. Sam Manson, owner of the Box X, had sold those steers at a good price. The soldiers stationed there were certain to appreciate the fresh beef. But, as Sam had told the four men, “If the beeves got to the fort at all. All you men will have

to face is stinkin' Apaches, sneakin' Mexicans and lousy white raiders. And that's not even countin' that helluva desert. Good luck, men."

However, despite Manson's dire predictions, the trip had been relatively problem free. Sure, driving a herd through the blistering, barren desert was hot, dusty, tiring work, but at least with the blazing-hot temperatures the cattle weren't in any mood to even think of stampeding. They merely plodded along, starting early in the morning. Come mid-morning, the men allowed the cattle to stop and rest during the worst heat of the day. While the steers rested and chewed on whatever thorny vegetation they could handle, the cowboys unsaddled and picketed their horses, then stretched out in any little shade they could find to catch some sleep. Once the sun was close to the western horizon, they would get the herd moving again, and would keep pushing them until it was too dark. They would stop for the night, and well before sunup the routine would start all over again.

Bob lifted the hat from his head and wiped sweat from his brow. Like all the men, he was drenched, perspiration-forming dark circles under his arms, soaking the front and back of his shirt and plastering it to his skin.

"We sure have been lucky, Spider," he replied. "Almost too good. There's been hardly any problems on this drive, and that's botherin' me."

"The Apaches have been quiet lately," Spider said. "Soldiers have driven most of 'em into Mexico."

"That's right. Most, but not all," Bob said. "Still plenty of those Indians around here who'd like nothin' better'n to put arrows in our bellies or slit

our throats, then scalp us and run off with these cows and our horses. We'd better keep a close watch all the way to Fort Huachuca. Those Indians are real good at blendin' into the landscape, then attackin' when you least expect it."

"Well, right now I'm just lookin' forward to beddin' down these here cows and gettin' outta this dust," Mort said.

"That's for dang certain," Pete agreed. "Sun's gettin' pretty high. When're we gonna stop until it cools down, Spider?"

Spider lifted up in his stirrups to better scan the surrounding terrain.

"Looks like there's a decent sized arroyo not too far ahead," he answered. "Even seems to be a bit of greenery stickin' up out of it. With luck mebbe there's a crick which hasn't dried up yet."

"Can't be too soon for me," Pete said. "Hyaahh, c'mon you dogies, get up there." He urged the reluctant cattle along.

Thirty minutes later, they were on the rim of the arroyo.

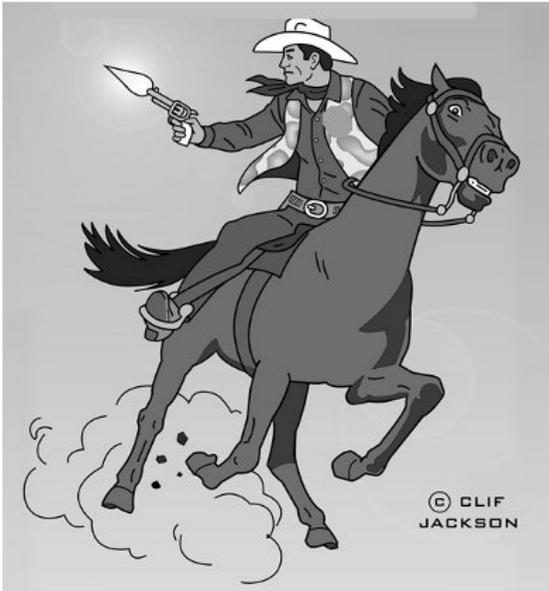
"Bit steep, but we should be able to get these cow critters down there all right," Mort said.

"We sure should," Spider answered. "Let's shove 'em on down the draw." They began pushing the herd into the mouth of the arroyo. In fifteen minutes, the cattle were spreading out on its sandy floor.

"Looks like you were right, Spider," Pete said as they trailed the herd into the draw. "This is a right pleasant sp...!"

Pete's words were cut short when an arrow fired from behind a cleft in the rocks drove deep

into his chest, knocking him backwards over his horse's rump. He landed face-down and unmoving.



“Apaches!” Mort screamed, and then he too was knocked off his horse by a bullet which took him low in the side. He slumped out of the saddle and slid to the dirt.

Bob and Spider wheeled their horses and raced for the only good cover in sight, a nest of rocks scattered halfway up the arroyo's side wall. They reached the rocks

and dove for cover, with arrows and bullets searching them out. Below them, the badly wounded Mort was trying to crawl to safety. Several arrows arched out of the brush and pin-cushioned his back. Mort screeched in pain and pitched to his face. Four Indians raced out of their shelter and ran up to the two dead cowboys. Knives flashed, and the Indians held up Mort's and Pete's scalps, shouting in triumph.

“Those dirty...” Spider said. He leveled his six-gun and fired. Alongside him, Bob did the same. Their bullets found their marks. One Apache went down Spider's bullet in his brain, dropping Mort's scalp as he fell. Another fell, screaming, when Bob's bullet ripped through his belly. One of the remaining two grabbed the dropped scalp, while the other dragged his wounded companion away.

“So much for this bein' an easy run to Fort Huachuca, Spider,” Bob said, with a curse. “Pete and

Mort are dead and are missin' their scalps, and it appears we most likely will be too, unless we can figure some way outta this fix."

Spider leveled his pistol and shot another Indian, plumb in the middle of the back. The Indian toppled over a rock and slid to the road.

"Bout all we can do is try'n out shoot them, Bob," he said. "Mebbe if we can down enough of 'em we'll scare 'em off. Leastwise I sure hope so. If not, then we'll just take as many of 'em with us as we can."

Another Indian's head popped up, and Spider snapped off a shot. He cursed when his bullet missed.

"Seems to me we'll most likely run out of ammunition before that happens," Bob answered. He too shot at one of their attackers, then cursed when his bullet spanged off a rock and ricocheted away. "Sure wish our rifles weren't still on our horses. We'd have a better chance with those handy."

Spider started to reply, but his words were cut off, replaced by a screech of agony and terror when an arrow buried itself deep in his belly. Clawing frantically at the arrow's shaft, he half-rose, then jackknifed and plunged to the road below, lying there writhing in agony. Instantly, several Apaches rushed from the brush, scalping the still alive Spider, then hacking at him with their knives.

Bob shot one in the back, another though his side, then a wave of unbelievable agony shot through his head as an arrow tore across his scalp, ripping through skin and taking his hat. Bob toppled onto his side, his body plummeting face-down into a narrow crevice in the cliff. Blackness enveloped

him, with Spider's terrified screams still ringing in his ears.

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Bob awoke to a pounding pain in his skull, a headache far worse than any hangover he'd ever had. As his senses slowly returned, he realized he was hanging upside down, pinned in the narrow crack in the rocks. That crevice had probably saved his life, for from what little he could gather he had wedged where it was virtually impossible for the Apaches to reach him. They'd probably left him there, either believing he was already dead or more likely to let him die slowly and in extreme agony. Which he would, unless he could somehow get himself free of his rocky prison, and right quick.

Bob took a deep breath, then took stock of his situation. He was indeed upside down, stuck in the crevice, his head sticky with half-dried blood. His left arm was wedged between the rocks and his side, while the right was jammed between the wall and his chest and belly. He was able to move his right hand just a bit. He also seemed to be able to wriggle his body ever so slightly. However, something was keeping him jammed in that crevice, preventing him from sliding free. Trying to move his hips. Bob realized it was his holster which was hung up on a point of rock. If he could somehow loosen his gunbelt, he should be able to break free. Granted, the head-first drop to the ground would most likely kill him, but even that would be better than hanging upside down, slowly dying from the heat and thirst.

Bob's right hand was mere inches from the buckle of his gunbelt. Fighting the vertigo which threatened to overcome him, he struggled to reach that buckle. After several minutes, he was able to

move his hand just enough to touch the buckle. It took a mighty effort to undo his gunbelt with just one hand, but in a few moments, he was able to get the buckle open. As soon as he did, he slid free of the gunbelt, and plunged through the crevice. Jagged rocks tore away his shirt and ripped his denims. They scraped Bob's skin raw as he fell. The crevice widened slightly at the bottom, just enough so Bob was able to twist around and land on the back of his shoulders, rather than head-first. That last second movement saved his life. He landed with a thud, the impact knocking the breath out of him. He rolled onto his back and lay there gasping, attempting to draw breath into his lungs. For what seemed an eternity, but in reality was less than ten minutes, Bob lay there, not sure if he wanted to live or die. Finally, he rolled onto his belly, pushed himself to his hands and knees and forced himself to his feet. The sight that greeted him drove him back to his knees, vomiting. What was left of Pete, Mort, and Spider lay baking in the hot desert sun. Besides being scalped, all three men had been stripped naked and horribly mutilated, their bodies slashed open, organs removed, skin peeled back. Already flies buzzed around the corpses, landing to feed and lay eggs on the bloody flesh.

“Gotta... get outta... here,” Bob muttered. “Doubt I’ll make it far, but I’ve gotta try. Mebbe I’ll last until sundown.”

Bob's horse was gone, along with his canteen and rifle. His hat had been lost when the arrow ripped it from his head, and his six-gun had fallen who-knew where. His knife was still in its sheath on his gunbelt hanging back in the crevice, and his shirt had been lost in the fall. Except for his torn denims

and his boots, he had no protection from the merciless Arizona sun. And those boots were made for riding a horse, not walking. Common sense would dictate that Bob hole up in whatever shade he could find until the sun went down, then start heading for help. However, he had no desire to wait until dusk, in case the Apaches decided to return. He also couldn't face the thought of remaining with the mutilated remains of his riding pards. He turned south, toward Fort Huachuca, and began to walk.

The sun beat down on the badly injured cowboy as he trudged along. Its rays quickly burned all of his exposed flesh, skin which would ordinarily have been covered by a heavy long-sleeved shirt and protected by a broad-brimmed Stetson. The heat quickly evaporated any perspiration which might have cooled his body, however slightly. By the time he had walked for an hour, Bob was stumbling and weaving, his every step uncertain. Any part of his flesh not covered by his denims was a flaming red, and his lips were blistered. His feet, rubbed raw inside his boots, tormented him, and he had no doubt if he pulled those boots and his socks off most of the skin on his feet and ankles would slough off with them. Already, buzzards were circling overhead, just waiting for him to collapse.

“Looks like you ain't gonna make it, cowboy,” Bob half-whispered. “Can't go... any... further.”

He took one last faltering step, then pitched to his face.

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Bob was jerked back to his senses, literally... by a buzzard tugging at his arm and ripping away a chunk of flesh.

“Get outta here, you winged son of Satan!” he screamed. “I’m not quite done yet.” The buzzard, along with several of its fellows, flapped away, squawking a protest. Bob lifted his head, then blinked his eyes in disbelief. In the distance, no more than a mile or two away, appeared the buildings of a small town.

“Can’t be,” Bob muttered. “Must be a mirage... or else I’m hallucinatin’.”

Nevertheless, he forced himself upright, and began staggering toward the town. He walked onward for over an hour, then, when he once again collapsed from exhaustion, lack of water, and loss of blood, he dragged himself along on his belly, attempting desperately to reach the buildings, which shimmered in the heat. The sun was just reaching the western horizon when he reached what was left of the main street. The town had clearly long since been abandoned.

“I think I know where I am,” Bob muttered. “This is Metotootsie... old minin’ town that never amounted to much. Mines played out less’n a year after they opened. Place is a ghost town. Well, better hope I can find a well that’s still got water in it... or mebbe some left behind canned goods. Otherwise I’m a goner for certain.”

He pushed himself to his feet, staggered over to a sagging building with a faded sign saying “General Store” hanging by one hinge over the door, stumbled up the steps and through the wide-open door. As he entered, the wind picked up, banging the sign against the wall of the store in a slow, funeral-like cadence. Bob shuddered, but headed for the back counter. Scattered across it were a few tins of peaches and tomatoes.

“I’m in luck, long as I can find somethin’ to open these,” Bob said. He looked around, and spotted a hammer and screwdriver in the corner. He got those and used them to poke a hole in the top of a tin of peaches. He slurped down the syrup, then did the same with a can of tomatoes. Feeling a bit better with his thirst somewhat slaked, he used the tools to further open the tins’ tops, so he could gulp down their contents. His stomach churned slightly, but it didn’t take long for the peaches and tomatoes to revive his strength, at least a bit.

“Looks like I’m gonna have to spend the night here, then figure out what to do come mornin’,” Bob said.. Dark was coming on fast. “Might as well wander over to the saloon and see if there might be a bottle of whiskey that was missed.”

The gloom of the dusk was deepening rapidly and the wind was picking up speed as Bob made his way across the street to the sagging, tumble-down building that had once housed the Bonanza Strike Saloon. The batwing doors were somehow still attached to their hinges, swaying and creaking in the gusts. Bob stepped inside to find that, just like the store, cobwebs hung everywhere in the abandoned barroom, and everything was coated with a thick layer of dust. It was obvious no one, except the rodents, snakes and bats, had set foot inside the building for many months, or more likely years. However, one object did catch Bob’s eye, right away. It was a pump at the end of the back bar.

“If by some miracle that thing works, I can get water,” he said. He stumbled across the room to the pump. Leaning all his weight on the handle, straining mightily, he pushed down, hard. With a screech of protest, the handle moved, slowly at first,

then more smoothly as it was set into motion. Bob used the last of his fading strength to work that pump handle. Just when he was about to give up, he heard the wonderful sound of water bubbling up from under the surface. A moment later, a full stream splashed from the pump's spout. Laughing hysterically with relief, Bob stuck his mouth under the spout and drank his fill, then doused his face, and finally his shoulders, chest, and back. The water stung his sun-blistered flesh, but at the same time nothing had ever felt so good to the cowboy. He spent a good ten minutes splashing under that flow.

"That felt mighty good," Bob whispered to himself. "Mebbe I'll pull through this ordeal after all... 'specially if I can find a bottle or two of whiskey around here." He looked around, and spotted two still-uncorked bottles of Old Granddad's on a shelf under the bar.

"Surprised those were missed, but I'll make good use of 'em," he muttered. He put both bottles on top of the bar, used his teeth to pull the cork from the first and downed a good swallow. The liquor burned its way down his throat, but once it hit his belly a warm feeling spread through him. Bob took another gulp, then another. Before long, most of the first bottle was gone. Bob's head was spinning, and his stomach queasy.

"Reckon I shouldn't have drunk that red-eye quite so fast, after bein' out afoot in the desert for so long," he said. "Better lie down and rest a spell." He pulled himself onto his belly atop the bar, flipped onto his back, and immediately passed out.

Bob was roused by the sounds of footsteps on the stairs to the second floor, and a door creaking as it was slowly opened.

“Just the wind blowin’ things around,” he muttered. “No such things as ghosts.” Nevertheless, his heart jumped into his throat when an upstairs door slammed shut, and a sound much like a woman’s scream pierced the night.

“Just the wind, or some wildcat prowlin’ around,” Bob said, trying to convince himself that was all he had heard. Finally, with the effects of the liquor he’d downed still working on his brain and body, he once again passed out.

Bob had no idea how long he’d been lying there atop the bar when a commotion once again awakened him. This ruckus was no ghostly footsteps, no sound of a door being opened and shut. This was the rowdy conversation of a large group of men as they rode into town and dismounted.

“Boys, that was a great job we pulled off, rustlin’ those Box X beeves,” one of the men said. “Those Box X hands never knew what hit ‘em. Now all we’ve gotta do is lay low for a couple of days, then push the cows across the border and get ‘em to Mercado. He’s ready to pay us very well for all the cattle we can provide.”

“We’ll all be rich pretty quick if we can keep pullin’ off jobs like this, Jack,” another man said. “Sure was smart hookin’ up with Chief Brome and his Apaches, too. Better to work together than fight each other.”

“That’s true,” another voice answered. “With us working together, even the bluecoats can’t stop us.”

“You’ve got that right, Chief,” the first voice replied.

I know who this bunch is, Bob thought. Jack Hannaford and his outfit. The worst bunch of cattle thieves and murderers in the entire Territory. And it appears he’s joined up with Brome, who leads one of the smartest, most vicious gangs of Apache warriors along the border. If they’ve joined up, there’ll be wholesale killin’ and thievin’ all the way from Texas to California. But I’ve got a worse problem. How do I keep from bein’ discovered?

“We’ll put up the horses, then head for the hotel,” the voice which apparently belonged to Jack Hannaford ordered. “Dunno about the rest of you, but I’m hankerin’ for grub, whiskey, and a soft bed. Smartest idea we ever had, makin’ this old ghost town our hideout. No one ever comes here, and if anyone did, we’d kill ‘em right quick... or scare ‘em to death makin’ ‘em think the place was haunted.”

“And no one would ever guess that old hotel is all fixed up nice and fancy inside,” the voice which was Chief Brome’s answered. “Looks just as rundown and abandoned as the rest of the town from the outside.”

“Enough palaverin’, let’s get these horses settled so we can get our own supper,” another voice complained.

“All right,” Hannaford said.

Well, I’m off the hook for now, Bob thought, as the outlaws headed further down the street. But I’m not gonna stay that way for long. Only chance I have is to stay low and hope those renegades get so drunk they all pass out, then with luck I can steal one of their horses and hightail it outta here before they wake up. Otherwise, I’m done for.

The unexpected appearance of the outlaw gang had jolted Bob out of his drunken stupor. He rolled off the bar and looked around the room, hoping to find a decent hiding place. His gaze had just settled on a door, which apparently led to a storeroom, when footsteps creaked on the stair outside and the batwings swung open. One of the outlaws stood there, as startled at Bob's presence as the cowboy was of the renegade's.

"Who the devil are you?" the outlaw asked. "Came in here to retrieve a couple of bottles of whiskey I'd stashed, and I run across some stinkin' saddle tramp. Well, don't matter. Can't chance you givin' us away. You're a dead man, Mister."

Bob's stomach muscles tightened as the renegade leveled his gun smack at his belly and thumbed back the hammer.

From somewhere behind Bob, a knife flew through the air, and buried itself to the hilt in the outlaw's stomach. The man screeched in terror and pain. His finger tightened spasmodically on the trigger of his gun, and the bullet plowed into the saloon's ceiling. Clawing desperately at the knife stuck deep in his belly, the outlaw staggered across the barroom, half spun, fell back against the bar and slid to the floor, landing in a seated position. His chin dropped to his chest, while his left hand still clasped the knife in his stomach.

Bob looked around for just a moment, puzzled. Where had that knife come from? There was no sign of anyone else in the room. Then he put all thoughts of anything but survival out of his mind. The gunshot, along with the dying outlaw's scream, was bound to bring the rest of the gang on the run.

Don't have a chance of gunnin' 'em all down, but I'll take as many of 'em with me as I can, Bob thought. He hurried over to the dead outlaw and yanked the six-gun from his hand, and thumbed a handful of bullets from his gunbelt. Just as he finished, the rest of the outlaws burst into the saloon. Bob recognized the two in front. The blonde killer with the pale blue eyes was Jack Hannaford. The one alongside him, dusky of skin and dark of eye and hair, wearing a faded, tattered cavalryman's uniform and cap he had undoubtedly stripped from a soldier he'd killed, had to be Apache Chief Brome. They stared in disbelief at their comrade sagged against the bar, dead, then at Bob.

"You killed Charlie?" Hannaford asked, although it was more of a statement than a question.

Bob shook his head. "Uh-uh. Dunno who did, but I'm sure grateful to whoever it was. Your amigo there was fixin' to put a coupla slugs in my guts."

"Well, then, I guess we'll just have to finish the job," Chief Brome answered. "Although I'd rather sink my knife in your belly instead." He pulled a heavy-bladed weapon from its sheath on his belt.

"You'll get me, that's for certain, but I'm gonna finish as many of you as I can before I'm done for," Bob answered. "Y'see, I'm one of the cowboys from the Box X herd you hit. You should've made sure I was dead."

"You are," Brome answered. He began to walk toward Bob, but stopped dead in his tracks at an ethereal voice which came from somewhere in the back of the darkened room.

"Bob ain't alone," the voice said. "The rest of us Box X hands are here too."

The outlaws' eyes widened in fear and disbelief. Bob turned to search for the owner of the voice, which sounded exactly like his old pardner Spider. But that wasn't possible. Spider was dead, killed by an arrow through his belly, then hacked to bits. But there at the back of the room were the ghostly images of Spider Webb, Mort Sullivan and Pete Hollings. All held six-guns in their hands.

"What're you waitin' for, Bob?" Spider asked. "Let 'em have it."

Bob nodded. He jerked up his borrowed pistol and shot Brome right between the eyes.

"Shoot that hombre," Jack Hannaford ordered. "He's pullin' some kinda trick. There ain't no such thing as ghosts."

Hannaford leveled his gun and fired. His bullet tore into Bob's belly. Bob jackknifed, then went to his knees. Instantly, the saloon erupted in a maelstrom of lead.

Despite the excruciating pain from the bullet which had torn through his guts, Bob kept firing. He shot three men before he had to reload. Two more bullets ripped into him, but he somehow managed to get six more cartridges in his gun. Behind him, his ghostly partners kept up a steady fire, outlaws falling like cordwood under the barrage of bullets.

Somehow, Jack Hannaford had managed to escape the hail of lead. He was drawing another bead on Bob's middle, but, before he could fire, Bob put three slugs through Hannaford's belly. As the outlaw leader fell, he managed to fire one more time, pulling a last bullet through Bob's guts. Outlaw and cowboy collapsed face down, Hannaford's boots kicking a final death tattoo, while Bob writhed for a few moments, then lay still.

The only thing was, Bob was no longer in that bullet-riddled body. He watched from above as he fell for the last time, then lay twitching in his final death throes. Outside, the sound of hoof beats replaced the sound of gunfire as the outlaws' panicked horses galloped off.

"Guess we got 'em all," Mort said.

"What... what? I don't understand," Bob stammered.

"Nothin' to understand," Pete replied. "We've done our job here. Now it's time to move on."

"On to where?" Bob asked.

"Across the Great Divide," Spider explained.

"Although mebbe, once in a while, just mebbe, when a gang as bad as Hannaford's starts terrorizin' folks, robbin' and killin', we just might come back to clean 'em up. Now let's ride. Horses are out back."

Still not quite comprehending what was happening, Bob followed his partners out the back door. Waiting there, untied, were four pale horses, ghostly white in the moonlight.

"That one's yours," Spider said, indicating the horse on the far left.

Bob and his partners mounted and wheeled the horses around. A moment later, they faded into the starry night sky.

