

HAMILTON
—
MAD RIVER



THERE WERE TOO MANY for Cohoon to have a chance of breaking through, and the men from behind were coming up fast. The impulse to stop, dismount, and, shooting carefully, take as many with him as he could, was very strong. With his father's old Henry he could make a shambles of that charging mob.

But into his mind came the sound of his father's voice, saying: *A man can always find a place to die; the trick is to find a place to keep on living.*

He reined around sharply and spurred hard. A bullet touched his sleeve and another kicked up dust behind him as he threw his weight forward to help his laboring horse up the steep bank. And now he heard the marshal's voice ordering men to cut south and keep him penned in the rectangle formed by the bluff, the canyon and the road.

He was boxed, he reflected grimly—but there was a hole in the box. True, it was a hole no sane man would try to use, but, a man who would spend five years in jail on the strength of a girl's smile could hardly be considered sane.

He turned his faltering horse toward the canyon's rim and urged him over, heading for the furious river far below. He'd have plenty of time for revenge—if he survived.

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112183 Mad River

by Donald Hamilton

A Gold Medal Book

GOLD MEDAL BOOKS

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HE AWOKE at the bridge. The stage came to a full stop before venturing onto the long and narrow span. This, like the ore wagons they had passed along the road, was new to Boyd Cohoon. There had been no bridge here five years ago, and no one had written him of it.

He pushed his hat out of his eyes and sat up, leaning forward to look out the side window. Old John Black's cable was still in place, he saw, far below and a quarter mile downstream. Despite the afternoon shadows, he could make out the dizzy switchbacks of the old road cut into the canyon wall on either side. The ferry was tied up at the south landing, looking water-logged and half-rotted already. The river swirled by it sullenly, yellow and creamy with sediment, the current gaining speed as it raced toward the narrow gorge below. Cohoon grimaced. Black's Ferry had become history in the time he had been away. He wondered how many other landmarks of his boyhood had changed or vanished.

A protesting movement beside him caused him to straighten up quickly. "I beg your pardon, ma'am."

The girl at his left said, "It's perfectly all right. Aside from a few broken ribs, I'm quite all right."

He had made his apology; he did not speak again. He wanted to look back at the land south of the river—it was strange that he could have slept, passing it—but he would have had to inconvenience the girl by the window again, and there was, after all, little to be seen from the road. From what had been written him, it seemed there was not much left to look at, anyway, except the land itself, and that would wait.

They were on solid ground now, climbing from the canyon's edge through the barren hills north of the river. Nothing had changed in here to amount to anything. There were some fresh rock slides, and once the driver stopped the stage and called down for someone to roll a large boulder out of the road, but that was the way it had always been along this stretch. As he and the man on his right responded to the call, Cohoon noted that neither of the two men in the opposite seat showed any inclination to help. They seemed disturbed by the halt, and moved apart to keep watch through the windows

on either side. Cohoon had already marked the pair because they were heavily armed and because they had taken the whole seat for themselves and the large valise they seemed to cherish, rather than give up the extra room to the lady in the company. It was a fairly transparent situation, and one, Cohoon reflected, that a man in his position would do well to ignore.

With the road clear again, they went on, following the same winding course as when he had been brought out this way in handcuffs five years ago. Perhaps the worst grades and curves had been somewhat gentled, but that was the extent of the change. They reached the top and started down through the clay hills; presently they were out on the flats. The dust and wind were worse out here. They always had been.

The girl riding beside Cohoon spoke again. "You act as if you'd been here before."

He hesitated, reluctant to be drawn into conversation. Then he said, "I was born here, ma'am."

She looked surprised. "Oh, I thought—"

She checked herself abruptly, and Cohoon saw that she was embarrassed. It was clear that she had taken stock of him early in the journey and classified him in her mind—by his unimpressive size, pale complexion, and by the cheap suit he was wearing—as not belonging to this country of large, tanned, and durably clad men.

He found her embarrassment uncomfortable, and spoke, therefore, as if he had not noticed it. "My mother taught the first English-speaking school in this part of Arizona. There was no bridge at that time, and the road, such as it was, came in over a pass to the west of the one we used today, and crossed at a ford thirty miles downstream." To converse with a woman, after the time that had passed, was a disconcerting experience. He forced himself to ask politely, "Are you acquainted with the Territory, ma'am?"

"No, I just know what I've been told. If I'd believed all of it, I'd have hesitated to make the trip." The girl smiled. "Maybe you can tell me the name of the river we just crossed."

"Well, the Mexicans had it named after some saint or other," Cohoon said, "but the Indians call it Crazy River or Mad River. It's kind of a tough crossing, most places, and I reckon a few savages got themselves drowned there from time to time."

"It looked as if there used to be a ferry of sorts down below the bridge."

"Yes," Cohoon said. Speech was coming more readily now. "That was Black's Ferry. Wasn't supposed to be too safe, in the old days."

The girl said, "It certainly didn't look safe."

"Oh, the ferry usually made it all right," Cohoon said. "But Old John Black was supposed to have a habit of shoving lone travelers over the side for whatever might be in their packs or saddlebags."

"Is that true," the girl demanded, turning quickly to look at him, "or is it just another story?"

Cohoon grinned. "Well, I used to know Willie Black, Old John's boy, but somehow I never did get around to asking him. We weren't exactly on friendly terms; my brother Jonathan shoved him overboard one day for a joke and he almost drowned before we got a rope on him and hauled him in. But certainly his dad never lacked money for hard liquor to the day of his death, although his family sometimes lacked food and clothing. On the other hand, no man who was swept down into the gorge ever climbed out to accuse him, nor did any bodies ever come out thirty miles below at Yellow Ford."

The girl shook her head. "Well, I was warned it was a wild country, full of heat and dust and dangerous men. Tell me, what were those mountains we went through south of the river? I hope you don't mind answering all these questions?"

"Not at all, ma'am. Those were the Candelaria Mountains, and the land lying between them and the river, west of the road, is the Candelaria Grant, formerly owned by a Spanish family of that name. It runs as far west as Yellow Ford."

"Thirty miles?" the girl said. "That's quite a bit of land, isn't it?"

"Not by local standards, ma'am," Cohoon said. "And some of it's pretty broken country. But it does include some of the prettiest grazing land in the Territory, although you wouldn't guess it by what you can see from the road. You have to come at it from the west to really . . ." He stopped, and cleared his throat. From talking too little, he was now coming to talk too much. It was hard to strike a proper balance, after five years. He went on, rather stiffly, "From the next rise, we ought to get a look at the Sombrero, if I remember rightly. It's kind of a local landmark. The town's a couple of miles this side of it, but hidden in a draw. There's the rock now." He pointed out the distant formation, a tremendous stone worn by wind and sand into a shape somewhat like that of a wide-brimmed hat, balanced upon a rock pinnacle over a hundred feet in height. After regarding it with interest, the girl raised her hands to her

hair as if to prepare herself for the entry into town. Cohoon grinned at this. "Distances out here are deceiving, ma'am," he said gently. "We have a good two hours yet."

The first thing he noted as they pulled into town was how greatly it had grown. Main Street was twice as long as it had been. There was a bank, a barbershop, a couple of new mercantile establishments, an assay office, and the office of some mining corporation, all housed in buildings that had a raw, new look. The town that Cohoon remembered had been characterized by the quiet colors of weathered boards and seasoned adobe: this town looked garish and unfriendly to him. The people, too, had changed. There were more of them—too many. They crowded the street and seemed in an unreasonable hurry. No one had ever hurried in the Sombrero he remembered.

The changes gave Cohoon an unpleasant sense of having been left behind by time, an old man at twenty-four. The stage came to a halt in front of the hotel, which had added a wing and a coat of paint since he had last seen it. He got out and helped the girl descend, and guided her aside so that the two men with the large valise could pass. He noted that they were met by two others, also well-armed; and he heard the soft exchange of greetings.

"No trouble?"

"None. The General must be slipping. Just the same, I'll be glad to see it in the company safe."

"Walk on ahead. We'll cover you from a ways back."

This was none of his business, and Cohoon turned to the girl, using her in that moment as a kind of anchor to reality. Concentrating on being polite and helpful to her, he could delay briefly the full impact of the changes he was going to have to face. He did not want to look around to see if there was anyone in the crowd he recognized. Someone who had kept count of the days could have worked out the probable time of his arrival here; but he had sent no message ahead, and no one came forward to greet him now.

"I'll help you with your things," he said, reaching for the small bag as the driver handed it down. But the girl stepped forward and reached it first.

"Thank you just the same," she said. "If you'd just see that my trunk gets off—it's the little brown one up there—I'll send for it later. And if you'd tell me where I can find Miss Elizabeth Tomkins. The place is on Creek Lane, wherever that may be."

There was a brief silence that involved not only Cohoon

and the driver but several other men and a pair of women standing nearby, all of whom looked sharply at the girl before resuming their talk. The driver spat and turned away. Cohoon regarded the girl for a moment. She was fairly tall and nicely shaped, he saw, with brown hair, gray eyes, a straight nose, and a long, humorous mouth. She was conservatively dressed in a dark green traveling suit that had a fashionable look despite the ravages of the long, dusty journey.

This was none of his business either, but the attitudes of the bystanders annoyed him; people were very quick to hurt and reject, as he had learned from experience. He reached for the bag she was holding and took it from her.

"I'll show you the way, ma'am," he said.

"It's not necessary. You've been very kind." There was a look of wry amusement, not entirely lacking in bitterness, in the girl's eyes, and he understood that she was fully aware of the situation.

"Come on," he said impatiently, setting off across the street at a good pace, so that it took her a few seconds to catch up. They passed the familiar weathered front of Van Houck's trading post, that had at one time been the only building within a hundred miles—but that had been even before Cohoon's time. He turned right at the corner.

"Creek Lane," he said, with a glance at his companion. "Miss Bessie's place is the one with the two-headed bird on it; I presume she's still doing business at the same address. The Double Eagle. Don't let the tame look of the street deceive you. It's early yet."

He stopped in front of the building, and held out the small valise, which she took. "Thank you," she said.

"My pleasure."

"It wasn't wise of you to help me," she said. "If you live here. They'll tear you apart for it. Charity is a word that sounds fine in church on Sunday, but this isn't Sunday."

He grinned. "Ma'am, after five years in Yuma, I figure it's a little late to start worrying about what people are going to say."

She had turned toward the door. Now she swung back, startled, and looked at him in silence for a moment. "Yuma? That's the Territorial Prison, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What did you do, hold up a stagecoach?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She was a little taken aback by his ready assent. "Well, I wouldn't have guessed it to look at you," she said.

Cohoon drawled, with a glance at the saloon door, "I wouldn't have guessed it to look at you, either, ma'am."

The girl laughed, but when she spoke again there was a defensive hardness in her voice. "Well, some evening when you're not holding up stages, you can come around and hear me sing and have a drink on the house for your kindness. If you don't see me, ask for Nan Montoya. Mrs. Nan Montoya." She laughed again, and the hardness of the sound was tinged with bitterness. "Montoya is dead, if it matters; and I was never legally married to him, anyway."

2

THE SUN WAS OFF the street as he walked back the way he had come, but the baked dusty earth and the walls of the buildings he passed still radiated the heat of the day. At the corner of Main Street, he turned right. In this direction, the town soon ended in a scattering of shacks and adobe huts, beyond which the church stood on a small rise where the sun still shone, but this light faded before he reached the white gate. He stepped inside and made his way among the headstones on the hillside to a group of four graves.

There had been only two the last time he had been here: that of his oldest brother, Stuart, who had been killed by a raiding party of Apaches when Cohoon was fourteen; and that of his mother, who had died two years later. Now there were two more, and he read the inscriptions: *Jonathan Walker Cohoon, 1859-1885*, and *Ward Zachariah Cohoon, 1816-1885*. It occurred to him, as a small surprise, that he had not until this moment known the date of his father's birth.

He removed his hat and knelt awkwardly, feeling hypocritical in the act since he had not had much practice—particularly of late—in the niceties of religious observance. Yet some token of respect and love was necessary. He had never been close to his father, but he had admired and revered him, and envied the two older brothers who, in size, endurance, courage, and ability, had more closely lived up to the standards Ward Cohoon had set for his sons.

Kneeling there, he felt as inadequate in the presence of the silent stone marker as he had always felt in the physical presence of the great, shaggy, buckskin-clad figure of the man who had been his father. He remembered clearly the fascinated

horror with which, as a child, he had regarded the scalps that Ward Cohoon had carried at his belt until his wife finally persuaded him to lay them aside; he recalled his own frustration, and his father's impatience—and the open scorn of his brothers—as he tried time and again to master to his father's satisfaction whatever weapon had been selected for the day's practice. He had been his mother's best pupil, and his father's worst; and the ease with which Stuart and Jonathan picked up the knack of rifle, knife, and tomahawk—although they never did learn to read and write properly—had deepened Boyd Cohoon's awareness of his own inadequacy.

Well, he reflected now, there was no sense in pretending to be something you weren't, and people were just going to have to get along with one Cohoon who stood and acted something less than seven feet tall. He rose and brushed off his knees, put his hat back on and stood for a moment looking at the four graves. *Well, you're on your own now, my friend*, he told himself, and turned and walked back into town.

In front of Van Houck's store he paused; after a moment he went inside. The old bearded trader was at the back of the store, counting his receipts of the day in preparation for closing up. Without looking up, he shook his head imperatively at Cohoon's approach, to indicate that he would lose count if he were interrupted. Cohoon leaned against the counter, waiting. Presently the old man closed the money box, raised his head, and peered at his visitor through steel-rimmed glasses.

"Five years is a long time, Uncle Van," Cohoon said. "How's my credit? I need an outfit."

Van Houck frowned briefly; then his eyes widened with recognition, and he came quickly around the counter to grasp Cohoon by the shoulders, almost shaking him.

"My boy! I did not realize—" He pulled Cohoon toward the front of the store where the light was better. "Help yourself to anything you need, but first let me look at you. Ah, but it is a man now! Almost as big as your father. . . ." His smile faded abruptly, and he looked up at the younger man. "Did you get my letter, in that place?"

"Yes," Cohoon said. After a moment, he said, "You didn't write *how* it happened, Uncle Van."

The old trader said, "It was like a stroke of lightning. I have grown soft, my boy. In the old days, one heard of friends and their families wiped out by the Apaches, and one said a prayer for their souls and checked the loading of the guns and the shutters for the windows. But these are less violent times, and to hear of your father dead, shot in the back within five miles

of town, after all the places he had been. . . . It was like waking up one morning to find that the great rock out there had fallen from its pedestal. And when the men came back with the news that Jonathan and the cook had also been shot down, out at the ranch, and the house burned . . . !”

Cohoon asked, “Was it the Apaches, Uncle Van?”

Van Houck shook his head. “There are some who would like us to think so, but it was no Apache. One man it was, with iron shoes on his horse. I am too old to ride with posses, but I heard the men talk when they came back—those that were not afraid to talk, or in Westerman’s pay. One horse. One man. He met your father outside of town. Whether the meeting had been arranged or was an accident no one knows. They talked for a while. Your father turned to ride away. Would he have turned his back on an Apache, after fifty years on the plains? The man shot him. The stock of your father’s rifle was broken off short; he had tried to pull the gun out as he fell, and snapped it off at the grip instead. The broken wood was still in his hands when he was found.”

Cohoon said, “And Jonathan?”

“The murderer rode directly to the ranch. Perhaps he was afraid that Jonathan knew whom your father had gone out to meet; perhaps he just realized that he would have to deal with Jonathan sooner or later, and preferred to take him unawares. Jonathan was shot as he opened the door. Would Jonathan have opened the door to an Apache, without even a gun in his hand? The murderer then shot down the cook, old Leonardo, as he ran for the corral, and set fire to the house. When the hands got there—they were working to the east—two hours or more had passed. They lost the trail up in the rocks. The posse caught up with them while they were still trying to work it out. Finally Westerman said to call it a day; it was obviously the work of a prowling Indian, and he would notify the authorities.”

“Paul Westerman led the posse?” Cohoon said.

“Yes. We still have no law here, my boy, except when the U.S. Marshal condescends to pay us a visit. Well, now we’ve got a town marshal of sorts to keep order here in Sombrero, but he was out of town and this was out of his jurisdiction anyway. Westerman rounded up a group of citizens and made a little speech, saying that at a time like this personal feelings were unimportant; a crime like this was a threat to every member of the community, and the criminal had to be caught and punished.”

"That was public-spirited of Mr. Westerman," Cohoon drawled.

Van Houck was watching him. "Boyd, what are you going to do?"

Cohoon hesitated, and moved his shoulders slightly. "What can I do, Uncle Van? The man apparently left no clues except a set of hoof-prints leading nowhere. What can I do against a ghost?"

"This was no ghost," Van Houck said harshly, "and no Apache, either. We know who it was, Boyd. It was a white man; a white man with a burning hate against the Cohoons. The same man who tried so hard to put a rope around your neck at the trial; who publicly proclaimed, when you were led away to prison, that the matter was not finished yet."

Cohoon said mildly, "You can't put too much weight on what a grief-stricken man says and does, Uncle Van. Harry's death hit him hard, and he blamed me for it. He is the type of man who must blame somebody for everything that happens to him."

Van Houck said, "Ah, that Harry Westerman was a no-good young trouble-maker, and you should have had more brains than to get mixed up with him. I must say that I still do not believe everything that was said at the trial, nor do a great many other people, Boyd." The old man looked searchingly into the face of his visitor, who laughed shortly.

"I'm glad for everybody's good opinion, but it's a matter of public record, and I've never denied it. But there's one thing wrong with your choice of a murderer, Uncle Van."

"What's that?"

"Why," Cohoon said, "neither Father nor Jonathan were fools. The fact that neither was holding a gun when he died may prove it was no Apache that killed them, but it also proves to my satisfaction that it wasn't Paul Westerman. They wouldn't have trusted him any farther than an Indian."

Van Houck shrugged, totally unconvinced. "So? Then he hired somebody. He hires many people these days. A stranger perhaps."

Cohoon said, "Perhaps. But there's no proof of that."

The old trader stared at him. "You are going to do nothing, Boyd? You are just going to forget it?"

"It would be a little hard to forget, Uncle Van," Cohoon said gently. "However, I have just spent five years of my life waiting to get out of prison; I don't intend to turn around and shoot my way right back in again—on no more than a shaky guess."

“Your father—”

“I know,” Cohoon said. “Father would have gone roaring after Westerman and challenged him to prove his innocence. So would Jonathan, or Stuart, if they had lived. But I’m not any of them. That’s one thing I discovered in Yuma.” He looked down at Van Houck and smiled. “You know, Uncle Van, I learned something in that place. I never was as big as the rest of them, or as handy with weapons, and I couldn’t hold as much liquor or make as much noise, but in Yuma I was a better man than any of them. They would have tried to buck the system, and it would have broken and killed them. I rode along with it, and here I am. Now you want me to buck this system and get myself killed or hanged. Well, if you don’t mind, Uncle Van, I reckon I’ll just ride along with it for a piece, like I did in Yuma.”

Van Houck said harshly, “Maybe this will make you change your mind.” He turned and marched to the rear of the store, his back stiff and angry. Returning, he threw down three objects on the nearby counter. “I saved these for you. I thought you would be needing them. The gun can be repaired. I have also, by your father’s will, paid the taxes on the Grant from the money he had in the bank; there’s enough left to help you get started again. Of course you need no money for anything I can supply.”

Cohoon looked for a moment at the broken Henry rifle, and the splintered stock that lay beside it, touching the latter gently. “Thanks, Uncle Van.”

Van Houck’s voice said, “He had it in his hands when he was found. He never got to use it!”

Cohoon turned to the knife in its worn leather sheath and pulled it free. The blade was hand-ground of file steel. The leather grip, as well as the sheath, had been burned with the Cohoons’ Diamond C brand. Cohoon spoke softly:

“He always said that a good knife was worth a dozen pistols in a fight; and when there was nobody to fight you could always whittle.”

“You’re going to let his murderer go free?” Van Houck asked insistently. “You’re going to live in the same town with the man who killed him, and do nothing?”

Cohoon set the knife back into the sheath with a sharp movement. “Why, I can stand it as long as he can, Uncle Van,” he murmured. “Maybe even a little longer. It remains to be seen.”

3

OUTSIDE THE AIR was quite cool, and Cohoon drew a deep breath of it, turned left, and walked quickly away. The heavy-set, bearded man who chose this moment to come out of the alley between the buildings was also moving in a hurried manner. There was time for neither man to stop. The impact threw Cohoon sideways, and sent the other back a step with a hand to his shoulder, gouged by the barrel of the broken rifle in Cohoon's hand. The man was dressed, Cohoon noted, in the rough stained clothing of a prospector or miner.

"My apologies," Cohoon said mildly, although the fault had been by no means entirely his.

"Apologies! Why the hell don't you watch where you're going?"

There was no profit in this, and Cohoon turned and walked on. He had taken three steps when the other's hand swung him about so roughly that the weapons he was carrying spun out of his grasp.

"I asked you a question, stranger. Why the hell don't you watch where the hell you're going?"

Cohoon looked at the bearded face for a moment, not really hearing the words, feeling only the contemptuous hand on his shoulder that reminded him of the brutalities and indignities he had suffered without protest for five years, knowing that was the only way to survive. But this was not Yuma. This man had no badge, and the law was not behind him.

Cohoon spoke softly. "Take your hand away."

"Why, you young pipsqueak—"

Cohoon drew a long breath. The bearded face seemed to swim before him in a kind of shimmering haze, but his mind was quite clear despite the anger. His muscles tightened imperceptibly in preparation for the quick seizing of the hairy wrist, the pivot, and the throw that would send the other over his shoulder into the dust of the street below, followed by his own body, feet-first, driving hard to crack the ribs and empty the lungs, after which the boots could finish the job at leisure. There had been no gentlemanly eastern rules taught in those daily practice sessions out by the corral. *Never give the other*

man a break until he's out cold, had been Ward Cohoon's repeated advice to his sons.

Cohoon turned slightly, casually, for better leverage, and instinct made him cast a glance around to fix in his mind the location of others who might intervene—and slowly he let his pent-up breath escape, because the street was quite still, waiting, and over by the hotel stood a slender man in dark clothes on whose shirt-front glinted the metallic emblem of the law. He should have recognized that waiting silence the instant he came out of the store, but he had been in too much of a hurry to escape Van Houck's reproachful gaze. This was a trap. This was Paul Westerman's marshal, ready to throw an ex-convict in jail on any excuse. A brawl would be reason enough for the law to take a hand.

Cohoon reached up and gently disengaged the hand from his shoulder and let it fall. "I'm sorry, partner," he said. "Reckon I was a little careless. No harm intended."

The bearded man was confused by the sudden lack of opposition. He growled without conviction, "No harm? Why, you like to broke my shoulder! Somebody ought to teach you to look out where you wave that gun barrel!"

Cohoon said, "I'm sorry. I'll be more careful in the future."

The larger man stared at him in a baffled way, and looked around, as if for a cue or signal. Then he said, "Ah, hell," and swung away, and strode off down the boardwalk.

Cohoon watched him go, aware that around him the scene was breaking into motion again as people started off about their business, some looking at him curiously, others ignoring him. It seemed strange that he should recognize none of them; five years before, an unfamiliar face would have been an exception on the streets of Sombrero. He grimaced, picked up his belongings, and started toward the hotel.

"Cohoon."

It was the slender man with the badge, who had crossed over and come up this side of the street. Cohoon waited for him, watching him approach. At close range, it was apparent that the marshal was much younger than he had seemed at a distance. The neat, somber clothes, that might have belonged to a preacher, except for the badge of office and the heavy gun and belt, were deceiving. The face was that of a man a year or two younger than Cohoon himself. It was a sober and humorless face despite its youth, clean-shaven, and set in stern lines—it was the face of a young man constantly aware that the eyes of his fellow citizens were upon him.