

THOMAS COBB

QUANTRILL

ALASKA, 1904

THE STORM HAD STARTED UP AN HOUR BEFORE. The bar had been filling since morning in anticipation of weather that was coming in hard and fast. There were nine of them altogether. Some knew each other, regulars — trappers and farmers who used the bar as a central point for meeting and leaving messages. The others were wanderers, travelers, idlers and drifters, pushed here by the first winds of the storm.

The old man had been here since just before noon. He said little. He bought bread, cheese and eggs along with a bottle of brandy and had eaten them alone, in the corner, wrapping his arms around his food as he ate, like a man who, used to the presence of others, did not trust others. He also took a pitcher of water and a glass. He drank slowly, mixing his brandy with a good amount of water, almost more water than a man might want in his drink if it were late afternoon and a hard storm setting in.

OHIO, 1846

He was a delicate boy and blond. Handsome. More, pretty. Blue eyes and long curling lashes. Pants, belted at the knee and stockings of white combed cotton, patent leather shoes.

He seemed out of place in the field where the cattle grazed among walnut and hickory trees, picking the last of the deadfall from the autumn crop. He moved carefully from tree to tree, keeping out of sight. He watched where he put his tiny feet. He stepped in neither mud nor muffin, stick nor rill of stale water. He made no sound, and his shoes shone in the morning sun.

From around the trunk of the hickory, he watched a Jersey, udder heavy, snuffing through the mud for the hickories, nearly rotten now, spilled from the petaled husks, the meat going just stale and dry. She pushed with her broad flat nose, moving the nuts deeper into the mud, forcing her to work harder for them. Beyond her, thirty yards to the fence and safety. When she looked up, he pulled back behind the tree and retied the ribbons on his hat so that his hat would hang behind his neck and not fall.

When she pushed her head down again, snorting and snuffing the mud below, he moved from around the tree and came at her at a dead run. She looked up, startled, a little boy in green, coming at her, the curved blade of the tanning knife just catching the glint of the late morning sun. She tensed to move at shoulder and haunch, her legs flexing down, preparing to wheel away toward the center of the field beyond the little green boy.

How long it took her to feel the knife separating the skin, exposing the gleaming fat beneath it, we cannot know. She was running now, bellowing, her side spraying blood as she moved across the field away from the fire of pain that held her, slobbering, her full udder swinging under her like a sack of grain, nearly tangling her hind legs and sending her to the ground.

On the fence, thirty yards away, the little boy watched and laughed and clapped in the late morning sun.

ALASKA, 1904

Bill Watson, who owned a few hundred acres just to the west, took note of the old man and tried to catch him in conversation. In storms like this one, men thrown together for the length of the storm in a one-room bar, restaurant, stable, post office and outlet of general merchandise, do not remain strangers very long. He spoke of the storm, though neither he nor the old man had any particular information to share. "It looks to be a bad one," Bill Watson said.

"It seems to me, they don't come any other variety up here," the old man said.

Bill Watson agreed. It was a bad spot for storms.

"Bill Watson."

"Charley Hart."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"The same."

OHIO, 1846

"My man seen him do it, just as big as you please. He run up on that Jersey cow and slashed her haunch to shoulder. Then he done sat and laughed on it."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry won't cut it. Not this time. My man done tarred up the slash, but if she don't take a fester and seize up, her hide is useless come slaughter and I'm out a extra two dollar."

He counted out two dollars, his last, and put it in Simmons' hand. "If she don't make it, I'll take care of the rest as well. I ain't sure how, but I will. You know I'm good for it."

"I do know that. You are most of a good man. But that little one of yours, that little Willy is mean as the devil hisself."

"I don't know what to do. When I go home, I'll beat holy hell out of him, but I'll tell you right now, it won't do a damn bit of good."

OHIO, 1853

ONLY A YEAR BEFORE, WILLIAM QUANTRILL had sat where those seventeen students sat, hunched over their slates, laboring over cyphers and letters that should have presented no challenge for students a third their ages. Over the screech and scuff of chalk, the rustling of paper, the hawking back of mucus, he thought he heard the hooves of horses in the distance. When he went to the window, there was nothing, nothing but the long grass of Ohio,

disappearing into the distant trees.

He turned when he heard commotion. He saw that Oliver Samuels had taken the lard bucket that contained the Johnson boy's lunch. The Johnson boy was making a futile attempt to take it back, keeping a wary eye on Samuels, who swatted away the boy's attempts as he would a fly.

He took the three steps over to the boys, took the lunch bucket from Samuels and returned it to Johnson. He gave Samuels a hard backhand across the face. The sound of the slap caused one of the girls to utter a shrill peep. Samuel's face went immediately red, and he knew by the sting in his hand how much Samuel's face must hurt.

Oliver Samuels did nothing but blink twice and go back to laboriously scratching numbers on his slate. The numbers, he knew, meant nothing. Numbers were just numbers to Samuels, and he would depend his whole life on the honesty and fear of others. He was a big boy, nearly six feet, the same as William, but he weighed maybe another fifty pounds more and he was more heavily muscled than a bargeman. He was little more than an idiot, but William had seen him slaughtering pigs, picking them up from the ground with one hand grabbing an ear while the other brought a two pound hammer down hard between the eyes. It was repetitive, efficient and quick, untroubled by thought, and it gave William some affection for the boy.

ALASKA, 1904

"What is it that you do, Charley Hart?"

"This and that. More of this and less of that. I move around. I take note of what others do."

"You don't have the gold or the oil fever, then?"

"I am too old for fevers, and I don't dig at the ground. But if others do, sometimes I might be convinced to become a partner."

"So you're looking for partners, then? You're interested in men that might have a promising piece of land and more ambition than money?"

"I am not a fool, and I do not give my money to fools, either."

"There is no need for offence, old friend."

The old man took more brandy and water. "There is never a need for

offence. It is like the wind. It comes and goes as it pleases."

KANSAS, 1860

William Clarke Quantrill, having left teaching, looking for a new line of work under the name Charlie Hart, failed as a horse thief in Lawrence, Kansas. He was run off by three different farmers and by a band of Delaware Indians. When he tried to sell three stolen horses to a sheriff's deputy, he escaped only by betraying his two partners.

There was more money and less risk in recapturing escaped slaves who made their way north through Lawrence. At this, he became successful, counting on anti-abolitionists to show him the whereabouts of the slaves. The sheriff of Lawrence warned him that if he ever caught Hart with an escaped slave, he would have him hanged.

KANSAS, NOVEMBER 1862

Quantrell

There have been fugitive reports circulated, for some weeks, that Quantrell, the notorious predatory chieftain of the border rebels, was making serious preparations to give Lawrence a call . . . Were it not for . . . the probable loss of valuable lives, we should be inclined to favor Quantrell's purposes against Lawrence, for with any such force as he has yet been at the head of, we are quite well satisfied that to lead it to an assault on Lawrence would be the most fortunate thing that could happen for the future peace of the border. . . Mr. Quantrell's reception would be warm, should he venture up this way.

Kansas State Journal, Lawrence, November 6, 1862

KANSAS, 1860

Hunting slaves proved profitable for Quantrill, and he gathered to himself a band of ne'er-do-wells, petty thieves, secessionists, sympathizers, horse thieves, wastrels, blood drinkers and cutthroats who rode with him. They included "Bloody" Bill Anderson, Archie Clements, George Todd, Coleman Younger and the James brothers, Frank and Jesse. When war broke out, they called themselves guerillas and nightriders for the south. Their principal business of capturing escaped slaves and returning them south for the rewards was augmented by bank robbery, rustling and arson.

KANSAS, SEPT 1862

KANSAS INVADED!
OLATHE SACKED!
QUANTRELL AT WORK!

The town of Olathe . . . was visited and plundered, on last Saturday night, by the secessionists from Missouri, under the lead of Quantrell. Had there been a well organized and drilled company of fifty men in Olathe, the proper guard out, the town could never have been taken . . . Let other towns take warning. The success of this raid will encourage similar ones on a bolder scale

Lawrence Republican, Lawrence, Kansas, Sept 11, 1862.

ALASKA, 1904

It had grown colder with the dark, and the wind, or at least the sound of it, had picked up. They moved closer together in the small store, the eight of them, though they probably did not realize that they had come closer. The lamps had been lit, and the stove was fed often.

"I don't believe I will ever complain of the heat again," one of them said.

"No," another answered. "It's hellish cold. It makes me homesick for Kansas."

The old man raised his head now and looked around as though he had fallen asleep in the quiet of the evening. "Kansas," he said. "You would be homesick for Kansas?"

"Well, once I thought that unlikely, but this Alaskan spring has given me to reconsider."

"I would never think fondly on Kansas or drink with a man who would."

"Be careful there, old man. I'm not truly fond of the place myself, but my father and both my brothers would live nowhere else."

"Then they, sir, are curs."

KANSAS, AUGUST 1863

General Order Number Ten, issued by Brigadier General Thomas Ewing, commander of the District of the Border, authorized union troops headquartered in the free state of Kansas to cross the border into western Missouri to forcibly remove and exile the suspected families and friends of bushwhackers, who were raiding eastern Kansas nearly daily. Over one hundred men, women and children were forced from their homes and sent to Union prison camps.

"Destroy, devastate, desolate. This is war." —Senator James Henry Lane, Kansas.

ALASKA, 1904

"I would not, old man, speak ill of another's family."

"All those from Kansas are curs and should be shot."

"You are finding yourself some terrible trouble here."

"I'm afraid of no man from Kansas. And all of Kansas are afraid of me." He rose from his table now. He was very drunk and unsteady on his feet.

"Be careful there, Charley Hart. You are not in your right mind at this moment."

"My name is not Charley Hart. I only travel under the name. My name is known to those from Kansas." He swept his arm toward the Kansas men. "My name. My real name is William Clarke Quantrill."

"Charley Hart, you are drunk, and that is not a good joke. "Quantrill is over 40 years dead, and the world a better place for all men, Kansas or not."

"I stand before you now. I am not dead, and I am the living man, William Quantrill, the scourge of Kansas."

The drunker he got, the more insistent the old man became that he was Quantrill. He did not die in Kentucky in 1865 as it was reported. That was someone else who bore a resemblance and, dying, was willing to impersonate Quantrill so that he might escape. He had over the next thirty-nine years, worked his way across the country to the west coast as a watchman, a reporter, a secretary to a banker and as a school teacher. Now he had come to Alaska, where there was more opportunity

than he had ever seen before.

In the early morning, the old man fell asleep; the storm had subsided into a slow, steady snow. One of the Kansas men motioned to the other. They rose, grabbed the old man and left out the front door, saying, "no one needs to speak of this."

LAWRENCE, KANSAS, AUGUST 21, 1863

THE COLUMN OF RIDERS PAUSED at the outskirts of Lawrence, Kansas, while two lone riders made their way through the town. It was nearly dawn now, and the streets were deserted. The air was still cold from the depths of night, but the sky was clear, and it would be hot later on. The two riders returned to the column of 400 men and reported that no preparations had been made against their arrival.

Jo, the dim boy who did odd jobs, was trying to lure a stray cat out from under the stairs of the Eldridge Hotel. He was supposed to be bringing in firewood for the kitchen stoves, but he was fond of cats, and, usually, they were fond of him. He knelt and peered under the stairs where the cat backed further away from him. When he heard the first pops of the guns, he thought it might again be the fourth of July, which would explain why the cat was so spooked, and it would mean that people would be having fun in the middle of town and that they would give him good things to eat. He liked watermelon almost as much as he liked cats.

The Reverend Samuel Snyder was dressed only in his trousers and undershirt and shoes. He had just milked the cow and was toting the bucket back to the house so that they might have breakfast before he went off to see to his company of black Union recruits who were camped about a half mile up the road, across the street from the encampment of the white recruits.

He turned when he heard the horses, nearly spilling the milk that was sloshing in the bucket as he walked. A line of horsemen, probably Union troops, was coming up the road fast. He went to the fence to watch them go by. The first bullet spun him around, sending the bucket of milk across the hydrangeas. The rest of the bullets kept spinning him until he fell to the ground, drenched in his own blood.

It took the riders another three minutes to reach the encampment of recruits, just up the road. Many of the recruits were still asleep, though some had heard the sounds of the horses and the report of the revolvers

and were struggling to get into their clothes. Ebenezer Scott was just buttoning his fly when one bullet passed through his right hand and out his left buttock. Before he had time to cry out, another had torn away the front of his throat.

Ralph Stone and Michael Franks, bunkies, stumbled out of their tent bare naked and were hit with over eight shots apiece. Neither knew what was happening. Within two and a half minutes, all forty-eight of the recruits, black and white, were dead.

The column split into three, and the middle and largest column followed Quantrill to the Eldridge Hotel, the biggest, grandest building in Lawrence. They surrounded the building as the other two columns reattached to the central column. The shooting was random, and the state provost marshal, who was quartered in the hotel, surrendered it to Quantrill, who had worn a tasseled hat with gold braid for the occasion, and was thought, by many of the guests, to be an exceptionally fine-looking man.

Jo, the dim boy, who had now been scratched by the cat, thought to get a better look at what was going on at the front of the hotel. He walked around the southeast corner of the building and skinned up the fence. He saw riders whirling and running in random fashion before his head, the only part of him over the fence, was blown apart.

Inside the hotel, Quantrill made his command post. He had more chairs brought to the lobby for the comfort of the lady guests. He bowed and kissed hands and assured them that whatever else might happen, there would be no lady harmed in any way on this day.

Senator James Henry Lane, who had lobbied for the General Orders against the Missouri bushwhackers, was awakened by a Negro, running down the streets, screaming that the bushwhackers had come. Still in his nightshirt, the senator jumped from his bedroom window, onto the roof of the shed house and down to the ground. Barefoot, he ran and did not turn to look back.

Lester Sprylock, a drummer from Nebraska, stood in a line in the lobby of the Eldridge Hotel to give up his money and his valuables. When he asked one of the raiders if he might keep a quarter in order to buy a drink at the bar, the raider leveled a Navy Colt .44 to his face, resting the barrel on the bridge of his nose. Deliberately, he drew back the hammer until the revolver cocked. The raider and Sprylock stared at each other over the gun, neither saying a word until the raider began to laugh. The raider lowered the hammer of the pistol and gave Sprylock

two dollars, saying, "Before this day is done, I think you may need more than one drink."

Levi Gates, who was known to be the best shot in Lawrence, rode to the outskirts of town, and then readied his hunting rifle. He fired once, and a bushwhacker fell from his horse, a hundred yards away. He ran to the woods and reloaded, fired and killed another bushwhacker. When he turned to run back to the woods, another bushwhacker hit him in the face with the butt of his rifle. The bushwhacker then went on hitting Levi Gates so hard and often that he was later identified only by his clothes, his head being an indistinguishable mass on the ground.

One of the raiders found a carton of candied figs in the mercantile. The raiders, many of them quite drunk by now, found them delicious. When they were brought to Quantrill at the hotel, he had them divided up and given to the ladies gathered there. An extra portion to Miss Rebecca Wheelwright who, at Quantrill's request, was playing popular airs on the piano.

Mina Spears, age 43, was gathering eggs in her chicken coop. She held up to the light what she thought to be a double yolker. In an instant it was gone. She found only egg yolk and bits of shell around a perfectly round hole in the side of the coop.

Abolitionist Preacher Hugh Fisher hid in the cellar under his kitchen. He worked himself into the floor joists and tried not to move, though his leg was trembling so badly he had to wedge it among the cross braces to keep it from drumming against the kitchen floor. Three times Quantrill's men came into the basement with lamps, and all three times they failed to see him amongst the joists. Finally, they set fire to the house. Nearly dead, he crawled out in one of his wife's dresses. When he collapsed, she threw a carpet over him, then piled more of their belongings on him until he passed out and could no longer whimper in pain.

At the gun shop, two men were tied together while the shop was being looted. When the guerillas had taken all they needed, they set the shop on fire and threw the two men back into the burning building. When the two managed to right themselves and struggle out the door, the guerillas laughed and threw them back in. They did this two more times before the men gave up and were burned to death.

Henry Barlow was shot fourteen times and failed to die. His wife threw herself over his body to protect him. One of the guerillas picked her head up by the hair, placed his revolver at the base of Barlow's skull

and fired, severing his spinal column and killing him instantly.

By nine o'clock in the morning, the Eldridge Hotel and most of the central business district and a couple score of houses had been torched. The grocery, the mercantile, several saloons, all the gun shops and jewelry stores had been sacked. The guerillas had taken what valuables they had been able to find. More than half of them were drunk. One hundred and fifty men and boys were dead. The guests, taken a short distance from the hotel were not harmed, and no lady of the town was harmed either.

ALASKA, 1904

Later, warming themselves by the fire, the first of the Kansas idlers said. "I don't really think he was Quantrill, do you?"

"Shouldn't have said he was," the other replied.

Note: Historical material in this story was taken from the books *Bloody Dawn* by Thomas Goodrich, Kent State University Press, 1991, and from *Quantrill's War* by Duane Schultz, St. Martin's, 1996. Newspaper quotes from *Bloody Dawn*.