



Prodigal of the Pecos

by C. E. Edmonson

As he drove his wagon out of Stockton Springs, the darkness swallowed Jared Millburn as surely as the whale swallowed Jonah. The stars in the moonless sky were obscured by dust and haze, so that sky and prairie merged into a gray immensity as bleak as the thoughts passing through his mind. Jared Millburn had fought for the Union in the war, fought long and honorably for what he believed in. He was a poor man before he volunteered, a man who made his way by the work of his hands, as he was a poor man afterward. Poor but proud.

Well, times had changed. He wasn't so poor now. Nor was he proud.

But there was no changing the facts, no going back, and his mind kept spinning, as though in a dream. He imagined Charlie Cooper and Dugan Burke and the rest as they rode through some anonymous gorge. Imagined gunfire erupting from high on the slopes, a classic cross-fire that drove the survivor's forward into a well-laid trap.

From off to his left, a prairie wolf howled. Other wolves joined in. Their voices pierced the humidity and the haze, an assault from which Millburn involuntarily cringed. He closed his eyes and saw bodies strung across a rocky ground, lying in heaps, one across the other, Rebel and Yankee alike.

Chickamauga, in the fall of 1863 in Georgia. Thirty-thousand men dead on the field of battle and he somehow alive. Watching a flock of

crows settle on the branches of a white pine stripped of its needles by grapeshot.

A flash of lightning, followed only a few seconds later by a monumental thunderclap, set Millburn's ears to ringing. His mule jumped forward, braying wildly, then settled when Millburn drew back on the reins. The storm was twenty miles to the east and moving away.

For a time, the lightning was more or less continuous and Millburn stared across the distance, entranced. Violence ruled the Pecos, at least according to his thinking, violence of every kind. Old Grits Mulvaney claimed the spirit of the Pecos now possessed him and he couldn't leave. That wasn't true of Jared Millburn. He wanted only to take his wife and his daughter, away from the violence. And now he was finally doing it.

Millburn's thoughts turned to Springfield, Illinois, city of his birth. There was plenty of work in Springfield, according to the letters sent him every month by his brother. The city was expanding, with new neighborhoods appearing almost overnight. Jared was a decent carpenter. Maybe he'd open a shop, maybe he'd—

Two men, mere silhouettes this far from Jared Millburn, rode out from behind a narrow butte two-hundred yards away. They closed the distance at a trot, their horses' hooves kicking up little balls of dust. Jared Millburn reached for the shotgun he kept behind his buckboard's seat. But the shotgun wasn't there. Except for the long knife at his waist, he was unarmed.

Millburn knew the identities of the approaching men before he made out their features, and he recognized a rough justice come to bring him to account. As he'd betrayed, so he'd been betrayed. How could he have expected anything else?