

Odds and Ends

by Raian

follows “Waiting On”

“Thieves respect property; they merely wish the property to become their property that they may more perfectly respect it.”

– Gilbert Keith Chesterton

To keep my hands from picking and stealing.

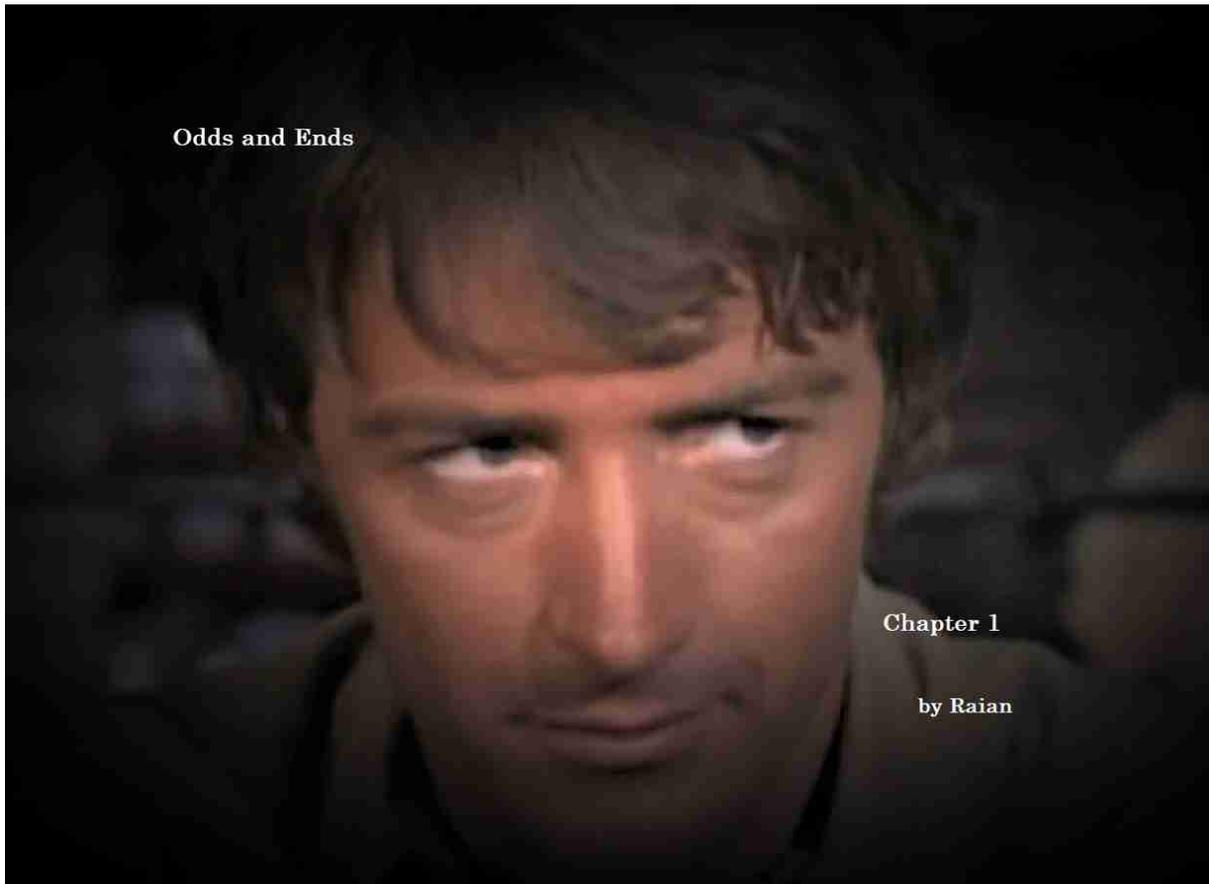
– Book of Common Prayer, Catechism.

Characters mentioned:

Silas Hacket and Absolem Weir from *Scarecrow at Hacket's* wherein Weir tries to steal land and a boy.

Penny Rose and Aunt Hester from *Little Darling of the Sierras* wherein miners try to steal money.

Jessamie and Grady, and Harner from *Shadow of a Dead Man* wherein land and lives are at stake.



A fast canter cleared Scott's head. Boots seemed to enjoy the run: they'd both been cooped up after Grandfather's visit. Returning to real work over the last few weeks felt like a blessing.

Some chores were easier than others. He didn't envy Murdoch. In fact, Scott had slipped away at the earliest opportunity to return to Lancer.

Murdoch had been put in charge of Penny Rose's financial well-being. He'd asked Scott to review the trust which the lawyer had written, which Scott had to do as he'd been tapped to take over as trustee if Murdoch died or became incapacitated.

Scott arrived at the hacienda in time for a late supper. Teresa and Johnny had waited for him and their talk turned to the upsets of the past several weeks: dealing with a devil, a little darling and squatters.

Without Murdoch at the table, they felt free to ask each other questions and discuss what had happened. They cleared the table and carried the conversation with them to the kitchen.

Scott wrapped hands in mitts and hefted kettles of hot water to the washtubs, obscuring Johnny with steam. Johnny worked the pump handle and added cold water. He put soap in the first tub and worked up a lather.

Scott refilled the kettles and put them back on the stove. "Had you seen that bounty hunter before?"

Johnny rested forearms on the side of the washtub. "Nope. Harner was the real deal, though."

Teresa dropped silverware into the sudsy water and handed Johnny a stack of dishes to dunk. "How awful! Was he the one who shot you?"

"Yeah. He was Pardee all over again." Johnny scowled and scrubbed. "Harner didn't think twice about taking money to kill a woman."

"Good thing you were there." Scott took up position by the tub of rinse water.

"It worked out. Grady saw a man killed and isn't interested in dime novels anymore. We buried the ones he had with Harner." Johnny handed soapy plates to Scott.

Scott swirled the suds off the plates and placed them on edge in the rack. "No *Two-Gun* in his collection?"

"I'd have thrown it down the well but it would've poisoned the water."

"You're catching up in the who-got-shot-most count." Scott held out a hand for the silverware Johnny had finished scrubbing.

"Add an arm to my list, brother. And a leg before that."

The silverware splashed into the water. "Just don't make the next one your guts."

Johnny grinned at him. "All in a day's work."

"All for one and each one for the ranch." Scott spread the clean silverware on a towel.

"Don't joke about things like that." Teresa finished putting leftovers in storage. She plopped pots and serving dishes into the washtub and reached around Scott to grab a dishtowel. "At least Jessamie helped you in the end, Johnny. It's too bad she couldn't help you shoot Harner."

“She'd dropped her rifle.” He elbowed Scott. “I never thought being able to fix a windmill would come in handy.”

“We've become jacks of all trades, masters of none.” Scott elbowed Johnny. “However, that's better than masters of one.”

Johnny swished the pots around in the soapy water. “Jessamie could handle a bandage as well as a rifle. Grady watched while she doctored me. He thinks saving people is better than killing 'em and he's right.” Johnny poked at one of the pans. “Can't we just leave these to soak, Teresa?”

“If it was up to you two, everything would soak until Maria comes in tomorrow morning.” She handed Johnny the dishtowel. “You dry. I'll wash. You shouldn't be stressing your arm too much.” She gave an exaggerated sigh. “If you want something done right –”

Scott and Johnny chorused with her, “– do it yourself.”

Teresa put elbow grease into the scrubbing. “Why didn't Jessamie trust you, Johnny?”

“I had to lie to her and we got off on the wrong foot. Any step through her front gate was trespass but it was Murdoch's land. I said, *No little woman with a big gun's going to stop me coming through this gate.*” Johnny smirked. “At least I started to say it. She cut me off with rifle shots.”

Scott stared at him with eyebrows raised. “You're lucky you didn't get more than one wound.”

“Oh, she could shoot all right. Just about singed me with every bullet or peppered me with dirt.” He tapped Scott on the arm. “You and her could have a contest. See who could shoot fastest and best.”

“I'll keep that in mind if I ever find myself bored in Cabot Springs.”



With dishes washed and dried, Teresa checked the coffee pot. “I’ll finish putting things away. Go sit in the Great Room. Coffee’s almost done.”

Johnny rubbed hands together. “You got any cake left? I’ve worked up an appetite.”

“I’ll bring you each a slice.”

Scott stretched out on the large sofa. Johnny lit the evening’s logs and lounged on the settee next to the fireplace. He rubbed his left arm.

“Arm bothering you?”

“Not enough to put that sling back on.”

Scott squinted at his brother. The double vision still happened in some light. What Scott didn’t see was the conflict that had been on his brother’s face after he’d fallen for Laura. Johnny was still courting Lucy – a love interest in Jessamie might knock that off the rails.

Seeing a lone woman struggling to live her life with a young son would have touched Johnny’s heart... a boy with tendencies toward gunfighter fantasies would have raised alarms. “Will Jessamie be all right on her own?”

“Men from town with guns showed up while we were burying Harner. The liveryman said he'd told Harner about Jessamie – had to, or Harner would've burned his hand off. She has a town full of good people wanting to help, even if this time they showed up too late.”

“Do you think she'll want to stay isolated?” Johnny had told them why Jessamie needed to hide out.

“She'll sell the place and move to town so Grady can go to school. That land's a scrub ranch but will give them a grub stake.”

“Are you planning to go back?”

“No reason to.”

That settled it – Johnny hadn't been tempted away from Lucy this time. Scott relaxed against a pile of pillows. “There's nothing more we can do to help?”

Johnny shook his head before looking up. He scratched an ear. “You remember books you liked when you were a kid?”

“I do.”

“Do we have any of 'em?”

“I'm sure we can dig them or ones like them from the library upstairs, if they aren't tucked into some corner down here. They'd make a good Christmas present for Grady.”

Johnny's slow smile spread across his face. “That's what I'm thinking. He needs to get his mind on better kinds of adventures and people before he goes to school.”

“He sounds like a bright lad. He'll treasure and remember a gift like that.”

Johnny rubbed at the edge of the settee. “Life handed him a bad start. I'd like to point him down a good road. He and Jessamie deserve that.”

Teresa came in, carrying a tray with coffee pot, three cups and two large slices of cake.

Scott helped her settle the items on the coffee table. “Aren't you having dessert?”

“I tested it before serving it. If I have more it'll all be gone. The last piece is for Murdoch.” Teresa poured the coffee.

Johnny got up to collect his share. “I'd figure Murdoch won't miss what he doesn't know about.”

“That's why I brought it to you instead of letting you serve yourself.” Teresa settled with her cup in the chair next to a reading lamp and dug a sewing project out of her basket stashed nearby.

“You know Johnny too well.” Scott put his cup and saucer on the couch's arm. Teresa hadn't brought forks – to eat, it was one hand on plate, the other on cake.

The tip of Teresa's tongue appeared as she threaded her needle. "You've been talking about Jessamie? At least she turned out to be an honest person."

Johnny swallowed a mouthful of cake and nodded.

Teresa glanced at Johnny before bending to her sewing. "It was nice of you to sell the land to her cheaply."

Johnny shrugged a shoulder. "She'd already paid for it."

"All the back taxes?"

"Yeah. I checked before I left." Johnny polished off the last of his cake and sat back, cradling the coffee cup in his hands. "Talking of thieves... Did you look into land sales while you were in town, Scott?"

Scott, mouth full of cake, nodded.

Johnny rubbed the rim of his cup with a thumb. "Did Weir's name show up? Wouldn't put it past him to be in on some kind of take-over deal with all the land grabbing going on."

Scott took a sip of coffee to clear his mouth. "Not that I saw. I don't think Weir's part of a larger scam. His plan was too complicated." He picked up the last piece of cake but finished talking before popping it into his mouth. "There was no obvious correlation between buyers. We'd need to follow paper trails from Sacramento to see if they lead to the same person or company."

"You have plans to go up there?"

Scott shook his head while chewing and swallowing. "Not anytime soon."

"More places are coming up for sale."

"There's always someone ready to take advantage of misfortune and the drought's causing troubles for many."

Teresa looked up. "I thought you said the Hacket place was valuable now water had been found on it. Murdoch said he paid a fair price for it."

Johnny refilled his cup. "Murdoch paid what it was worth. If water was that near the surface, things would've been growing there. Weir dug that hole too easy. I went back to check. He'd buried a cow skin full of water where he could break it open with a shovel."

"Counting on some greedy person who wouldn't check?"

"Trying to fool us. He fooled Jelly, anyhow." Johnny swallowed a sip of coffee and his voice lowered. "El potrero de Satanas." Johnny had worked hard to eliminate his Mexican accent.

Teresa repeated the phrase, using proper pronunciation as she dug through a cup full of buttons. "Cipriano says none of the vaqueros ever called it that. Weir must have talked up an old wives' tale and got people to spread the story 'til they'd convinced themselves it was real history. Maybe there is

something more valuable than water there for him to want the land so badly.”

Scott traded shrugs with Johnny and said, “If so, we'll find it someday. At least Silas is away from his clutches.” As easily as Silas changed allegiance from Johnny to Weir and back, the young boy decided he wanted to live with his uncle. Without spectacles, the uncle was the spitting image of Silas's father.

Teresa finished sewing a button on one of Johnny's shirts. “Did everything work out with Penny Rose, Scott?”

Teresa seemed to enjoy having children in the house but she hadn't been there for any of Penny Rose's performances. “She'll receive monthly payments for her aunt to provide for her care.”

“What happens when she comes of age? Couldn't someone take advantage and steal her money?”

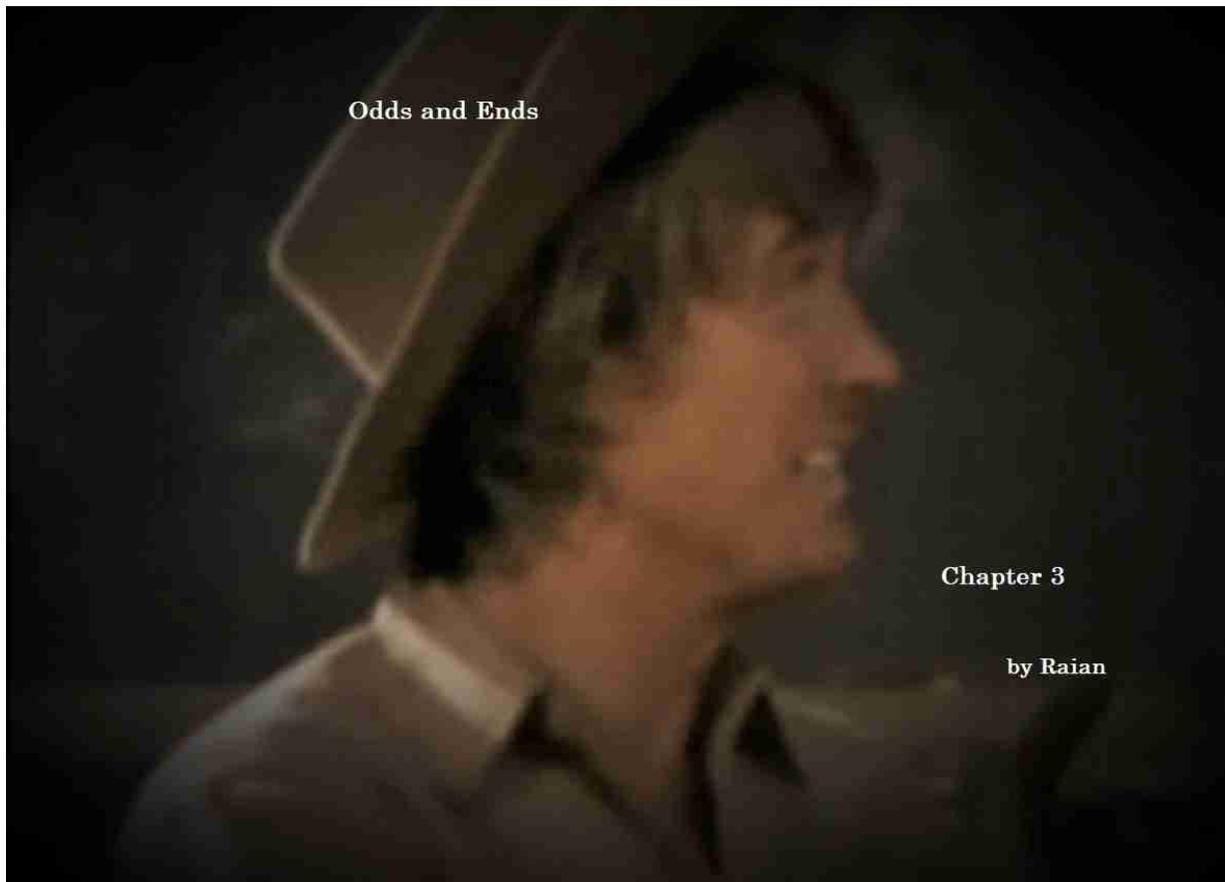
“No one but the bank and trustee can get their hands on the balance.” Scott lifted the coffee pot and refilled his cup. “Trusts help to prevent sorry situations.”

Teresa folded Johnny's shirt and added it to the pile of mended articles. “Will she have enough to live on?”

“Some of the stocks were worthless but the rest sold well. She shouldn't have to worry about money for the rest of her life.”

“That's wonderful. It's nice when things work out.”

Johnny sang *Golden Slippers* and nearly spilled his coffee when Scott pelted him with pillows.



Johnny stopped singing and launched the pillows back to Scott. Scott caught them and arranged them to lean back in comfort.

Teresa corralled her next sewing project: one of Scott's beige shirts that had torn a few weeks ago. "It's too easy for people to take advantage of children. Will Grady be all right, Johnny?"

"I'm going to send him a box of books. He'll have a leg up before he goes to school."

"And Silas." Teresa shivered. "Ghouls move in when someone dies. Like in *A Christmas Carol*, when people took what they wanted for themselves or to sell."

"Ghosts and devils." Johnny tapped fingers on his thighs. "How did Weir made all those noises and made his voice carry the way he did?"

Scott hadn't heard what Weir sounded like. "I'd guess through mimicry and ventriloquism. The wind and darkness fooled you into thinking he was where he wasn't."

"He sure fooled me into thinking he was dead. Can you do that ventro... that thing?"

"No. I've seen it done, though." Weir had done his homework. It would have been easy to learn Scott had been raised in the east where such staged acts were commonplace. Weir might also have heard Murdoch was imperturbable and Scott had bested a trick-shot artist.

Johnny stared at the fire. “Sure was spooky.”

Dry thunderstorms made things worse – and, at the same time, easier for Weir to come and go without being seen. “You spooked Jelly by bringing Weir's cane here. Jelly still won't walk past where you left it.” That made Johnny's smile return.

Teresa finished placing pins in a ripped sleeve and held spools against the cloth before picking which thread to use. “At least the law's after Weir now. It'll be harder for him to pull a con when he can't stay in one place long.”

Johnny put his empty cup on the tray. “And he'll have to use a different name. Val and the other sheriffs are watching for him.”

“Why do you think he didn't kill you, Johnny?” Teresa waved a hand. “I mean, if he was such a good shot, how could he miss?”

“He couldn't have missed at that distance. He'd killed one man and needed to disappear again.”

Teresa frowned. “Wouldn't killing one man make it easier to kill another?”

Johnny shrugged and Scott answered. “People will forget a hermit like Chinese Charlie – but the son of a prominent rancher? That would've brought too much attention.” If Murdoch had insisted on going to the mine with Johnny, Weir might have been caught instead of making his escape.

The front door opened and Murdoch canted in. All the riding he'd been doing and the stress of assisting neighbors and friends hadn't helped his back. He took off his hat and tossed it on the dining table, heaved off his jacket and draped it over a chair.

“How'd it go, Murdoch?”

“Just fine, Johnny. Penny Rose and her aunt are on a train home.” Murdoch limped over and eased himself down on the back of the sofa.

Teresa tilted her head. “Are you hungry, Murdoch? I held some supper back for you.”

“Not really. I have a headache.”

Johnny smirked. “Penny Rose gave one last performance?”

“Yes, she did. I'm off to bed.”

Teresa jumped up. “Not without eating first.” She put a hand on Murdoch's arm. “Come on, I'll make you a sandwich and coffee. That'll make you feel better.”

Murdoch patted her hand, rose and tucked her arm under his. “I'll give it a try. Good night, boys.”

“Good night, sir.”

“Night, Murdoch.”

The fire popped and cracked. Johnny wrestled with the logs, exposing unburned wood which flared with flame.

Teresa returned after a few minutes. “Murdoch's exhausted. I hope he can finish eating before he falls asleep.”

Scott grinned. Murdoch needed a break, especially after the episode with Penny Rose where he had to do most of the work. “Did food calm the savage beast?”

“Doesn't it always?” She picked up her sewing. “Too much has happened these last few weeks. You should celebrate now everyone's home.”

“Celebrate how?” Johnny sat forward. “Whatever it is, I'm in.”

Teresa pursed her lips. “I don't know. Something fun. A hunting trip, maybe? Or go fishing?”

Scott hadn't been able to get away to fish in months. “That last sounds good. Won't you come with us?”

“No, thank you.” Teresa displayed a dainty smile. “I always find lots of things *not* to do when all of you are gone.”

Johnny leaned back and laced fingers over his stomach, tapping thumbs together. “We can't just fish.”

Scott turned to him. “Why not?”

“It's boring.”

“I guess that depends on your point of view – and your temperament and fishing methods.” Invariably, during previous outings Johnny had scared fish into hiding.

“Well, my temper says if I'm going to be bored let's make it interesting. Some kind of contest.”

“Who can catch the biggest fish?”

“With a prize at the end.”

“Dining on fresh fish isn't enough?”

“You've been complaining about those creases in your hat since I stowed it in my saddlebags –”

“I've been joking about that, Johnny.”

Johnny held up a hand. “No, no. We could all use a new hat. Whoever gets the biggest fish gets one.”

“You can all chip in on the cost. Winner takes the pot,” Teresa suggested.

Scott smiled at thoughts of serene nature, the lullaby of a river and spending leisure time with Murdoch and Johnny.

They ought to take bets on how long the quiet would last.

The End Dec 2019