

Song Sung Blue

By Raian

Follows "Odds and Ends"

"The stupidity of men always invites the insolence of power."

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

"People hate hearing their favorite stories questioned. And plenty of them would far rather continue to live a lie than even consider facing the truth."

– Ed Combs

Song sung blue. Everybody knows one

– Neil Diamond

And the best thing you've ever done for me is to help me take my life less seriously.

It's only life after all

– Indigo Girls (Closer to Fine)



Desert's harsh edges and badlands fell behind him on the journey to greener pastures. He'd ended up a long way from home. Lancer pulled him northward and he made good time after leaving Onyx and seeing Bill and Willie Sharpe safely onto a stage headed north.

Days passed and Scott resisted pushing his horse hard. A long time getting back proved useful in one way: rope burns on his wrists had almost healed.

As they neared Lancer, darkness fell. Rather than spend another night on the trail, Scott rode on. Once on familiar ground, Boots knew the way and Scott let the horse have its head. They could both smell home well before they reached the Lancer valley – green grass and water after weeks of heat and dust. The smooth road on the valley floor invited a lope.

The Lancer arch made its presence known by blocking the stars when he rode underneath. No lights shone from Great Room doors or windows.

The ranch sat quiet and still. If not for dim light coming from an open barn door, the place could have been deserted.

Scott dismounted, loosened the girth and led Boots into the barn. Pausing inside the door, he stripped off saddle and bridle and tapped the horse on the hip. “Go to your stall, boy.” As Scott rinsed the bit in a nearby bucket of water, Boots trotted down the aisle to his stall and banged on the manger. Barranca nickered and Boots answered in kind.

“Don't you ever feed that horse?” Johnny's arms and head appeared over Barranca's stall door.

“He forgot he ate this morning.” Scott removed saddlebags and bedroll from the saddle.

Johnny reached for the latch and shut the door behind him, coming to heft Scott's saddle onto an empty rack on the way to the hayloft ladder.

Scott shook out the saddle blanket, putting it upside down over his saddle before hanging the bridle on the saddle horn. There was enough left in the barrel of oats for a coffee tin full. Boots inhaled the ration. Scott ran a brush over the horse, though no doubt Boots would rather have a roll in the dirt.

Forkfuls of hay dropped from above. Most landed in Boots's manger. The horse shook its neck and flopping mane sent pieces of hay flying.

Scott glanced up, eyes following Johnny's footsteps. “You're working late.”

Johnny slid down from the loft, booted feet gripping either side of the ladder as he controlled his descent with hands on rungs. “So are you.”

“I'm almost done. Is everyone in bed?” Scott felt Boots's chest – hair nearer the horse's body had already dried.

“It's Saturday night, Scott.”

Tapping fingers counted days on the trail and in Onyx. “Indeed it is.”

“Teresa's at Aggie's. Murdoch went to Gus's poker game.” Arms crossed, Johnny leaned against Boots's stall.

“You didn't want to see Lucy tonight?”

“I stopped in. The ladies are working themselves up for a big do in town tomorrow.”

“And rather than being roped into helping, you left early.”

“Told her I had to check on a stray that might show up.”

“Did it?”

Johnny displayed a gimlet grin. “Yeah – better late than never.”

Brushing hay off himself, Scott backed out of the stall, swung the door shut and trudged to the hacienda behind Johnny. The sight of the pump and starlight glinting on water in the tub below it caused a shiver. He'd had enough of bathing in cold water. “Is there water left in the bathhouse?”

“Probably. You eat supper?”

“Not yet.”

“I'll wash up in my room and see what's in the pantry.” Johnny lit lamps and leapt up the stairs. Scott trailed behind, wishing he had a modicum of Johnny's energy left.

Navigating his room in the dark, he tossed bedroll, saddlebags, coat and hat on a chair and selected clean clothes. Going out through the back patio door, he plodded along the gloomy walkway to where the bathhouse hulked. The door creaked open under his hand. Feeling for chairs which might have been left in his path, Scott made it without stubbed toes to a wall and lit a lantern.

The fire under the water tank had been banked for the day. Scott twisted a valve open. Compared to streams found along the trail, water from the tank felt warm. He sped through ablutions while water ran into the tub – less water used meant less to have to drain.

As he dried and dressed, Scott examined his wrists. The remaining marks were barely visible in dim light. He buttoned shirtsleeves before running hands over his wet hair, willing it into neatness. It had grown long before the fishing trip. He needed an appointment with scissors soon. As it was, Murdoch would call him the wild man from Borneo or make jokes about ancient Britons looking through hedges.

In the hacienda kitchen, a wine bottle and glass waited on the table across from a tumbler holding two fingers whiskey. Johnny banged around in the pantry. Scott leaned against a counter, lifting lids from what Johnny had already placed there. “Do you need a hand?”

“Already have two. Sit.” A sharp knife made short work of slicing bread and Johnny piled food onto a platter: all leftovers, but even cold scraps of Maria and Teresa's creations would be good. Johnny, hands busy, swung his chin toward the table. “You want more than wine?”

“This is fine.” Scott turned the bottle to read the label. “A good choice for what we're having...” – Johnny chorused the last word with him – “Beef!” Scott pulled the cork and filled the glass.

“Did you and Willie find old man Sharpe?”

“They're together. Headed off to make a new home.”

“You were gone a long time. What happened?”

Scott frowned and tapped the table. “It's a long story. You see, Onyx –”

“Wait.” Johnny set the platter on the table before sitting. He lifted the tumbler above his head. “I've had it up to here with ledgers, cattle prices, ranch work, drought problems and neighbors wanting things since you've been gone. Make it a story.”

Scott ran his lower lip between his teeth. Kidding might take some of the sting out of the trip. What he thought would be a simple, perfect reunion between Willie and Bill had gone wrong. “All right.” Scott slid the platter closer to himself. “This is more than I can eat, Johnny.”

“Not all for you.” Johnny reached for a thick slice of roast beef, held it centered between thumb and index finger, and rotated it by nibbling around the edges.

“The ride there and back was hot, dry and dusty.” Scott selected his own piece of beef. “Willie met his grandfather and they're going to Oregon to start a new life.”

“That's it?”

Scott studied the plate of food, though there was no reason to be picky with vegetables. Piled haphazardly on the side nearest Scott, Johnny wouldn't eat any except potatoes. Silverware should be used... Scott shrugged and chose two beans. Food could be more satisfying when eaten slowly and in small amounts by hand. “That's the executive summary.”

“It's too short.”

Scott smirked. “There's not much else to it.”

Johnny spoke around a mouthful of beef. “You were gone for weeks while I've been working my toes off. I want a good story.”

“I'm tired, Johnny. And we're eating.” A flourished carrot emphasized the point.

“Eat and talk.” Johnny licked his fingers before selecting another piece of beef. With the other hand, he topped up Scott's wine glass.

Talking would help him stay awake while they ate. He could cast the story in the style of *Charles O'Malley, The Irish Dragoon* but that wouldn't be as familiar to Johnny as a western-themed dime novel.

Two rode south through sun-drenched pastures full of bovine and ovine herds happily chewing their cuds.

Soon – or not soon, but after many multiples of days riding through what slowly became drier and fiercer country boding dreadful and most difficult times ahead – the two began the arduous task of climbing into the forbidding and ominous hills which held the mining town of Onyx. Actually, the two did not have to labor. The mighty steed of The Man did the work. The Man and Willie had only to hold on and were carried ever upward. The Man –

Johnny held up a hand. “You can't call him *the man*.”

“Why not?” Scott downed a mouthful of food and sipped his wine.

“Not good enough. It lacks....” Johnny's lips compressed under a tapping forefinger.

“Panache?”

“Sure.”

“Sophistication?”

“Yeah.”

“Flamboyance, élan, charisma, esprit, animal magnetism –”

Johnny held up both hands. “The name has to say what kind of man he is.” He picked up beef and a potato. “Or what he does for a living so everybody knows when he gets to town.”

“Readers will see the capital letters and know... he's the one and only... The Man. A most perspicacious personage.”

Johnny waved a hand, making roast beef flap. “I'm not reading. Didn't know he was capital.”

Scott selected another vegetable. “Let me ponder the problem.” A list of dime novel names from the books they'd read ran through his head. “Black Scott.”

Johnny made the face he used when looking at a bull's manure-smear'd rump. “What kind of name's that?”

“Well... mine. With an adjective to indicate he's a desperado.”

“No, no. That's not how you do it.”

Scott singled out more vegetables and a piece of beef. “How do you do it?”

“Has to be something different. Black's been used 'til it's used up. The Man In Black's taken.” Johnny rolled the slice of beef around the potato. “You could use a nickname.”

Scott drew a shoulder up toward an ear and lifted his eyebrows.

The side of Johnny's mouth lifted and gave a glimpse of teeth. He whispered around a mouthful of food. "Scotty."

Scott imitated a good ol' Texas drawl. "*Them's fightin' words.* Or in this case – *word.*"

Johnny, chewing, grinned.

"It doesn't matter." Scott raised his eyes to the heavens. "I'll call him The Gunfighter."

"Nope." Johnny raised his chin and thumped his chest with the tip of a thumb. "That one's mine." He refilled Scott's wine glass.

Scott rubbed his lower lip with his tongue. He drank half a glass of wine. Nothing came to mind.

"Come on, brother. Don't make me do all the hard work."

"I could use some help."

Johnny ran a hand over his hair before smirking. "The Dude." Fingers tapped the top of his head. "He could wear that dumpy round hat."

Scott rolled his eyes. "Señor Scott."

Johnny barked out a laugh. "Nobody's going to think you're Mexican." He tipped his head and looked Scott up and down. "Too Slim."

"I suppose that would make it harder for bullets to hit him, but it's hardly a name for a ruffian. Do you want me to tell this story *realistically* or not?"

"Sorry, sorry... Boston."

A smile spread across Scott's face. "Boston Butterfly."

"Butterfly? You gotta be kidding!"

Scott waved fingers in the air. "Fleety flitting from flower... for flower. Fighting ferocious foes. Forswearing foibles. Fomenting ferociousness."

Johnny tsked. "Won't scare anybody. You can't start rumors and lies over somebody called *Butterfly.*"

"It's better than Too Slim or Dude Something-or-Other." Scott folded a piece of beef around several vegetables. "What about Giant Blue Moth? He who lights upon your face in the night until you think you're being smothered. And when you try to chase him away all you manage to do is slap yourself." Beef in one hand, he toasted his idea with wine glass in the other.

"That's on the right track anyhow."

Scott raised an eyebrow and swallowed some wine. "I'm still open to suggestions."

Johnny rolled eyes up, leaned elbows on the table and with chin on palms tapped the sides of his face as he thought. He scratched the back of his neck. "This is hard. Can't you come up with something?"

Scott finished the food in his hand. "The Man in Blue?"

"Better than in Black."

"I'll shorten it to Blue Man. Or I could use the initials... on second thought, no."

Johnny smirked and made a sandwich of a slice of bread between two pieces of beef.

Scott made his own sandwich while pondering the difficulty of picking an appropriate dime novel name. "Blue Rifle? Rifle for short."

Johnny pointed with his sandwich. "*That's* a name people will remember." He waved his free hand through the air palm upward. "Proceed."

Rifle toted Willie along on the long, hard, dusty, dry ride to Onyx. All the while, the sun beat a tattoo on their heads. Running water became a fond memory. Greens faded away, replaced by an annoyingly boring and desertish palette of dull grays, reds and tans. Without Rifle's blue shirt, they'd have faded into the background.

The Rifle's mighty horse made child's play of the deserty trail full of rocks and potential hardship. Fortunately, they'd taken all the supplies from all available saddlebags before they left... a diet of beans, jerky and dried apples fueled their arduous trek.

Their quest? To find Kansas Bill Sharpe. Or rather, to give Bill time to find himself. Though Rifle and Willie didn't know it at the time, Bill had happily and willingly climbed into a bottle and pulled the cork in tight.

But never fear, dear reader. Bill will climb out of that bottle, fall back in and finally get out of it for good by the end of this story. As you will see.

Johnny made his *I am not amused* face. "Don't like it."

"What's wrong with it?"

"You can't start a story by telling the ending."

"It's done all the time. It's called foreshadowing."

"It's called going ass first."

"Would you like to tell the story?"

“How can I? I don't know what happened.”

“I just told you.”

“I know they go to Oregon.” Johnny waved both hands in front of himself, palms down. “OK. OK. Never mind. Sometimes stories start bad and get better. Sure hope this is one of those.” He refilled Scott's wine glass.

Rifle longed to finish this quest so he could return to his wild and woolly life of solitude and hardship broken now and then by the beauty of sunsets on lonesome back trails. He anticipated a quick and joyous meeting between Willie and his grandfather but first had to make sure Bill was in town and able and willing to be presented to his grandson.

He left Willie in a deserted cabin nearby, trusting a child who'd walked barefoot for miles and who'd proven he could steal with the best of them could take care of himself.

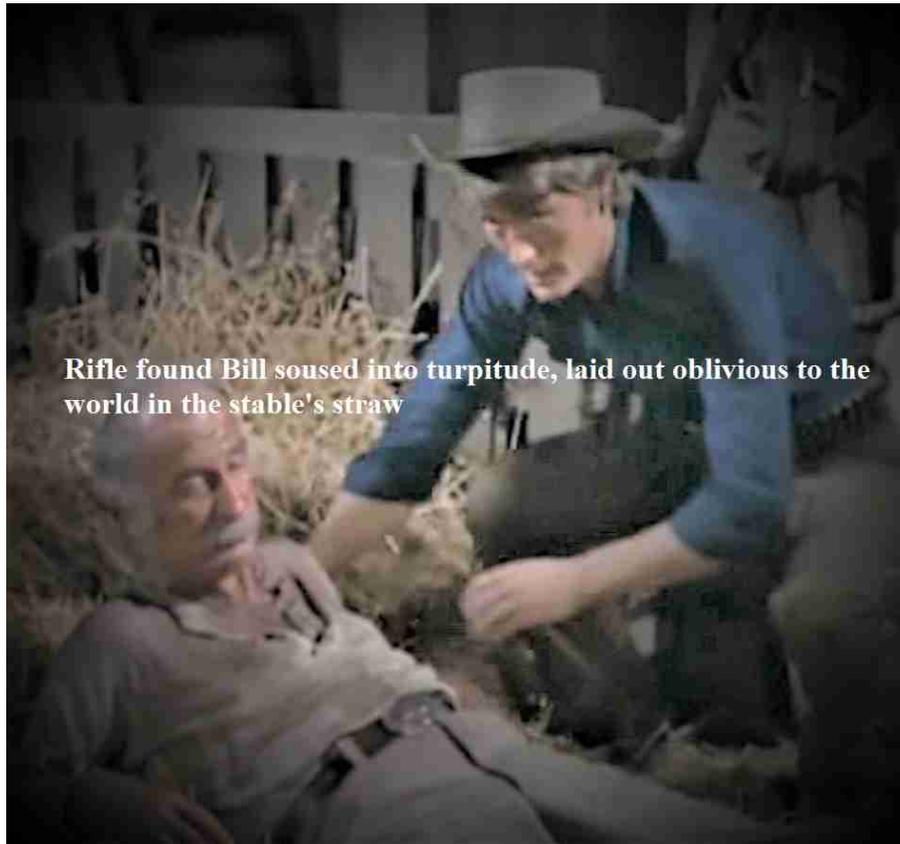


The streets of Onyx were quiet when Rifle rode in. He knew with instincts born of many long rounds with adversity that such silence could hide brooding evil.

Someone had built a sheriff's office but it was unoccupied. Perhaps the small group of respectable resident females roaming the town had insisted it be erected as a deterrent to the bad element.

It soon became evident that at present no law was needed. Drunk and disorderly miners couldn't do a decent day's work. The man who ran Onyx – who we'll meet presently – and local businessmen didn't want property destroyed. They were there to make money and take money from others, not to spend it fixing windows and broken tables after rowdy sprees.

Rifle inquired after Bill and traveled in the direction pointed out by one of those respectable women – who lifted her finger with a disgusted expression which did not augur well – toward the town livery. There, Rifle found Bill soused into turpitude, laid out oblivious to the world in the stable's straw.



Rifle determined to sober up Bill, refusing to be the one to ruin Willie's fantasies born of tall tales – spread by his parents – of his rumored famous and only remaining kin. Rifle wanted Willie's meeting with Bill to be a fairy-tale – or dime-novel – ending to a laborious odyssey.

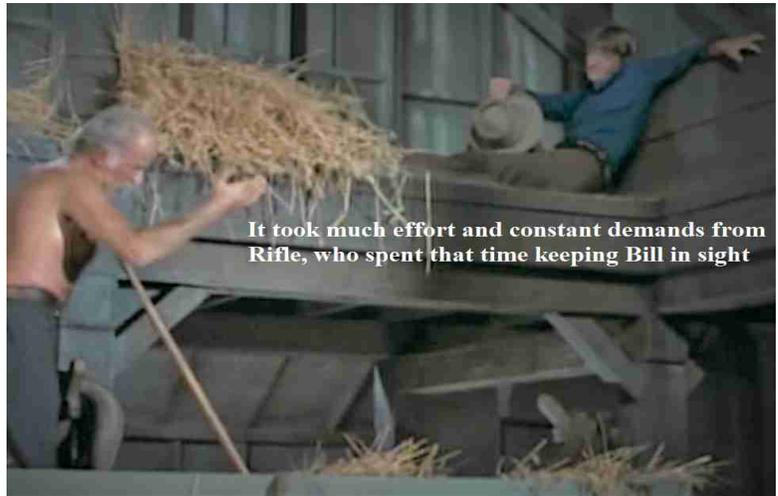
Bill did not want to cooperate – he did not see himself as a family man. Rifle adjusted his plan to have Willie meet Bill before a new home was found... somewhere else... for the young boy.

Before they met, however, Bill had to be de-soused. The offer of twenty dollars to meet Willie convinced Bill to play along.

Four days. That's how long it took to get Bill dried out. It took much effort and constant demands from Rifle, who spent that time keeping Bill in sight. Because guaranteed, if Bill got out of Rifle's sight, Bill would fall face first into the nearest bottle. Rifle knew he would – Bill tried it once while Rifle's back was turned.



Four days. That's how long it took to get Bill dried out



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Some in Onyx resisted Rifle's plan. A dastardly man named Andrews – who claimed to be a colonel though in which army he'd gained the rank was never revealed – ran the town. Andrews owned most of the mines in the area and most of the people. Because he ruled the roost, most townsfolk followed him around like sheep and did his bidding.

Andrews considered Bill to be his and the town's punching bag. It was Andrews's delight to keep Bill in the bottle. Bill in a bottle made for fun and laughs. The bad element watched the contests Andrews set up – mock gun duels where he could best a fallen lawman called Kansas Bill Sharpe – who was Willie's grandfather, as has already been stated.

Our indomitable hero –



Our indomitable hero

“You're too wordy.”

“It's hard to tell a story without words.” Scott drained his glass.

“Some are a mite long. I don't want to have to ask what they mean.”

“Go ahead and ask. The story's already become piecemeal. More interruptions won't hurt anything.” Scott took advantage of the break to built another sandwich.

“Nobody's going to want to read your story if they keep tripping over words.” Johnny topped up Scott's wine glass.

“The book could be part of a matched set that includes a dictionary.”

“Who wants to keep looking up words?”

“Only the hardest souls. The types who want to say, *This hamlet contains inadequate capacity for the twain composed of yourself and myself.*”

Johnny's mouth dropped open and his face went blank while he parsed the sentence. The edges of eyes wrinkled and a smile spread. Johnny ran fingers through hair on the side of his head. “We should've called him Wordy.” His palm hit the table. “No. Long-Winded Scott.”

Scott flourished fingers full of peas that had rolled out of his sandwich. “Sorry. The character taking my part in this story has been assigned a name.” He tipped his head back and deposited the peas in his mouth, managing not to drop any. He washed the mouthful down with wine.

Johnny got up to slice bread and piled more beef on their plate. “What'd you do next? Threaten the fake colonel you'd shoot him if he didn't leave Bill alone? Threaten to shoot the miners so they'd quit working which made Andrews go bankrupt? You could've sat by the mine entrance with a rifle. Or an empty shotgun.”

“There were too many mines to cover and Quaker guns only work until someone realizes they're fake.”

“Yeah.” Johnny sat and pulled his chair close to the table. “It only takes one and you're toes-up. Did you call out Andrews or one of his sheep?”

“Now who's anticipating the ending?”

“Just hoping this turns into a real dime novel at some point.” Johnny pushed the refilled plate to the center of the table.

Scott thumped Johnny on the arm. “Once the tale is told it can be edited to improve readability.”

“OK. Haven't we already done a story about a mine?”

“More than one... I think. Or maybe it's only been once up 'til now. It's hard to keep track when storylines repeat. I'm sure we'll encounter mines again. In any case, there's only a brief mention of them in this story.”

“Don't know if I can stand a fuse burning toward dynamite while Rifle's stuck unconscious or tied up –

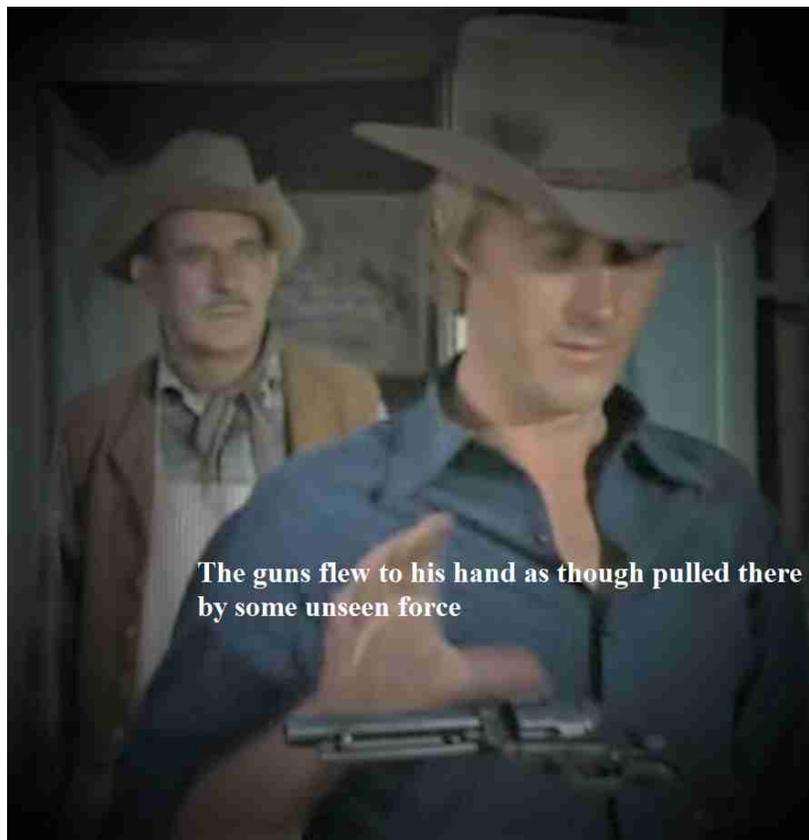
or both – in one of Andrews' mines.”

“I can assure you that does not happen in this story.”

After all alcohol was squeezed from his body by the sweat of honest work – and after a bath – Bill looked and smelled like a new man.

To complete the picture of famous lawman that would thrill the eyes of Willie, Bill wore new clothes. He needed to be armed. Dried out he might be, but Bill's hands still shook. It was up to Rifle to select the weapons.

Andrews and his hangers-on, along with all idle townsfolk, wandered over to watch. Guns flew to Rifle's hand as though pulled there by some unseen force and tin cans had no choice but to flee.

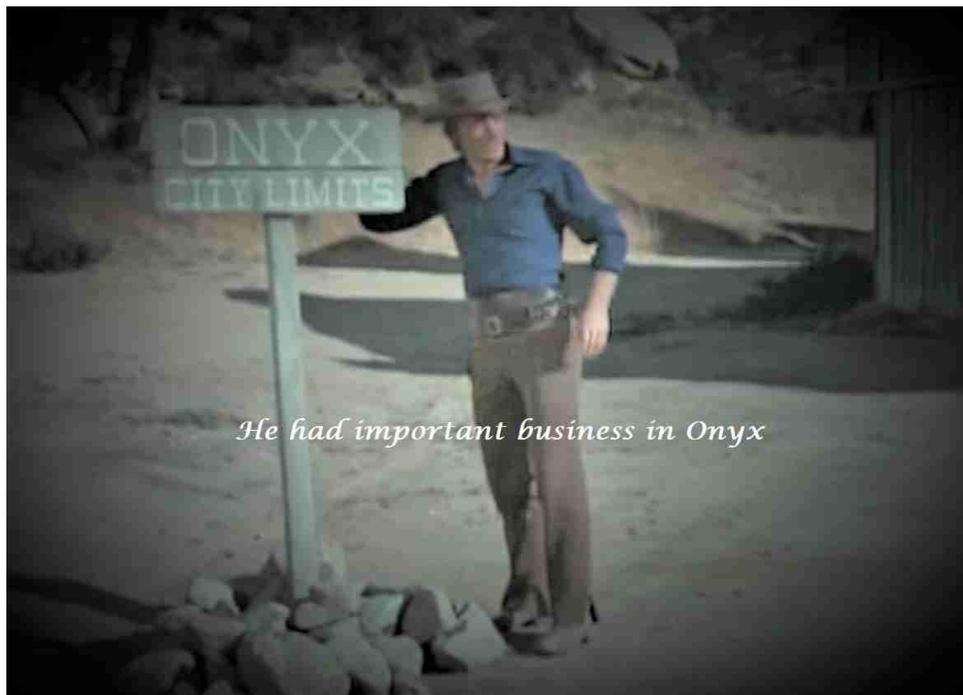


Rifle with a rifle was something to see – after Andrews made threats, Rifle wanted Andrews and his dastardly minions to see. Rifle's rifle fire sent a can running for its life... but it could not escape the furious fusillade before its hide got perfectly perforated.

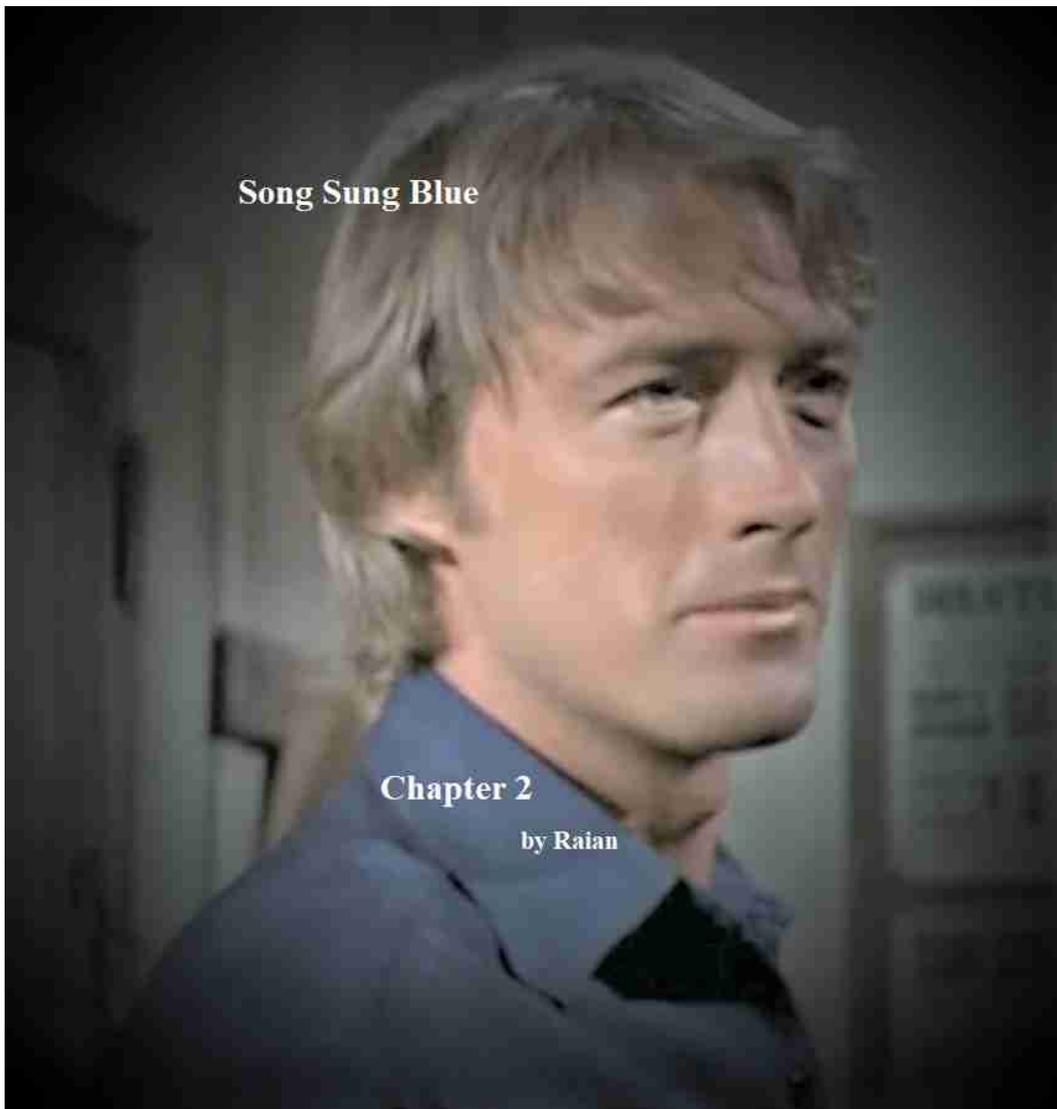


Rifle with a rifle was something to see

Andrews blinked and twitched... and ordered Rifle out of town. Rifle refused to go. He had important business in Onyx: Willie had to meet his hero.



He had important business in Onyx



Song Sung Blue

Chapter 2

by Raian

“Andrews saw you use a rifle?”

“He and others watched. I had to test fire guns and carbines to make sure we bought ones in working order.”

“That should've sent old Andrews running for the hills.”

“It didn't... but it did give him pause.” Scott laced fingers and tapped his thumbs together. A dime novel needed a bad guy – one who'd test the heroes and fall flat when trying to do so. Some imaginary gunman fit the bill for Bill. *“Most importantly, it gave The Man With No Name a hide full of second thoughts. He did not want to run up against Rifle's rifle.”*

“Man With No Name?”

“He'd come to town to call out Bill.”

“What kind of name's No Name?”

“Not much of one, apparently.”

“He must not be much of a gunfighter. Gunfighter book of rules says to strut around town telling everybody your name.”

“Couldn't you wait 'til you kill someone, only to triumphantly declare: Me, the Great So-and-So, has just killed What's-His-Name. You all remember the prowess of the Great So-and-So.”

“Yeah, you could. But if you lose, nobody knows what name to put on the tombstone.”

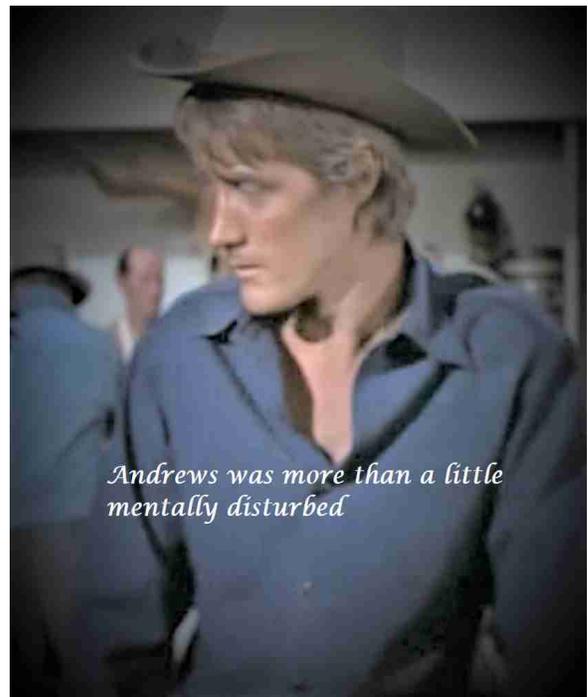
“Ah, yes. Eminently good advice.”

“Why couldn't Andrews brace Bill?” Johnny pulled more sandwich makings from the platter.

“A sober Bill meant losing a pet monkey. Andrews wanted Bill killed and wanted to watch it happen.”

“Monkey?”

That part had been true and more than a little disturbing. Scott described his interview with Andrews in the saloon.



Johnny whistled and shook his head.

A drink of wine washed the taste of that meeting from Scott's mouth. “Andrews is more than a little mentally disturbed.”

“I'll say.”

“Yet another small-minded man trying to run a town. Seems like we run into one of those every few weeks.” There were many strange, aggressive and greedy people living near Lancer.

“What about that Man With No Name?”

“I'm getting to him.”

“He has to have a name.”

“He was hoping to give himself one by killing Bill.”

Johnny chortled. “Now you're making a dime novel.” He tore bread into pieces. “It doesn't work that way – real gunfighters don't do it. If we all stalked each other, nobody'd get any work done.”

“So it's not at all like the claim that eating someone's heart makes you as courageous as he is?”

“What? That's crazy!”

“I hear it's done in some parts of the world.”

“Well, men who live by the gun have bad ideas but killing somebody who might be better than you means nothing. The only thing that means anything is you're willing and able to kill who you're paid to kill.” Johnny looked grim. He picked up his tumbler but put it back down without drinking.

Scott blinked. Johnny had stated the harsh truth and it took a moment to find the will to keep kidding about it.

Johnny set him back on track. “There has to be a shootout for it to be a dime novel.”

“I'm getting to that. Remember No Name?”

Johnny wiped fingers on his pants and selected more food. “Right. So what's his name?”

“That's it.”

“He has to have a real one.”

Scott ate a piece of potato. He shouldn't have brought up No Name. In reality, after Scott selected firearms for Bill in front of Andrews, Bill spent hours target shooting out of sight of the town. Using up multiple boxes of ammunition, the practice steadied Bill's hand and gave him confidence. “No Name's name is Cowboy.”

“That's... pathetic.”

“Too simplistic?”

“Who'd be scared of some dude named Cowboy?”

“All right, then. He's called” – Scott picked a name out of thin air – “Elliott.”

Rifle brought Willie to meet his kin. As they rode into Onyx, the main street rang with shouts and derisive laughter. What was going on?



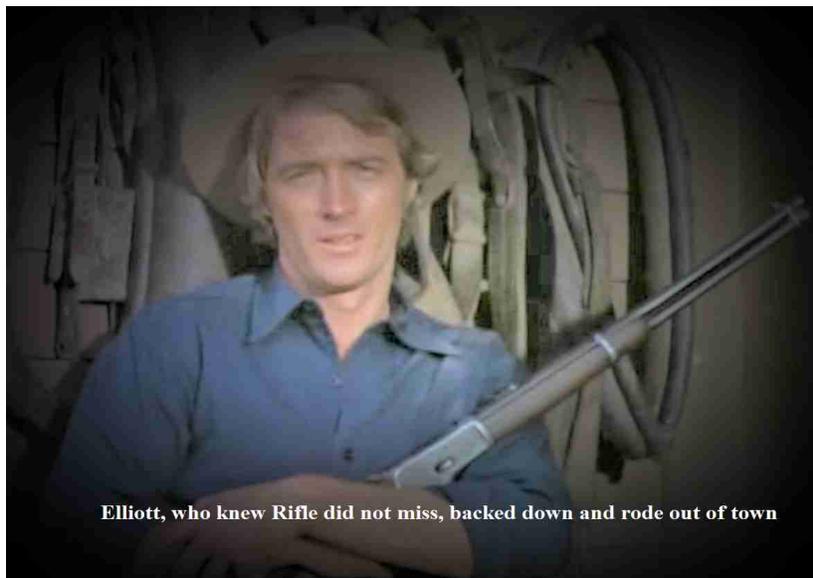
A gunfight! In order to see his pet monkey killed, Andrews had engineered a gunfight between Elliott and Bill.

Rifle fetched his rifle and went to lurk in a conveniently located open door behind Bill. Elliott could see



him but Bill did not turn to look back.

Elliott, who knew Rifle did not miss, backed down and rode out of town.



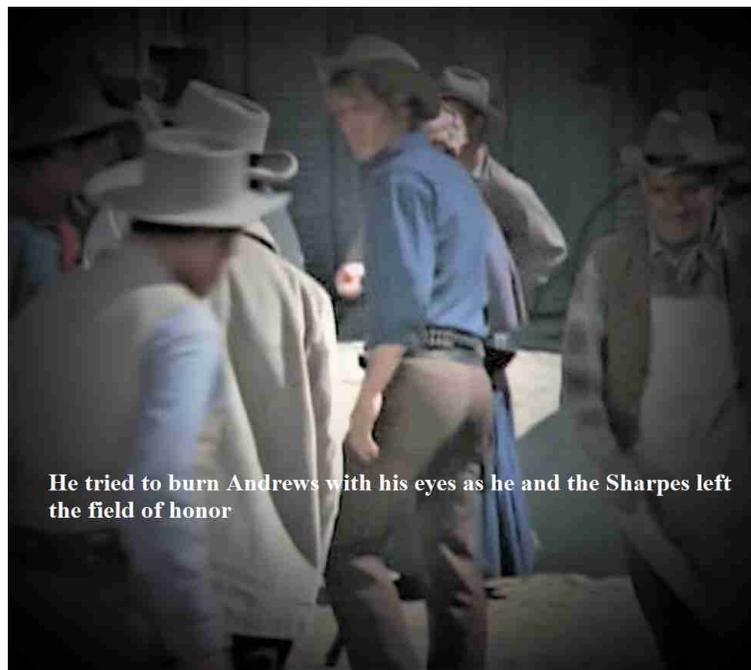
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Willie had eyes only for his famous kin, Kansas Bill Sharpe, standing tall in the middle of the street, wearing clean clothes and encumbered with new rig and pistol. Willie had been named after Bill, after all. They were two peas in a pod, though one was a young boy and the other an old sot.

Bill looked dumbfounded and flummoxed upon seeing Willie, as if the whole purpose of sobering up had been forgotten. Willie reacted with enthusiasm. Bill realized he had a pair of large fantasy shoes to fill... at least as long as Rifle and Willie were in town.

In Bill's point of view, Rifle and Willie couldn't leave town soon enough.

As the townsfolk gathered 'round to admire the fresh-smelling and lawman-looking Bill, Andrews appointed Bill as town marshal. Bill accepted, thereby throwing a wrench in Rifle's plans. He tried to burn Andrews with his eyes as he and the Sharpes left the field of honor.



He tried to burn Andrews with his eyes as he and the Sharpes left the field of honor

Will Andrews really give up his pet monkey? Can Bill stay sober? Will Willie want to leave town after meeting his famous kin? Read on, dear reader, to find out.

Scott rubbed his eyes. Making light of the story had become difficult. Willie's words had hit Scott in the gut: *I'm scared he won't want me.*



Bill hadn't wanted Willie – not at first. Not until Bill decided life without a bottle beat a life under Andrews' thumb. Bill had been reminded what it meant to be respected for living a good, honest and useful life. He wouldn't forget that lesson: *if that boy saw you drunk it would kill you.*

Happiness... a home... family. Didn't everyone deserve them? Johnny and he had gotten a second chance. Compared to Willie, they'd had an easier time of it. They'd both been told tales about Murdoch the Monster. Reality had been something easier to adjust to than seeing someone highly praised fall from a pedestal.

Scott pushed aside his weariness. His trip to Onyx came out right in the end. He needed to finish the story for Johnny.

Johnny, mouth full of food, started to chuckle.

“What's so funny?”

“If Rifle takes out Andrews all the others will slither out of town.” He used a foot to tap Scott's shin under the table. “You know – that snake thing.”

Scott rolled his eyes. “Bill did mention cutting heads off snakes and he's the one who had a showdown with Andrews.” He shrugged. “Unfortunately, men like Andrews can quickly be replaced. He did survive. He'll find someone else to pick on, and his minions will follow along. Besting Andrews did allow Bill to regain his dignity, though. He chose family over reputation.”

Johnny looked down at his hands. Scott smiled at the top of Johnny's head. Grabbing onto Lancer had saved his brother from the downward slide of a mercenary's life.

Wanting to get to know his brother had kept Scott in California in the beginning. He'd been changed for the better as Johnny, Murdoch and Teresa – and Lancer – crept under his own skin.

Rifle and Willie left town before Bill could return to old habits and disappoint his grandson. Bill had not yet found faith in himself – he could not ignore the siren song of booze.

Back on the trail, Rifle slept soundly. Though sad to see Bill choose bottle over boy, that boy was safe.



Willie, however, had other plans. He snuck away in the night, speeding back to Onyx. He found his grandfather in the same place and state as when Rifle first found him: drunk in the straw.

Andrews arrived on the scene, sensing victory – he could keep his monkey and have a boy for a toy.

Bill was left alone to soak in the straw. This time, however, the liquor did not sit so prettily in Bill's stomach.

Somehow, before leaving the barn, with the determination and disappointment a young child can bring to bear, Willie showed his disgust at seeing his hero Kansas Bill Sharpe laid low. The many days, nights, weeks, months and years of humiliation wrought by Andrews had not done it – a child's scorn was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Bill dragged himself up by his bootstraps and emerged from the barn whiskey-soaked but determined to salvage himself in his own eyes and in the eyes of his grandson.

Bill yelled down the street: Andrews, I'm calling you out. This town's not big enough for the two of us.

Andrews accepted the challenge. Moments before, he'd seen Bill sprawled in the straw and did not fear the former lawman turned habitual drunkard.

Bill knew if he cut the head off the snake, the rest would wriggle out of town.

Andrews went to draw his gun but stopped before his fingers touched the butt, his movements arrested by a gunshot and his own yell of pain. Bill had winged Andrew's right hand – an amazing display of speed and marksmanship from a tipsy man over fifty feet from his target. It could be called a miracle, but those watching knew the truth – the Legend of Kansas Bill Sharpe had come back to life.

“A showdown in the street?” Johnny snorted. “What really happened?”

“Andrews approached 'til he could reach out and touch Bill – which, as I understand it, is how their little contests usually ran. They each took hold of the end of a bandanna. Andrews dropped his end first.”

“Did Bill take a shot?”

“No. Bill beat him to the draw, which was enough to shock Andrews and the whole crowd. Andrews had built up an illusion of greatness – he'd won all their previous contests – but it couldn't hold up when put to a real test. At that point the emperor had no clothes. The whole town saw it and Andrews knew it.”

Johnny gaped. “They fought naked?”

Scott waved a hand back and forth. “No. That's from another story. Remind me to tell it to you sometime.”

“Did Andrews shoot after Bill's back was turned?”

“If he had, it wouldn't have done any good. Andrews hadn't loaded his gun. His *pièce de résistance* during the little duels he set up with Bill was to pull the trigger on an empty cylinder.”

Johnny rubbed his face. “Bill really said that snake thing?”

“He did, indeed. While telling stories of the good old days to Willie.”

Johnny shook his head. "So how'd it all end up?"

Andrews, magnanimously trying to save face, pronounced: Well. We might have a town marshal after all.

Bill undid his gun belt, letting it fall to the ground in a puff of dust which added emphasis to his exhortation: I don't want to shoot anybody anymore.

Johnny folded hands on the table and contemplated them before looking up. "Andrews let you all leave?"

"The story's coming to an end... he had no more time to protest or to try to push his own agenda."

"He should've got a comeuppance."

"He won't. Not unless those he surrounds himself with dare to lift their heads out of the sand. Which won't happen 'til the mines play out. Andrews is in a position of power – he holds all the cards and can dole them out to appease his town full of monkeys."

In the Great Room, the clock struck four and walls brought echoes of the sound to the kitchen.

Scott pushed himself upright in the chair. While talking, he'd slid down far enough to rest shoulders against the chair's back. "I'm off to bed while there's still a possibility of a few hours sleep."

"You already forget tomorrow's Sunday?" Johnny poured the last of the wine into Scott's glass.

"Oh. Never mind." He slid down in the chair again, cradling wine glass on his stomach.

"At least this time you didn't get shot."

Scott slid fingers sideways to pull the opposite sleeve down to his knuckles, making sure the rope burns stayed covered. He took a few gulps of wine. "Not this time."

"Not hit over the head?"

"No." A few more gulps drained the glass.

"Not beat up?"

Scott shrugged and put the empty glass on the table "Only a little."

"How many did you take on this time?"

"Three." That was to start. Others piled on once he'd been pulled from the barn.

“We better be careful. We're due for a gunshot or two.”

“I can't remember whose turn it is.” Food remained on the platter but Scott couldn't summon the energy to reach for it. “Had you really heard of Kansas Bill Sharpe?”

“Sure.” Johnny, one elbow on the table, used the other hand to pick up the largest remaining piece of beef. “He was a lawman. Long time ago. A hard case. You kept your nose clean in his town.” He took a bite, chewed, and pushed the food into his cheek to continue talking. “After he quit, some writer made up a bunch of stories for books. None of us ever read 'em. Nobody wanted to hear about a lawman chasing off gunfighters.” More chewing, around a grin. “No more'n we wanted to hear about horse soldiers keeping the peace and spoiling everybody's fun.”

“In Onyx, they seemed to think the name was something of a joke.”

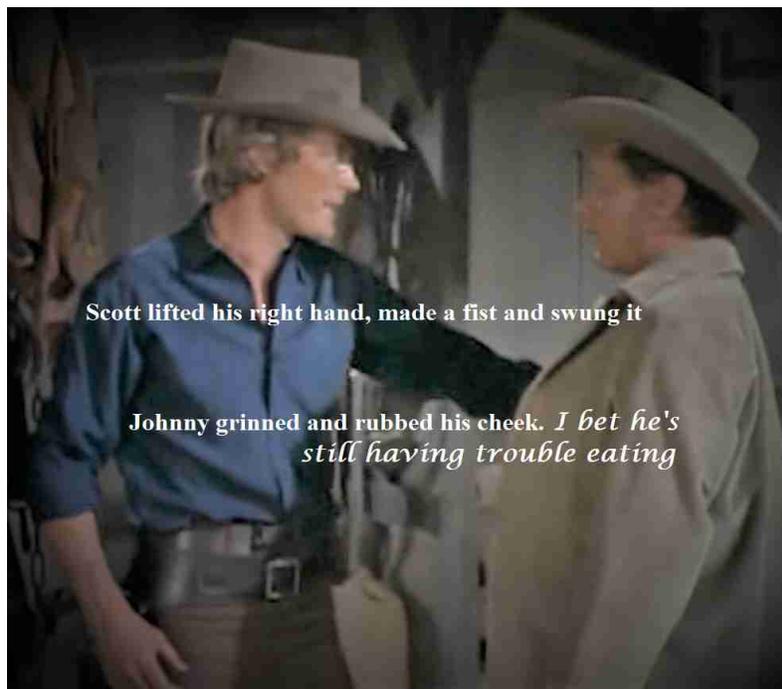
“So what *did* Andrews do to you?” Johnny sat back and crossed his arms.

“What do you mean?” Scott stopped himself from fussing with his sleeves.

“Andrews can't have let you walk away free – not after you showed him up.”

“I told you. His cronies roughed me up a little.” Scott's lips narrowed – the level of liquor in Johnny's tumbler hadn't dropped. Next to Johnny's glass stood the empty bottle of wine. Scott rubbed fingers along his jaw, unable to stop a smile at the attempt to loosen his tongue. It might have worked but he'd already decided to tell no one about being dragged – as punishments went, he'd had worse.

Johnny stared at him before uncrossing his arms. “You must've done something to Andrews besides show how good you are with slinging words and guns.” Scott lifted his right hand, made a fist and swung it. Johnny grinned and rubbed his left cheek. “I bet he's still having trouble eating.”



"I hope so." His and Bill's combined defiance convinced Andrews to give up.

"That the end?"

"I'm sorry. I forgot the most important part." Scott looked up at the ceiling before dropping eyes to meet Johnny's with a grin. "*The End.*"

"It'll do." Johnny tossed back his drink and gathered what needed to be washed while Scott returned the remaining leftovers to storage.

Johnny scraped leavings from the platter into the chicken's scrap bucket. "If cattle saw what chickens did to pieces of their old buddies the whole herd would run for the hills."

A vision of hungry chickens with wings spread wide and beaks agape, running after steers made Scott chuckle. As a child, he'd seen a farmer in Vermont stun a mouse by throwing it against the side of a chicken coop. Chickens descended and ripped the mouse to pieces before it could come to. If chickens were bigger, they'd rule the world with their pecks.

Johnny put dirty dishes and utensils to soak in the sink "Bugs, worms... they're close to meat."

Scott shivered. "Indeed. Insects can make a meal in a pinch."

Johnny turned with a questioning look but Scott closed his lips on knowledge of that subject. He headed for the back stairs. Yanking on the banister, Scott heaved himself upward, feeling mellow and fuzzy-headed. It had been a long time since he'd drunk that much that fast.

"You're going too slow." An ill-timed push from Johnny almost landed Scott on the floor at the top of the stairs.

"I can afford to be slow. It's your turn for an adventure now."

"Was looking forward to quiet times."

"You don't want to get shot in the leg again?"

"I've had enough of that and being nursed by some gal who wants to marry me."

"You forgot the best part... while a band of renegades threatens you."

"That couldn't happen again. Our lives aren't a dime novel."

"If it does happen, you can ask for help."

"I'd be stupid to take on somebody on my own when you and Murdoch can back me up." He gave Scott another shove.

Scott straightened his collar. "Let me walk with dignity, brother – at least with what little I have left."

"Sure, brother." Johnny paused with hand on the knob to his bedroom door. "Can you make it the rest

of the way?"

"If I can't, you'll be the first to know." Bed beckoned with a promise of oblivion and a cure for too many long days riding and sleeping on hard ground.

Scott couldn't get out of his clothes fast enough. Neatness could wait – pants, shirt and drawers landed on the bureau and he left boots and socks where they fell before climbing into bed.

Home again. He fell asleep to the sounds of Lancer stirring to meet a new day.

THE END Dec 2019 - Jan 2020

A/N: *Charles O'Malley, The Irish Dragoon* is said to be a favorite adventure book from George Armstrong Custer's childhood.

Johnny's mention of Earp and Masterson in this episode does not fit the true timeline of those two men.

What about the location of Onyx? Johnny tells Willie, "It's a tough trail. You gotta go through desert. It's up in the Lava Hills." Unless the Lancers went very (very!) far afield for their fishing trip, it's unlikely Scott needed to go "up in the Lava Hills" to get Willie to Onyx.

According to Google, the Lava Hills are in San Bernardino County, California, north of Bagdad which is currently one of many ghost towns in the Mojave Desert. John Sutter found gold in the Bagdad area in about 1898. Satellite view shows a whole lot of desolate desert with no oasis-like fishing spot in sight.

There is a town called Onyx near the south end of the San Joaquin valley, situated at least 100 miles northwest of Bagdad. In the time frame of Lancer, Onyx would have been called Scodie (in honor of William Scodie, who opened a store in 1861). The first post office at Onyx opened in 1889 which is when the name was changed (Scodie was too similar to the name of another town 400 miles away). Onyx includes 5,307 nearby mines according to one web page.

Inyo County (close to and east of Onyx – though close only counts in horseshoes) has lava flows... but once again begs the question of why the Lancers would travel so far to go fishing (especially since Murdoch disappears before they start eating what had been caught. Where did he go?). Why travel to Death Valley when there are many nice streams and lakes on Lancer?

In the interests of using those pieces of canon which fit reality, the current day town of Onyx is where Scott takes Willie – and it's a far piece from the likely location of Lancer.