

Testimony: Declensions of a Klismos

Word Count: 6300

Wednesday, May 22

At daybreak the next morning Will and Cook rode north at a brisk trot on the twisting and climbing and descending road to the place once known as Williamsburg or Whiskey Flat. They passed at least a dozen abandoned cabins disintegrating quietly in the midst of grass-grown mounds of dirt and potholes laboriously dug by miners long since gone or dead and in either case forgotten. Jackrabbits and a few cottontail now scurried away in alarm at the passing of men and horses on contested terrain while scores of jaybirds, assessing the unaccustomed sight, raucously announced their own irritation. The men saw many sign of deer. A buck splendidly antlered suddenly materialized and faced them for a few seconds in the middle of the road and then vaulted quickly up a bank, disappearing among the oak and pine and the foliage spread thick beneath them.

“What a clean shot he was,” remarked Will. “Getting him back to Havilah would be rough.”

“Yeah,” Cook grunted. “I think I’ve seen him before. He’s good folks. It’d take a day or two to give ‘im away, though.” He was not enjoying the ride. He was unaccustomed to a saddle and horse. He heartily wished he were walking slowly alongside his old burro, now resting contentedly at the town livery.

“This here life and jus’ one more,” he said, “and thank God for that!” He said it more than once.

For a while Will was mildly amused at his companion’s plight. But in deference to the old man, anticipating the soreness that would be Cook’s lot by the end of day when they returned to Havilah, he soon slowed the pace.

“Wha’ do you know about this Stinson hombre, in Havilah?” he asked.

“Well, I’ve knowed him ’bout ten years. Sold him a heap of dust too. He’s well off. Got a lucky break back when he made his Indian Head strike.”

“Thought he was an assayer.”

“Shore he was—still is—but he owns the Indian Head mine and he’s still operatin’ even if it ain’t much good no more.”

“Seems like assayers in boom towns wouldn’t have a lot of time to run around the country prospecting for gold.”

“Come to think of it, they don’t. Story among the local folks is that Stinson jist went ridin’ one day not payin much attention, and stumbled onto it. Mebbe him knowing a heap about mineral country, quartz formations and all that, helped him some. Ya know, I believe he’s a Yale man, or mebbe that beat-up little Wilfred and Mary place down there by Richmond. Anyway, he sure found a honey of a mine. He’s taken a lot of good ore outta that glory hole. Lot of it free gold too. Didn’t even have to smelt it. Mine’s almost petered out now, but he got his.”

Will smiled at the ambiguity of Cook’s final remark. The riders stopped for a few minutes. Will rolled himself a cigarette and one for his friend.

The two riders moved onward, and descended into Whiskey Flat well before noon. The town’s lone remaining building was the saloon. Seeking more lucrative locations, the prostitutes

long since had left. The shacks that had housed them had been torn down and the usable lumber hauled away to be incorporated into similar structures elsewhere: new towns, new towns, old towns. Cook explained that in its heyday the town had boasted four emporia dedicated to drink and vice—one for each of the now non-existent corners.

“Rip roarin’ place she was in them days,” he reflected. “Story says the fust man ever showed up here for breakfast got killed right smack in the middle of the street. Hit by four shots—one from each of them saloons. I guess nobody gave a damn about cross fire. Probably too drunk. Funny thing was, he turned out to be the wrong man, ‘cording to the story. So much for public opinion.”

“Sounds like this must have been an easy place to get killed,” Will commented.

“Bet your life it was,” Cook continued, warming up to the subject. “Town never had no real graveyard, but just up here ta Kernville they’s a place called Gunman Row. They’s fifteen or so of ’em buried in a nice straight line out there and I believe ever’ last one of them got it right here in Whiskey Flats.”

They reined up at the scarred hitchrail.

“Who runs the place now?”

“Fine old gent by the name a Wheatleigh. Changed owners a lot in the last few years. A few got shot, others just couldn’t stand the gaff and lit out. I hear business gets worse, every year. Liquor gets too hot out here, ya know—almost bad as Bakersfield.”

Cook climbed down wearily from the saddle, grateful to be on solid ground again. Will swung lightly off his mount.

“How do you know this Red’s gonna be here?”

“Hell, if he ain’t dead he’s around here somewhere. This is his home. He’ll be around till they plant him, I reckon. He’s stashed enough money for grub an’ a grave, an’ plenty a booze enroute.”

“Yeah, the booze’ll speed up the trip.”

“That it will. Sad too, ‘cause the man writes a good poem—once in a while.”

Cook pushed open the precariously hanging door. Will followed him into the gloom of the interior. As their eyes adjusted they made out the battered bar and the extraordinary apparition behind it.

“Howdy, Wheatleigh,” greeted Cook, more or less shouting.

Wheatleigh slowly aroused, from a profound sleep. A globoid mass of unhealthy flesh that quivered with the slightest movement, nearly discalced on its underside with remnants of fine leather shoes worn nearly to nothing, he must have weighed at least 350 pounds. He evinced no sign of recognition of Cook, nor curiosity concerning Cook’s companion. He took a long drink, straight, from the whiskey bottle on the bar before he spoke.

“What’ll you gents have?” he asked in a thick, expressionless voice. Cook stood saying nothing, smiling warmly, looking questioningly and expectantly across the bar at his good friend of many years and many revelries. He wanted a sign of life, some trifling sign of memory, a sign that his erstwhile friend were not now falling into the long lethargic disengagement that, among the older and the time-hardened and the time- and booze-consumed miners, was merely an extended prelude to death, an exploration of the prospects of death. And in this spectre now raised before him, Jed Cook saw the uniqueness: Ancient failed prospectors give themselves to slow, inexorable withering, and it was only the special circumstance of this particular man and this particular place that enabled the man to flout in its absence the world entire. In this barroom, he

believed, Wheatleigh had replicated the world around the calm and growing fires of his own extinction, as if he in his nothingness nonetheless had appropriated the simultaneous creativity and devastation of the god Shiva, unknown to the inhabitants of this land.

“Beer for me,” said Will, wondering how the man behind the bar managed to stand at all.

Cook ordered whiskey, in a voice and commentary that were a delight of happy memories.

“Well my friend, I’ll have that same cheap bar whiskey I was drunk on the night you decided to adopt the last two whores around here and we had to kick hell outta their pimp and three customers.”

“Beer ain’t cold.” Wheatleigh did not mean to apologize, but merely stated a fact as he set the beer on the bar. He looked confused.

Will studied the backbar. Many years earlier it had been a magnificently ornate structure, but now the once flawless mirror was cracked and clouded, and the carved mahogany pillars chipped and pitted at intervals by gunfire. Among the finely patterned bullet holes some were elegant in their geometry; most were random scars of unknown origin. The few glasses before the mirror were clouded over with local smut, and the visible bottles were festooned with cobwebs carefully managed by energetic and well-fed spiders. Wheatleigh poured. He poured Cook a huge drink, filled a second glass for himself, took another swig directly from the bottle, maneuvered himself backwards into a tiny, armless chair—the remnants of a Klismos, Philadelphia, circa 1837, mahogany—and appeared ready to lapse into his customary lethargy. Will smiled, noticing that Cook’s pleasure had diminished only slightly due to the fact that Wheatleigh had poured his drink from a personal bar bottle.

Will looked questioningly at his friend.

“Say, uh, Wheatleigh,” said Cook, “you seen Red lately?”

“Hell, I ’member you!” said Wheatleigh, coming to life. “Uh, uh, Jedidiah Cook, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. How ya been, Wheatleigh? Dangit alive amen you don’ look so good!”

Again the barkeep made a mighty struggle, a courtesy struggle held in reserve for all reliable clients, to get to his feet: First his drinking glass, returned to a small table on his right; then the second bottle, also for his personal use, set carefully on the floor at a safe distance beyond the nigh leg. The man was stun-blind (so he claimed) on that offside, but ordinarily in that region he didn’t need to see anything in particular: He only had to reach and probe carefully. Came then the challenge of getting the feet below the body once again—for the chair, the fine Klismos, was slightly too low. The man had to take hold of his pants at the calves and pull backwards, and then reach further down and pull the ankles so that they would slide back. Finally both hands, clamped to the edges of the chair seat, so that legs and arms could work together in unison as a complex of lifting jacks that would raise the central mass and, by the undiminished goodness of gravity cleverly countervailed, set the blood moving and the legs functioning. The two men shook hands. The huge man smiled, but he did not reveal how he’d been: One had to read him by his appearance and his behavior.

“I can’t believe you’re still alive plowin around these mountains without that beautiful bride a yers. How long’s it been, Jed?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. It’s just dumb luck, Wheatleigh. I either had to plow or go for a plot, ya know? Goin’ on ten years now. Tildie did put the color into these hills.”

“I ’member she stayed nice and slender livin with you, Jed. Never did get a chance to fill out, like me.”

Jed laughed. “Yeah, don’t I know it! Couple occasions we wuz out here ready to eat our

own gold dust, 'cept we couldn't afford that either! Shouldda gone into business, way you done."

The barkeep nodded toward the far end of the bar where a dark and cluttered corridor led to an unused exit at the rear of the building, like a deadend drift in a worthless mine. His voice was now strong and vibrant, because he wanted it to carry beyond the normal distance.

"Far's I know Red's lyin' where he usually is, Jed—over there sleepin' it off. Broke as usual, flat busted. So 'e says."

"That's why this is Whiskey Flat, my friend," said Cook.

Wheatleigh became alarmed and moved back to his chair, sat, and looked down at the floor. Then, by the established protocol he struggled to standing again but stayed bent over like a schoolhouse globe of the earth on a tilted pedestal. In the pinstripes of the immense open shirt one saw in sharp demarcation the longitudes through which this miserable life had journeyed. The man began coughing loud, violently, vehemently. The effort of it caused his body to move with unknown energy and the fat to quiver wildly and undulate and to roll noisy flatus out his rear. He raised himself strenuously to standing upright and with the hand no longer holding the bottle of the floor he swiftly unhitched his trousers and let them descend to the floor, balloon-slow, deflating like the airballoons of modern France or a shot-down airballoon from the War Between the States. He bent over. Again he began coughing wildly and the flatus took a liquid form backwards to a stained mosaic upon the backbar depicting Diana the Goddess of the Moon, and the liquid missile shot like a hunter's arrow collapsing harmlessly against the hard façade. Wheatleigh's face turned red but not with embarrassment, and he gasped so that he seemed like a steam engine about to explode. Then the coughing suspended itself; his massive body stopped moving altogether. Still bent over he looked up at Cook and smiled again warmly and shook his head and raised the index finger of the hand still not holding the bottle of the floor, to beg Cook's pardon. He slowly leaned way over as far as he dare and spit carefully to the floor a mouthful of thick yellowed phlegm smelling of vomit, flecked with disintegrated tobacco that gave it a deeper golden hue. Now Jed Cook laughed in astonishment and said nearly shouting, goddammit Wheatleigh cain't you getcha own bottle around here? as Wheatleigh himself laughed furiously without knowing why, and Cook watched a huge and globular rat run the length of the backbar along the filthy floor, the rat not unmindful of Wheatleigh's enticing sputum.

"Well, if that don't beat my buzzard," saith the man.

After a brief glance at the two newest patrons the rat turned, slowed its pace, and as if it were serving the visitors dutifully as a specially anointed guide and guardian it ambled understanding and efficiently and softfooted so as not to disturb or offend, to the place said to be occupied by good friend Red-Eye. Wheatleigh raised his trousers and again lowered himself and reached and raised the bottle of the floor, drank deeply, moved forward to the bar and placed the bottle circumspectly upon it. Again, open for business.

Behind the red eyes there still lived a small part of Mr. Eiseley. This is what he entered, on this day, into his personal journal:

*Shuffles back good Wheatleigh, alarmed, to his chair
Sits himself softly, looks down at the floor
Long since the day, when 'e had 'is last hoar
By protocols known, he then makes his flight
He struggles to standing on two feet but stays
Bent like a schoolmaster's globe of the earth*

*On pedestal tilted, where personal pinstripes
One sees of his shirt—full open, immense
In sharp demarcation, longitude lines
Through which this life in misery runs—
Long since have passed, have journeyed alive*

*Begins he now coughing in violence loud
Which effort soon causes his body, God-vowed
With action unknown and fat quiv'ring wild
To undulate out from his rear noisy flat
While quickly he raises himself upright standing
With the hand not now holding the jug of the floor
He swiftly unhitches his trousers galore
Which descend to his heels, so balloon-like slow
Deflating again, airballoons, French moderne
Or a shot-down balloon from the War of the States
This gasbag billowing putrefied fumes
And he bends down again to the floor, coughing spates*

*And the sudden-found flatus takes pure liquid form
Back, ascending, to all those old surfaces stained
Where a backbar depicts the Goddess of Moons
Liquid missile shot as a hunter's swift arrow
Collapsing sure silent harmless to the hard, hard façade
A power and placement to bring down a sparrow
And Wheatleigh's face reddens, but not to embarrass
As he gasps once again and so does it seem
Like an engine about to explode, in a dream
And the coughing then again, itself will suspend
And this massive old man stop his movement so full*

*Unto Cook he then looks, still bent, smiles again
With a shake of the head, raises fingers of signs
Of the hand not with bottle, that clings to the floor
Old Jeddie, pardon he begs, slowly leans to the font
As far as he dare for to spit to the floor
This thick yellowed phlegm with its singular scents
Like vomit with flecks, with tobacco for gents
That gave deeper gold hues, and Cookie does laugh
And says nearly shouting, goddammit my son
Wheatleigh, he says, cain't you getcha'own bottle?*

*As Wheatleigh laughs loud 'thout knowing full why
And Cook sees the huge and a globular rat
Run all through the lengths of the backbar's dark floor*

*Not without noting good Wheatleigh's dark sputum
And then with brief glance at the two freshest patrons
The rat slows its pace, as if it were serving
Serving visitors, dutiful, as special anointed
Guide and fine guardian, it ambles appointed
It ambles efficient, with softness afoot
So as not to disturb, give offence to this place
Said not just of late to be held by Red's grace
And Wheatleigh again himself doth descend
To raise the floor bottle, his body unbend
And drink of it deep, moved now 'fore the bar
Placed upon it with care—with care,*

O Thee, O my Beloved, my Death

(In a later century a sign affixes itself to this building, or perhaps to an outhouse that serves it:

PROTECTED BY SMITH & WESSON
6 NIGHTES A WEEK
YOU GUES WHICH NIGHTS.)

(Mr. Eiseley calls his story *California Gold*.)

“Gotta clean up your system, ya know.”

“Right. An’ you are a picture of health, Wheatleigh. Damn good-sized picture too, my friend. You gotta be way over twenty stone, an’ about nineteen of em’s inside yer head.”

The barman refilled Cook’s glass generously from the floor bottle because this barman was well attuned to customer discomfort and complaints. His face now held a renewed and broadened and cherubic smile.

“Don’ know if you can wake him up, Cook, if you wanna. Only reason I give him drinks is I gotta have somebody to talk to, ya know, and then the fool always passes out on me. Wish somebody’d round ‘im up. He don’t impress the other patrons around here, believe me.” Of whom there had been none for many days.

Cook smiled. “Right, Horace. This is a class operation.” And the delight flashed again across his face and his smile broadened because he had remembered the name of his old friend, and because he knew that his old friend had poured him the whiskey of quality.

“You know this bar was designed by none other than old Amos Hannah? It’ll go down in history. Somebody put lotsa gold into this damn mess. And you and that fool over there’s gonna go down with it.”

“Hell, I’ll bury that damned fool under this bar.”

“Well I’ll tell ya somethin, Horace. You keep that big arse a yers parked on that little Greek spider chair or whatever the hell it is, with them four swords flairin way out there for legs, an’ you keep at it till she just lets go, yer gonna get run through bottoms up like them damn fool generals you hated so much, down there at Shiloh or wherever.”

Still enthralled by an eventful morning, the first in recent local memory, Wheatleigh

waddled over and looked down at the shapeless, sodden figure lying on the floor, a creature who would live and sleep and eventually die unnoticed except by rats in the undisturbed filth of this place, a place that would perhaps honor him by becoming his tomb. Or he, it—if he were not first eaten. Wheatleigh prodded him; the man slept on. Wheatleigh slowly lowered his massive weight, sat himself solicitously on the floor, rolled the man over and looked into the eponym eyes—these eyes that now had nothing to give save a name, eyes near dead and staring in their half-trance and surprising only in their intensity and in their bloodred witness. Wheatleigh held the man's shoulders and shook him vigorously, still with no success. He signaled to Cook that he wanted a bottle. Reluctantly, Cook carried a bottle to him; but the barkeep waved him away, because the barkeep wanted the second of the two bottles, the cheaper. Soon the barkeep held the correct bottle close to the fallen man's face and tripped the whiskey against the dead and colorless lips where it restored a sudden semblance of life, and then it spilled to the whiskered chin and to the grimy vest that still clung to the dearly recumbent. Red smacked his lips and mumbled something unintelligible, incoherent, but his eyes again closed and he snorted and began a broken snore. Disgusted, Wheatleigh gave up, although it was several minutes and help from Cook and a unique and untested procedure before he was ready to rise up from the floor.

"How 'bout another beer, young fella," he said, as he completed the daunting task.

"Yes, sir. Ya know, I kinda like this dark stuff warm."

Will looked at Cook. "Let's wait 'til he comes around. I really want to talk to him. He prob'ly has a lot in common with the man we're looking for."

While they sojourned Will asked Cook many questions about his earlier life in Havilah, about people of the town and their activities and how he had come to know a man like Stinson. Wheatleigh roused himself from time to time to serve the men or take a drink himself or merely arrange his bulk in a new deployment. Each such exertion was a project of such immensity and complexity that it served to divide a lengthy conversation into convenient intervals.

"So how did you avoid ending up like Jim Smith? I mean, he musta been mostly broke and unhappy, and whatever he had, looks like he wasted on liquor."

Cook shook his head. "I dunno, Will. Ol' Jim had a little schoolin' too, ya know, and he always seemed to be mad at the world. 'Course, anybody with any sense is mad at the world, but—"

"Yeah, you know, that's what my ole man used to say."

"Makes sense to me."

"How much schoolin'd you have, Jed?"

"Not a lot. Just enough to get madder'n hell." Both men laughed.

"Then why didn't you get messed up like Jim? Y'all spent lots of years around here, did the same stuff."

"Who says I didn't get messed up?"

Will swallowed a mouthful of beer and lowered his bottle. He answered Cook's question with a smack of the lips and a smile.

"Well, I'll tell ya, Will. Bein' mad at the world is one thing, and bein' mad at yourself is another bucket a acorns."

"This is where you said he sorta had troubles?"

"Yeah. Ole Lovely—first thing that happened to him out here is that he finds out minin' ain't as good as he thought, and then he gets word that his wife's dead out there in, wherever, Kansas—don' know what got her. And then, you know, he starts worryin' real bad when the war

got started down in Carolina. And before long he's worryin' about the Indians out here gettin lynched the way they done down in Texas and nobody givin a damn."

"Oh, man, he musta been a lot like my father."

"He still alive?"

"No. He died pretty young. Seemed to me he was sort of mad at himself too."

"Wha' do you think got 'im that way?"

Will sipped his beer, shrugged, shook his head. "I don' know. Always seemed to me that he had so much, a good life ya know. Our mother. Two boys who loved him. Good work, mosta the time. I tried to learn from him. Maybe he wanted money, power. Stuff like that."

"That'll do it."

"But he always said—you know, he had this thing called treacle, and he said it was the most important thing in life, that—"

Cook looked surprised. "Molasses?"

"Well, yeah, there's this boiled out molasses, I guess, the way they make candy. But that's not what he meant. He said it stood for truth, courage, and love—treacle—and that they're a sort of antidote, which is what it was in the old days I think. This molasses. For poison. Scurvy. Syphilis maybe."

Jed smiled. "Damn. Must take a lot a boilin'."

"He said you can use treacle against misery. Suffering. Anything. I think he really meant both the candy and the philosophy. But he meant this balm, too, whatever it is."

Cook smiled. "Don't it just wreck your teeth mosta the time?"

"Well, what the old man said was—it was like fishin. If you had truth and courage, that would bring you love. Courage and love would bring truth. So his treacle stuck together, ya know, just like the candy."

"What if you only had one a the three? Could you sop up the other two?"

"Seemed that way to me. If life's candy—kinda messy and kinda sticky. Why not?"

"What if ya started out, an' say ya only had courage? Which one would you go for next, truth or love?"

"I don' know. I kinda think truth. I don't see how you can get love unless you hook up some sorta truth in there, somewhere."

"It's sad your pa died so young."

"Yeah. But he did handle the suffering. He had this plaque from somebody named Hylton. In old-timey English, that said, um, something like, um, 'This ointment is a precious treacle, made of venom to destroy venom.' But treacle was spelled t-r-i-a-c-l-e. Venom was v-e-n-y-m and all that. Real ole-timey. I used to ask him what it meant."

"How can you use venom to destroy venom?"

"I dunno. I never understood it. But I think that's how they made this stuff."

"It's like yer fightin' the devil with satan. I say just run 'im out to a hangin' and bring in this sugar treacle stuff when you get 'er done. Make sure it don't rot out nobody's teeth, which ya don't need no devil for nohow."

"Amen to that. After the old man died, my mother took down the plaque and put it back up a half dozen times. It also showed an old guy handing the stuff out."

"Maybe the love part was the hard part—for your father. If he saw venom all around."

"Yeah. That's what I thought. He was all truth and courage everywhere." And then, nodding his head, he added "but the hard part was loving."

“And, uh, seems like he still suffered.”

Will looked at him intensely, raised his beer, drained it, put the bottle down on the bar, and turned to look again at Red.

“But the worst thing’s what’s happening to these two,” Cook said, distracted by Wheatleigh’s latest maneuvers. “Look at ‘em. You can’t tell they hate anything right now, ‘cept havin’ to move. They ain’ nothin but drink-fuddled funk sticks. Don’t hate nothin but themselves.”

For a few moments, Will and Cook were silent, pensive. Then Cook spoke.

“I’ll tell ya somethin’ else, Will. What these two fools and Lovely had in common is that they never had a good woman, or they was too messed up to get a good woman, or they lost a good woman the way Lovely did. That’s where I was lucky. My woman, ole Tildie, she died out here. She come out here with me. Her and I was all over the place out here. With our boy.”

“You had a kid?”

“Yeah, once upon a time. Till an adit fell in on ‘im.”

Will saw that, for now, this topic should be left alone. After a moment, he again spoke.

“Well—losing your family, that’s gotta—that’s gotta cut deep. But, uh—maybe you just keep ‘em alive inside your head, ya know? Your dreams. My father never lost my mother, but he still died young.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know. What you gotta do out here is figure out some way to head off that process, whatever did it. Like these two fellas ain’t.”

“But y’all do seem a little shorta good women out here.”

“Yeah. Well, it’s too bad that crazy, uh, Lizzy Farnham, outta New York or whatever messed things up so bad, ‘cause she had the right idea on what these fool miners need out here.”

“Yeah, yeah, she’s this angel of mercy got stuck in Bolivia somewhere?”

“That’s her. That’s her. We oughtta round up these boys and run em down there and look ‘er up. Hell, yer still an angel, even if yer stuck in Bolivia. Only one ever made it here was my wild and woolly wife. But she was a notch better at gettin stuck than bein an angel.”

“Whadya say her name was, Jed?”

“Jo. Josephine. We mostly called her Tildie.”

“And she wasn’t exactly an angel, then, huh? Always figured I’d need one.”

“Nah. Cain’t no angel take the place of a real woman like Tildie. You try it, and you got bulls fightin bears. All them crazy bastards killin each other out east, from Nawlins to Gettysburg—they had religion. They shouldda had babies.”

There now had elapsed the better part of an hour, perhaps more. And suddenly in the midst of all this unwonted social activity the drunk lying on the floor awakened and shouted, or perhaps shouted from a dream: “Shiloh? Shiloh? Who the hell’s talkin’ Shiloh ‘round here?” And he turned over and tried to fix his gaze on the two men who had created this unfortunate focus upon war, and at that same instant the opposing forces behind the bar mustered themselves again and shouted in a high-ranged yet powerful baritone voice, “dammit, Red, cut that Shiloh shit, you damn fool, we whupped you down there and everywhere else and none a these boys aroun’ here want to hear your Secesh bullshit any more’n I do,” for which the drunk on the floor had a ready volley: “To hell with these damn drunks ran your side, Wheatforth, the only sober one in the whole pack was Lincoln—” Thoughtful pause. “But who knowsh, he went down early.”

Red concentrates his historical erudition and projects it to the bare-timbered face of the bar, in the general direction of Wheatleigh’s disembodied voice: “Johnson and Grant! They wuz always so damn drunk it’s no wonder—those boys, an’ poor ole Gen’l Johnson dead at

Shiloh—an’ them damn-yank drunks—they see copperheads crawlin on em like—” He stopped talking and vomited on the floor. Then he said okay and yelled something indecipherable, perhaps a reb yell through the remnants of his vomit, and within a few minutes he had scraped to his feet while the enemy hidden behind the bar re-deployed not at all, and Red propped himself incrementally against a rear door that, throughout the struggle, he seemed to be trying to push open perhaps again considering retreat, and the yellowed and brilliant glamour of the late-morning sun filtered through dust-moted air near the single small window in the door, clothing in silhouetted radiance the embattled and trembling revenant. The man soon seemed to focus on the two strangers visible at the far end of the bar and undertook a lengthy new challenge, moving toward them in search of a few rare moments of fellowship and perhaps a drink to replace his heavy losses. Will had to grasp him by an arm and by his disintegrating shirt and lean him against the bar to keep him from falling.

“Mornin’,” said Red, looking in Cook’s direction as if he could not find him. “You boys ever heard a King Cotton?”

“How ya doin’, Edward, you damned fool?” said Cook. He paused, trying to ascertain whether he was being heard. He shouts. “We’d like to ask you some questions about old Jim Smith. This here’s Will, he’s tryin’ to find ’im. Will’s good folks.”

“Mornin’ sir. How ya feeling?” said Will.

Will and the drunk shook hands: The left hand extended by the drunk out of consideration, because the right hand had served ineffectually to wipe away vomit. The determined tone of Will’s voice—and the gun he wore on his hip—penetrated the old man’s injured and besotted brain. A vague sense of threat, the threat raised by any serious human concern other than whiskey and especially by a concern prefaced with the name Edward, partially sobered him. Wheatleigh inexplicably had worked his way to a standing position behind the bar, had propped himself against it and become a huge exaggerated funhouse mirror image of Red, the sickly slender Red-Eye distorted by a trick mirror into a grand rotundity, and had fallen asleep standing. Nobody paid attention as his head thudded down on the bar, again awakening him, again enlivening him, and again causing him to commence a reversal of his latest strenuous maneuvers.

“What time ya got, Jed? You gents ready for a little lunch here pretty soon? Only twenty cents.”

“Biggest chunka gold I got’s my watch, Horace, and it ain’t worked since the day Tildie died.”

Red-Eye stammered. “Wha’ do you boys want from me? Whadja say? Jones? Who the hell’s Jones?”

“I want you to tell me what happened to Lovely Smith, Jim Smith,” said Will. “Jim Smith, the old prospector, ya know, outta—outta Kansas.”

“C’mon, Edward,” said Cook. “You ‘member old Lovely Smith.”

Forcing himself to concentrate for a moment, the drunk probed for long-forgotten memories. He felt the urgency of having to think for the first time in many months—except for his journal. The faded faces of departed men slowly emerged from the obscure recesses of his brain. A look of bewilderment passed over the flaccid ruin of his own visage.

“C’mon, sir, think hard!” The voice was demanding, inflexible.

At last recognition, slowly.

“Lovely’s gone—”

“I know he’s gone. Where did ‘e go?”

“Way back.”

“How long ago?”

“Five, maybe ten yearsh—who knows.”

“Do you know where he went?”

He shook his head. “Jus’ went.”

“Where’d you see him last?”

Red-Eye’s face brightened.

“Right here.”

“You last saw him in this saloon?”

Slowly, memory came to the sot.

“I ’member now. Me’n Lovely did a little drinkin’. Lovely had money, back them days. He’s a good shpender when he’s got money. We had a fine time, me’n Lovely. Got real drunk th’other night. Had a rip-snortin’ time. But—no, no, it wasn’t here, it was in Havilah.” He smiled, nodding his head, and his fantasies gave his voice a sudden renewed energy. “Town was alive in them days. There was girls, girls and gamblin’. Town was alive. Me’n Lovely was too.”

Will interrupted. “Was that night the last you saw him?”

Red-Eye, for an instant, was dead sober.

“That’s the last anybody seen ‘im, far’s I know. Five, ten—hell, that’s, uh, fifteen yearsh, ain’t it?”

Will persisted.

“When did you leave him that night?”

“I don’t ’member that. *He* musta left *me*. Next mornin’ I woke up on the floor, right over there.” He pointed to the precise spot where he had just been lying a few minutes before.

“It’s no use, Jed,” said Will, shaking his head. “May as well get out of here.”

Cook did not relish the return ride, but he too wanted to get out into the air again.

“Edward’s mind’s kinda shot,” said Cook. “He doesn’t know whether he’s talkin’ about this place or Havilah or Keyesville. They ain’t far, if we could sober the fool up for a day or so.”

He thought for a moment. “But, you know, I’m startin’ to think Lovely disappeared after Whiskey Flats was dead. Maybe you should take a day and look around over ta Kernville, where this Alex Hamilton gent dragged the booze and most a the whores. Mebbe see the digs up around Quartzburg.”

There came from Wheatleigh the sound of mud and gravel moving through a sluice. “It ain’t Alex, Jedadiah. Name’s somethin’ else. Alex Hamilton was President, out east. Our man, *whores* drug *him*.”

“How about a drink?” Red-Eye pleaded. He had already forgotten the conversation. Will put a silver dollar on the bar and he and Cook turned to the doorway.

“Thanks for tryin to help us on Smith. Have one on me and get yourself some food. Get some a that jerky ’fore the rats get at it.”

“Hey. You boys tell Lovely’e still owes me seven bucks on ’is prostitutes.”

“When’s that, Red?”

“Christmas a ’62. Tarts told me’n Lovely all about Shiloh Church. That damned fool Beaugard. Said they wuz there.”

Wheatleigh’s huge head snapped to attention. “You fellas are wastin your efforts on Red. He don’ know shit from a shinplaster.”

“He knowed ole Smith. We got that much. They was still foolin around in ’62.”

“Hell, Jed, I know more about Smith than he does. An’ I never met the man.”

“How’s that come to be, Horace?”

“Well,” said Wheatleigh, “I’ve heard Red and some a these other dead miners talkin about him over the years. Figured nobody’d ever remember nothin. But then, here about two months ago, this feller shows up, jus passin through on his way up to Visalia, or mebbe San Francisco.” He stopped. He turned aside. He panted. He looked at the floor. He nearly threw up. He recovered.

“Dangit, Horace. You okay? Thought you was goin back to heavin. You boys are gettin good at it.”

“An’ he starts asking me, an’ Red too I think, about this same Smith gent yer talkin about, far as I know. Said *his* name was Smith too, like mebbe they was related. Said he knew this Jim Smith down in Havilah. And *he* wanted to find ‘im too.”

“Well, damn a horse if that don’t do it.”

“So, you ain’t the only folks lookin for this man. Musta been a popular guy, this Smith character.”

“Yeah,” said Jed. “I doubt ole Lovely ever figured he’d be popular.”

Handshakes, expressions of gratitude, and the two guests departed.