

Abram's Wife

By Richard Prosch

Riding his buckskin gelding, deputy sheriff Whit Branham was delivering a package to Eden Valley when he saw Carlton Boggs and his wife, Greta, camped on the lush, green bank of Lassiter Crick.

He recognized them from the wanted poster hanging in his O'Neill, Nebraska law office.

"That's them all right," said Branham's friend Ezrie Dawson. "What'cha think we should do?"

Carlton Boggs leaned against a cedar pole wearing only a long nightshirt, his bare legs hardly keeping him upright. Sitting in the grass beside the wagon, Greta was shapely and blonde wearing a man's shirt and trousers.

Their camp was a tidy affair on a patch of grass between the worn trail and the muddy track of the crick. Boggs had a pair of mules and a small, tattered covered wagon. Two or three feet in front of the lead wheel was the remnant of a fire with an old kettle sitting in the ashes.

Above them, a canopy of sycamore leaves played with light and shadow.

Neither of them appeared to be armed.

Branham's mustache, like his shoulder-length hair, was the color of rusty iron, and his Stetson matched the blue black of the short-barrel coach shotgun in his saddle boot. "I'd hate to not get our package delivered," he said.

"Heavy as it is, I hate for your horse to keep lugging the dang thing around."

Branham glanced at the saddle bag behind his left hip where the big ornate book pushed aside an open flap.

"German heirloom," said Branham. "This book is real special to Clara's family."

"Good to do a favor for a friend," said Ezrie. "Biggest Bible I ever saw."

"Collected works of Shakespeare," said Branham. "Ain't no Bible."

Ezrie's reply was cut off by a call from the camp.

"Hello, Deputy!"

Boggs waved a knobby hand at the end of a upraised crooked right arm. "Join us for a spot of coffee?"

"Neighborly," said Branham, waving in return.

"Just you be ready for anything, Whit."

Branham grinned and spurred the buckskin forward.

Wasn't he always?

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As it turned out he wasn't.

"You want me to do what?"

"Join me in the back of the wagon, Deputy," said Greta, green eyes sparkling in the sun as she moved across the shadow dappled grass.

"Ma'am?" Branham said.

He felt the blood rushing to his cheeks even as he heard Boggs rasp, "It's all the same to me. You go ahead."

Greta crossed her arms.

Then pulled off her shirt.

Branham sat back in his saddle with an audible creak.

At the same time, Carlton Boggs found a surprise surge of energy and stepped away from his cedar crutch.

By the time Branham got his eyes away from naked Greta, Boggs had a big Colt revolver pulled from under his shirt and aimed at Branham's chest.

"Throw your gun over here, and then crawl down off the horse. Slow and steady, or I'll kill you both for sure."

Branham shoved his hat back on his head and slapped his thighs.

Well.

Damn.

Finally he pulled the coach gun from its boot and tossed it to the ground.

"Lady, that's a dirty damn trick," he said.

"No trick," said Greta with a mischievous grin. She walked to the back of the wagon and started to climb inside. "You're welcome to join me." She smiled at Ezrie. "Both of you."

"I told you, it makes me no difference," said Boggs.

Branham laughed. "Oh, I think it does at that. I think it makes a big difference. Because if we're both in there with her, that leaves you free to pilfer my saddle bag."

With his bluff called, Boggs spoke to Greta. "C'mon and cover yourself up," he said. "Before you get skeeter bit."

Branham watched while the girl stepped down and got her shirt back on.

"You two remind me of that old story in the Good Book," he said. "What is it, Ezrie? The story of Lot's wife?"

"Lot's wife? I don't follow you."

"Shut up," said Boggs.

Branham ignored him.

"Yeah, Lot's wife. You know the story about the old fellar goes into strange country and pawns

his wife off to the men so's to save his own skin."

"That ain't Lot," said Ezrie. "That's Abraham. But I think he was called Abram then."

"No," said Branham, shaking his head. "No, I'm sure it's Lot."

"I said you shut up," said Boggs.

"What're they talking about?" said Greta. "How am I like this Lottie?"

"Not Lottie," said Branham. "Lot. He's an old-time Bible fella. You're like Lot's wife."

"Lot's wife is the one got changed to salt. You're thinking of Abraham's wife," said Ezrie, a note of frustration creeping into his voice.

"No, I ain't dammit," said Branham. "We might look it up in our *Bible*."

With just a little too much force.

Just a little too much anger.

Hoping Ezrie would catch on.

"Well if you want to be wrong," said Ezrie, "just go ahead and be wrong. I always said you were too busy sleeping during church to pay much attention. Or too busy making cow eyes at the girls."

Ezrie's face said that he caught on.

Greta's cheeks spread out into a wide smile. "Cow-eyes, Deputy?" She batted her eyelashes at Ezrie. "Tell me more about the Deputy's naughty eyes."

"Sister, the things I could tell you," said Ezrie. "You'd be grateful this old coon dog didn't take you up on your offer."

"That's enough," said Boggs, swinging the gun high.

"I still say it's Lot's wife," said Branham.

"It ain't," said Ezrie.

"Is it?" said Greta.

"I'm ready to shoot the lot of you," said Boggs.

"Alright, alright. Listen," said Branham. "I can prove it. I can prove it."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"You got a Bible handy?"

Branham held his breath.

"Are you kidding?" said Boggs.

Exhale.

"It just so happens," said Branham. "That my friend and I are carrying a big ol' family Bible in that saddle bag right over there. Now, before you tie us up or kill us, or whatever you plan to do, I'd be obliged if you'd let me look up the passage in question."

"Why should I?" said Boggs.

"Oh, it'll be fun," said Greta. "Let him look."

Boggs eyed the saddle bag.

"I'll look it up myself."

"Like you can read," said Greta, scoffing. "He really can't read a word," she told Branham.

Boggs looked from Branham to Ezrie to Greta. Then back to Branham.

"All right. But be quick about it."

Branham walked deliberately to the side of his horse. "Don't worry about that," he said.

He put his hand on the top of the big book, its gold lined pages reflecting sunlight onto his fingers.

"I'll be real quick."

And just like that, the book was out of the saddle bag and open and falling.

In his hand was a big Colt .45. It boomed once.

Boggs clutched his arm and his own gun fell to the ground.

"Thus sayeth the Lawd," said Ezrie with a cackle.

The book lay open in the grass. But it wasn't a book. It was a box that looked like a book, with a big hollow square cut from it's center. A space big enough to conceal the gun Branham used.

"That ain't no Bible," said Greta.

"That ain't no Shakespeare, neither," said Ezrie.

Branham held the gun up for his friend to see.

"Here's the heirloom, Ezrie."

"I guess it wasn't as heavy I thought."

"For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light," said Branham.

"What's that? A Bible verse? That ain't no Bible verse."

Branham grinned. "It is."

"Is not."

"Will you two shut up?" said Greta.

"I say it is," said Branham.

And arguing about it, they carried their prisoners back to town.

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