

THE BALLAD OF BUSTER SCRUGGS

Written, Produced and Directed by

Joel Coen & Ethan Coen

FADE IN

Close on a heavy volume, morocco-bound. To the extent that the book does not fill the screen we see that it rests on a knotty, oaken table.

A hand enters the bottom of the frame and opens the book to the title page. With its opposite page the cream-colored vellum now fills the screen. The title reads:

The Ballad Of Buster Scruggs

And Other Tales of the American Frontier

--With Color Plates--

The page is turned again. The page on the left side is the table of contents, the page on the right is the list of color plates.

Without pausing the unseen hand turns the page again to the title page of the first story:

The Ballad of Buster Scruggs

We hold for the briefest moment and the page is turned again to reveal a translucent sheet of rice paper, which is itself turned to reveal a full color illustration in the style of N.C. Wyeth.

From a low angle the picture shows a burly outlaw rising to his feet from his place at a saloon card table. His right hand hovers over his holstered six-gun, a toothpick is clenched between his yellowed teeth.

Objects on the table have been knocked askew by the sudden movement. The players around him all look off toward the object of the burly man's ire, who occupies our (the viewer's) perspective.

We travel down to a caption below the illustration:

"You seen 'em, you play em," sneered the hard man.

The page turns once more to a full page of text which begins:

None heard it, but the man's voice
carried through the crisp morning air,
just outside of Mexican Hat. His horse
clip-clopped, it seemed, in time...

Dissolve from the page to:

EXT. MONUMENT VALLEY - DAY

Panoramic view of Monument Valley. Mighty towers of red sandstone rise from the desert floor below. We hear only the sound of the wind.

Then, distantly, singing. A tiny figure just visible to the naked eye, dressed in white and riding a white horse, has cornered a huge archway of stone.

Close on the rider, Buster Scruggs. His white clothing and ten-gallon hat are blindingly clean. He has one leg drawn up to rest on the pommel and a guitar resting on the leg. He strums as he sings, smiling.

He finishes the song, holding the last note. Then he hooks the guitar over the saddle horn and picks up the reins. He addresses the camera as he continues to ride.

BUSTER

A song never fails to divert m'mind
during a long day's ride out here
in the West, where distances're
great and the scenery monotonous.
Additionally, m'pleasing baritone
seems t'inspirit good ol' Dan,
keepin' him in good heart through
the day's measure of hoofclops.
Ain't that right, Dan?

A confirming Huntz Hall from the horse.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

Maybe y'all've heard a me, Buster
Scruggs—known to some as the San
Saba Songbird. I got other handles,
nicknames, appellations and
cognoments...

He is reaching into his necessary bag and draws from it a wanted poster with a picture of himself with his name printed beneath, and beneath that, "The Misanthrope."

BUSTER (CONT'D)

... but this'n here I don't
consider t'be even halfways earned.
I don't hate m'fellow man even when
he's tiresome'n surly'n tries to
cheat at poker. Why I figure that's
just the human material...

He crumples the handbill and tosses it over his shoulder.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
 ... and himmet finds in it cause
 for anger'n dismay is just a fool
 for expectin' better. Ain't that
 right, Dan?

Another Huntz Hall.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
 ... Well folks, unless I grievously
 misremember, there's a little
 cantina on the other side of yon
 rimrocks, and if I'm in luck it'll
 be customers there amenable to
 drawin' up in a circle round a deck
 a cards. Git up now! Haw!

INT. CANTINA - DAY

The door creaks open and Buster Scruggs takes in the humble establishment: a slow pan shows a rude small-windowed place with rough wood appointments and a planktop bar. The few hard-looking men drinking there have stopped to look up at the visitor.

Buster Scruggs claps his hat against his clothes, raising a fine dust. He addresses the bartender.

BUSTER
 Like me a splash a whiskey ter wash
 this traildust offen my gullet'n
 keep m'singin' voice in fettle.

The bartender slowly shakes his head.

BARTENDER
 Dry county. Whiskey's illegal.

Buster looks around at the other customers.

BUSTER
 What're they drinkin'?

BARTENDER
 Whiskey.

A beat during which Buster tries to square the information. The bartender explains:

BARTENDER (CONT'D)
 ... They's outlaws.

BUSTER

Well don't let m'white duds'n
pleasant demeanor fool ya, I too
have been known to violate the
statutes a man—and not a few a the
laws a the Almighty.

The hardest of the hard men seated nearby gives a derisive
chuckle.

HARD MAN

Hew ain't no outlaw.

Buster turns to face him. The man, chewing a toothpick,
offers calculated provocation:

HARD MAN (CONT'D)

... And we don't drink with
tin horns.

Buster meets the taunt with a smile.

BUSTER

Sir, it seems you are no better a
judge of human bein's than you are
a specimen of one. Just on a brief
inventory I'd say you could use
yourself a shave and a brighter
disposition and lastly if you don't
mind me aspersin' your friends a
better class of drinkin' buddies.

The man grunts. His companions grunt, looking at Buster in
surprise and pity. The hard man, mouth clamped on his
toothpick, slowly rises, gunhand poised beside his holster.

Buster is completely relaxed, hands at his sides. The hard
man sneers:

HARD MAN

Your shootin' iron work?

In less time than it takes to tell, Buster draws and shoots
the man in the head and twirls his gun and reholsters it.

The hard man, a neat hole in his forehead, stands on his feet
for a suspended moment, not yet aware that he is dead.

BUSTER

Appears to do, yes.

The hard man drops.

His friends stare, stunned.

As one, they leap to their feet hauling out guns.

Buster redraws his and, fanning the hammer, lays the men down with four quick shots. He cocks the hammer one last time and for some reason whips the gun round to point it backward under his left armpit.

He holds that odd posture for a long moment, then slowly turns his head to look back over his left shoulder.

Behind him, the bartender is frozen in the act of reaching down a shotgun from over the bar.

The two men have eye contact.

Buster winks at the bartender and—BLAM!—fires.

One man from among the group at the table is not dead. He crawls pitifully toward the door of the cantina. Buster, surprised, looks at the camera.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

Appears that the vitals of this
lucky sonofagun remain
unpunctured—sloppy shootin' on my
part!

The man's groaning and scraping sounds are the only noise in the cantina.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

... But the nearest human
habitation is a day's ride away,
three days on foot, 'n lord alone
knows how many on your belly. I
suspect that wolves'n gila
monsters'll save me on ammo. Adios,
amigo. Puts me in mind of a song...

EXT. CANTINA - DAY

Buster fetches up onto his horse and pulls out his guitar. He sings "Lonesome Cowboy" as he sets out from the cantina. Behind him we can see the dying man hauling himself out the doorway into the vast dustiness of the desert.

EXT. A TOWN - DAY

Buster finishes the song as he travels the town's one dusty street. He puts up his guitar.

BUSTER
 Frenchman's Gulch. This town is new
 to me. But I ain't never knowed
 nothin' French to be dry.

INT. SALOON - DAY

Buster enters. It is everything he could have hoped for:
 smokey air, flocked wallpaper, somewhere a piano playing, and
 several tables set about where men play cards. The place is
 crowded with drinkers, poker-players, hell-raisers.

VOICE
 Hang on, son...

The voice belongs to a man behind a small counter by the
 swinging doors. He taps to indicate a small sign on the
 facing of the counter: CHECK FIREARMS HERE.

VOICE (CONT'D)
 ... House policy.

Buster amiably unhitches his gunbelt.

BUSTER
 Here's the six-shooters...

He bends down to pull a derringer from each boot.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
 ... Now're you gonna be wantin' the
 señorita pistols as well?

CHECKER
 Everthang, 'cludin' knives.

BUSTER
 Never partial to knives. I ain't
 much for workin' in close.

As he strolls away:

BUSTER (CONT'D)
 ... Feel a bit naked but I guess
 with ever one similarly
 disadvantaged there's scant chance
 of misadventure. Hello!

He is reacting to a man rising at a nearby table and tossing
 down his cards.

MAN
 I'm out.

As he stalks away Buster slides into his chair.

BUSTER

This is well timed. You gentlemen
mind if I take his spot?

A surly man directly across answers:

ANGRY MAN

Iffen you play his hand.

Buster picks up the five face-down cards and looks: aces and eights. A beat.

BUSTER

I would prefer not to.

Another man, in a vest and with a small neatly waxed mustache, has a French accent:

FRENCHMAN

It is too late. You have regarded
ze cards.

SURLY MAN

You seen 'em. You play 'em.

BUSTER

I ain't anted.

FRENCHMAN

Ze uzzer hombre anted.

SURLY MAN

You seen 'em. You play 'em.

BUSTER

And what if I don't?

The surly man rises. He has a gun in his hand. He aims it across the table.

SURLY MAN

Play them cards, fancy dan.

The table—the entire establishment—falls silent.

BUSTER

Can't no one compel a man to engage
in recreation, and certainly not a
sonofagun as ill-humored as
yourself.

He rises slowly, holding his hands away from his sides as a sign that he is unarmed.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
 ... Second place, m'horse's Dan,
 I'm Buster—Buster Scruggs. And
 third place—

SURLY MAN
 Buster Scruggs? The Runt from Reata
 Pass!

He pulls back the hammer on the gun, smiling.

SURLY MAN (CONT'D)
 ... And dis-pistoled!

Buster looks at the gun, looks at the man.

BUSTER
 I do hail from Reata Pass which is
 in the county of San Saba, bein'
 the which-a-why "The San Saba
 Songbird" is m'sobriquet of
 preference. But right now I would
 appreciate it if you would place
 your weapon in that receptacle by
 the swingin doors, which concealin'
 it on your person in the first
 place was a violation of the rules
 of this establishment and an
 offense against local norms.

The surly man chuckles. He aims the gun toward the middle of
 Buster's chest.

SURLY MAN
 And iff'n I don't?

Buster raises one leg and stamps smartly on the near side of
 the table. The far side flips up, knocking the man's gunhand
 upward to discharge into his face.

The table settles and the hand drops, still clutching the
 gun. The surly man's face is half shot away.

Buster stamps two more times in quick succession, slamming
 the gunhand up for two more shots.

The Frenchman is spattered with blood. The ceiling gets a
 splat of blood and brains.

The man lingers on his feet long enough for us to look at his
 chewed-away face, then drops.

A hard man nearby looks on in shock. He is Ike.

IKE

Joey...?

He rushes over to the body. Buster addresses the camera.

BUSTER

I'm not a devious man by nature but
when you're unarmed your tactics
might gotta be downright
Archimedean.

He looks around.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

... Now what happened to the music?

The piano starts up again. Buster goes over to place a foot up on the piano stool and join the bowlered, cigar-chomping piano player in a raucous song, "Surly Joe the Gambler" The whole saloonful of rakehells and bawds joins in on the chorus.

We intercut Ike kneeling beside the face-shot gambler, cradling his head and trying to mop the ever-flowing blood from his face with a bandana. Ike pauses occasionally, weeping, to wring blood from the bandana. It is sad visual counterpoint to the joyously upbeat song. Finally Ike's keening voice breaks up the music:

IKE

Joe! Surly Joe! He's gawn! We've a-
lost'm!

He lurches tearfully over to Buster.

MAN

... You kilt my brother, you
cowardly, sonofabitch! Gunned 'im
down when he wasn't hardly lookin'!

BUSTER

I can cut you a little slack,
grievin' as you are, but the fact
is Buster Scruggs don't shoot
nobody in the back and that sorry
sack a bones was more in the nature
of a suicide.

Ike is taken aback.

IKE
 You're Buster Scruggs?! The West
 Texas Twit?

For the first time Buster loses his smile.

Everyone around tenses.

Buster clears his throat and, with an effort, recovers his smile.

BUSTER
 Presume you meant to say "The West
 Texas Tit"—on account of that
 p'ticular bird's mellifluous
 warble.

IKE
 Call yerself any damn name you
 please! I wanna see you outside—
 wearin' iron!

EXT. SALOON - DAY

Buster is stepping down off the boardwalk into the street,
 addressing the camera.

BUSTER
 Things have a way of escalatin' out
 here in the West with one thing
 leadin' to another, but I think I
 can make pretty short work of this
 ramified ol' sonofagun.

In the deep background, planted in the middle of the street,
 Ike bellows:

IKE
 Scruggs! Scru-u-u-u-u-uggs! I'm a-
 callin' you out!

BUSTER
 Well hang in there, pardner, I just
 need to buckle on this toolbelt
 here.

He finishes doing so. Ike is poised, right hand hovering at
 his holster.

Buster smiles at him.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
 ... Are ya ready?

IKE
Ready!

BUSTER
Are ya set?

IKE
Set!

BUSTER
Ya need you a count?

IKE
Na'sir!

In less time than it takes to tell, Buster draws and fires. Oddly, Ike screams but does not drop. He raises his right hand—gouting blood from where the index finger used to be.

BUSTER
Hard to trigger with them other
fingers, but...

He fans the hammer, shooting four more times.

Ike's hand: his other three fingers are shot off in quick succession, followed by his thumb.

On the dusty street, the digits plop to the ground.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
... you cain't be too careful.

Ike, screaming, looks at his stumpy hand spewing blood. He starts to reach awkwardly with his left hand for his right-holstered gun.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
Uh-oh. Looks like when they made
this fella they forgot to put in
the quit! Lemme see here, five
fingers at a bullet a piece, I
ain't got but the one bullet left.

For some reason Buster turns to face the other way up the street, presenting his back to screaming Ike.

Close on Buster we can see Ike small in the background, twisting his hips and reaching across his body to clumsily start withdrawing his gun.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
Sure hope I don't miss.

Buster takes a small mirror out of his pocket with his left hand. He holds it up to sight in as he aims his gun upside-down and backwards over his right shoulder.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

... Leseee, his heart'd be on the left side but the mirror puts it right, cepting for we is facing the same way and the gun is upside down. So, um...

Ike has his gun out and raises it, screaming.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

... maybe it's best not to play it fancy.

BAM!

Ike pitches backward into the street. There is a hole in the middle of his chest.

Buster Scruggs enters a low shot to gaze down at the body. He remembers the mirror he still holds and, as he starts to pocket it:

BUSTER (CONT'D)

Cause for reflection—heh-heh.
Well, this whole entire episode
puts me in mind of a song.

He sucks in his breath but before it can issue out in song we hear someone else's singing, faint but sweet.

Surprised, Buster looks around for the source of the singing.

Riding up the road is a handsome young man accompanying himself on guitar as he sings.

Buster walks over to meet the oncoming rider who finishes his song and puts up his guitar.

THE KID

Buster Scruggs?

BUSTER

The same. You got a mighty sweet
singin' voice, pardner.

THE KID

That's high praise—from the San
Saba Songbird, Herald of Demise.

Buster smiles, flattered on a point of pride. The rider returns an innocent smile.

RIDER

... Mr. Scruggs, I been huntin' you on account a they say you're the one to beat, a-singin' and a-slingin' guns.

EXT. STREET - DAY

A minute later. Buster sadly shakes his head as he paces into the foreground, pushing bullets into his six-shooter.

BUSTER

Another young fella with something to prove.

Behind him in the background a couple of men are dragging Ike's corpse away by the ankles, and the young man is taking his place in the middle of the street.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

I gotta set m'self up in the undertaking bidnis—stop doin' all the skillwork so's another man can profit.

He turns, having reloaded and holstered his gun. He murmurs to himself, staring at his new antagonist:

BUSTER (CONT'D)

... But then, do I wanna wear a black suit.

From off:

THE KID

You need a count?

Buster chuckles.

BUSTER

Na'sir—

BLAM!

Buster blinks, puzzled.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

... Hold on a second.

He looks down.

His right hand is relaxed, empty, next to his still holstered gun.

He looks up the street.

The young man stands set in place, gunhand extended before him, other hand back as counterbalance, smoke wafting from his gunbarrel.

Buster squints at him. He looks down at his own chest when:

A red droplet hits the snowy white of his tunic.

Buster tries to sort this out. He reaches for his hat.

He holds it up before himself to inspect it. The front of the crown shows a bullet hole.

He tips the hat, front brim upward, so as to look inside.

The inside back of the crown shows an exit hole. Sprayed around it is blood and a bit of brain.

BUSTER (CONT'D)
Well now that ain't good.

He looks up.

The young man is still planted. The gunsmoke has dissipated.

Buster takes out his handmirror. He examines himself in it.

There is a hole centered high in his forehead.

In the reflection, he drops away, quickly followed by hand and mirror.

From behind the young man's hip: he twirls and holsters his gun. In the background we see the soles of Buster Scruggs boots and his body stretched away.

High on Buster Scruggs, on his back in the street, sightlessly staring.

Oddly, his voice continues in the same present tone:

BUSTER (CONT'D)
I guess I shoulda seen this
comin'...

The young man enters a low shot to gaze down at the body. He starts to sweetly sing.

Back to the high shot of Buster. While his corpse remains rooted to the street and blood begins to pool out from under his head, his soul begins to separate, rising off his body in the same white get-up but with wings sprouting out the back. His soul, semi-transparent, continues the speech:

BUSTER (CONT'D)

... Roam and ramble though you might, eventually you're gonna come across some sonofagun who sings a little sweeter and draws a little faster.

Buster's soul starts to sing, harmonizing with the sweet-swinging cowboy. At the end of the verse, the cowboy continues singing but Buster's soul has more to say:

BUSTER (CONT'D)

... I don't know as I believe in a divinity shapin' our ends and numberin' our days. But I do believe I'm a-headed for a hereafter...

The young cowboy goes over to his rail-hitched horse, still singing.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

... Why heck, if there warn't a place where men ain't low-down and poker's played fair, then what're all the songs about?

The young man unhitches his horse and swings aboard.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

... I b'lieve the music comes from that higher place...

The young man swings his guitar up and heads out, riding with one leg up on the pommel and his guitar resting on the leg, strumming as he sings.

We are rising higher, higher, with the ascending soul of Buster Scruggs.

BUSTER (CONT'D)

... An' at's where I'm off to, to trade my gui-tar for a lyre and sing those sweet songs where they ain't no clinkers to sour the spell and cain't no gunplay inter-trude.

(MORE)

BUSTER (CONT'D)

I'll see all of you sonofaguns in
the bye and bye and we can sing
them sweet airs together, and shake
our heads over all that meanness in
the used-to-be.

He resumes his harmony part as the young cowboy recedes below, leaving town, a tiny figure entering the vast desert, his distant voice echoing off the sandstone formations.

As the singing voices fade into the sound of a moaning wind we dissolve to:

The last lines of our tale in print on the page, which is then turned to the title page of the next story:

Near Algodones

Under the wind we hear now the steady clunk of a piece of wood knocking against a heavy object.

Turning again to another full page illustration:

We are looking across a dusty expanse toward a low-slung adobe structure that stands alone in an endless expanse of high desert.

In the mid-foreground a short, fat man in a dirty union suit, is running toward us, prancing, almost airborne. He holds a double-barreled shotgun at the ready. Pots and pans are draped over his body, twine threading the handle-holes. One large pot sits helmetlike upside-down on his head.

We travel down to the caption below the illustration:

"Pan-shot!" cried the trapper.

Dissolve from the illustration to:

EXT. PRAIRIE - DAY

We are panning the horizon. It is flat, windswept, vast, empty. The sky is a dismal gray.

It is the western edge of the Great Plains.

Our pan eventually finds and settles on a small adobe building, the only bump on the measureless horizon.

A weathered wooden sign above its door identifies it as the FIRST FEDERAL BANK & TRUST OF TUCUMCARI.

Swinging beneath it and clunking against the top of the door is a smaller handpainted sign, apparently put up as afterthought: *And Notary*.

Taking it in, eyes crinkling against the wind, is a man in an ankle-length duster, holding the reins of a mount that stands behind him.

From somewhere, a creaking sound. The man's eyes shift:

A well. The bucket suspended over it creaks back and forth. A sign handpainted on jagged scrapwood is nailed to its canopy: BAD WATER.

The horse nervously nickers. The cowboy drops the reins and starts forward.

INT. BANK - DAY

The cowboy enters.

The one-room structure is empty except for a trapper with white hair and mustache behind the teller's bars, hands planted on the counter. He wears a black eyeshade and black sleevegarters.

The cowboy walks to the counter, spurs jingling.

COWBOY

Awful big name for a little place like this.

TELLER

It's a comfort to the depositors.

The cowboy looks around.

COWBOY

... What depositors?

TELLER

Oh, we got folks from over Val Verde, Chloride, Tucumcari itself of course—why, the whole entire three-county area. Hell, we even had a run on the bank once't, warnt purty. Had to hop up on the counter here with m'scattergun, talk the folks down. Well, that's banking.

He chuckles, shaking his head.

TELLER (CONT'D)
 ... Crazy business. Crazy business.

COWBOY
 Ever been robbed?

TELLER
 OOHH yeah, sure enough have. TWO times. Attempted, I should say. One fellow I shot dead—BINGO!—the other I held for the marshal, both his legs was shredded some, had to lock him in the vault there, marshal don't come through but once't a month and he'd just visited the previous week, had to billet the scamp for what, three weeks, applyin' a poultice of wet leaves'n urine. He's in Yuma now, bustin' rocks, still a little grumpy from what they say. Fella by the name of Chevilly unless I misremember, said his papa was from Fr—France—Fr—from—fff...

His voice trails off and he stares in silence.

The cowboy is pointing a six-gun at him.

The prairie wind moans.

The teller's jaw, relieved of its service to speech, hangs open.

The cowboy tosses a burlap sack over the bars.

COWBOY
 Money in the sack.

The teller gazes owlshly. Finally he sighs and his jaw resumes operation.

TELLER
 ... Okay. Okay, ya got me, young feller, ya got me fair'n square. The large denominations...

He is stooping behind the counter. His voice continues, off:

TELLER (CONT'D)
 ... I gotta stoop fer...

A silence. The cowboy frowns.

The unmistakable clack of a shotgun-prime.

The cowboy's eyes widen. He takes a nimbly evasive step down the counter as—

ROAR!—wood from the base of the counter splinters outward where he'd just been standing.

ROAR!—another explosion further along.

The cowboy grabs the bars at one end of the counter and hoists himself. He stands perched on the counter lip, hugging the bars. The shotgun continues to roar.

He scales the bars and drops to the counter's far side.

The shotgun has fallen silent. Drifting gunsmoke.

Inside, no sound.

Outside, the moan of the prairie wind.

The cowboy looks down at the duckboards behind the counter:

Empty. The teller has fled—somewhere.

The cowboy drops to the back floor. His bootheels clomp and his spurs jingle as he walks the cage's length.

He stoops, starts stuffing bills into his sack.

EXT. BANK - DAY

DOOR

Creaking open at the cut with a rusty-hinged whine.

The cowboy peeks out the bank's front door, sack in one hand, gun in the other.

His point-of-view shows the great empty plain. His horse placidly crops the grass. Wind moans. The bucket creaks over the well.

The cowboy hesitates, tenses, and—pushes off, heading for his horse.

BOOM!—a shotgun blast kicks up dirt at his feet and the cowboy drops his moneysack and tucks and rolls to take cover behind the well housing.

His horse nickers nervously and trots a few paces further out onto the prairie. It tentatively stops—a good thirty yards away, over exposed ground.

The cowboy hisses at it and waves a hand inward.

The horse looks at him speculatively. Its ears flick.

The cowboy looks toward the windblown adobe structure. No sign of life.

Very present, the creak of the bucket over the well.

The cowboy looks at the sack of money abandoned in no-man's land. The wind stirs the mouth of the sack. Bills flutter and rise like bees leaving a hive and then twist away in the breeze.

The adobe structure, still.

The cowboy, tensed.

The bank's front door bursts open and the old teller boils out, cackling maniacally, waving his shotgun. There is now something strange about his get-up which seems to be clanking as he runs.

The hunched cowboy fires at him over the wellwall.

CLANG!

TELLER

Pan shot!

The teller gallops on, cackling, and—BOOM!—fires his shotgun. It takes a divot out of the wellwall.

The cowboy shoots again: CLANG!

TELLER (CONT'D)

Pan shot!

The teller has pots and pans draped over his body, twine threading the handle-holes. One large pot sits helmetlike upside-down on his head.

The cowboy rises, firing—CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

BOOM! A shotgun blast smacks the cowboy's shoulder and twists him, sending his gun flying into the dust.

He looks from his lost gun up toward the teller just as that cackling figure arrives a-clank, swinging his shotgun-butt up and at us to send us THUD into

BLACK

LONG HOLD ON BLACK

EXT. HANGING TREE - DAY

SLOW FADE IN

A black figure. Soft-focused and gently rocking.

An echoing voice:

VOICE

Do you have anything to say...

Very close on the cowboy: his eyes squint open. He too is gently rocking, as if on a becalmed boat.

The voice repeats, with a little less echo:

VOICE (CONT'D)

Do you have anything to say?

The cowboy licks parched lips. A raspy:

COWBOY

... What?

He works his eyes.

The black figure comes slowly into focus. It is a man in black clothes and cowboy hat. He is in treeshade but the open prairie behind him bakes in blinding noonday sun.

His gentle irregular movement comes from the shifting of the horse he sits astride.

MAN IN BLACK

Do you have anything to say? Before sentence is carried out.

Wider on the cowboy: there is a noose round his neck. Its rope stretches up to a treelimb overhead. The cowboy's shoulders are back, his hands tied behind. His gentle bobbing matches the other man's—he, too, sitting ahorse.

COWBOY

What's... m'sentence?

Guffaws. There are other men, four of them, also mounted.

The man in black looks reprovingly at his companions, then back at the cowboy.

MAN IN BLACK

Son, we held you some proceedin's here for attempted bank robbery. You was off yer nut feverish for most of the goin's-on but it was a fair trial like we do here in New Mexico. These peers convicted ya, I pronounced a sentence of death, and we found us this tree. Now's your opp'tunity to speak your piece before sentence is carried out.

COWBOY

Well...

He licks his lips.

COWBOY (CONT'D)

... That pan-covered sonofabitch back at the bank don't hardly fight fair, in my opinion.

The man in black nods respectfully.

MAN IN BLACK

Okay. That it?

COWBOY

Well... I reckon it is.

Silence.

Creaking rope.

One member of the posse has a thought:

MAN

Can I have yer horse?

The cowboy considers. Another posse member pipes up:

SECOND MAN

No, me.

The ad hoc judge looks from his posse to the cowboy.

MAN IN BLACK

You wanna give one of these boys yer horse? It'll save scrappin' over it after you've passed.

COWBOY

I don't want any of 'em to have it.

The first man growls:

MAN

Selfish bastard.

THIP! An arrow pierces this man's neck. He gurgles and reaches up, eyes wide.

A Comanche war party whoops in on horseback as the man tries to pull the arrow from his neck. He manages only to break the shaft.

The other men are drawing guns. Their horses rear, wild-eyed.

COWBOY

Whoa... easy...

The noosed cowboy tries to calm the horse stirring beneath him as the battle boils around.

The judge has two six-guns out and is firing to either side. A posse member nearby is maced off his horse by one galloping brave and then lanced by another. He rises with the lance sticking out of him, its feathers aflutter, and fires at the braves flashing by until an Indian tomahawks him down from behind.

The cowboy's horse bucks and stamps. The cowboy anxiously squeezes the flanks of the panicked horse with his knees and, awkwardly leaned back to ease pressure on his throat, rolls his eyeballs left and right to goggle at the battle raging round.

A posse member kicks down at an Indian afoot who is trying to pull him from his mount. He fires down at the Indian as another brave sawhorse-vaults up onto the rump of his horse and slits his throat from behind.

The judge is finally St.-Sebastianed full of arrows and tumbles off his horse, his fall snapping arrowshafts. Unmounted now, the horse takes off, taking the stirrup-tangled body of the judge on a prairie sleigh ride, and grazing the strung-up cowboy's horse as it gallops past.

COWBOY (CONT'D)

Whoa... easy there...

Through the dust and the gun smoke another posse member, barely alive is grabbed from behind by a brave as he takes out his knife to scalp him.

The cowboy's horse is stamping.

COWBOY (CONT'D)

Easy...

From the noosed cowboy's perspective the doings are obscure as the scalping Indian finishes his work.

Another Indian who by his warbonnet and bearing seems to be chief turns his attention from the battle, now won. He eases his horse over to face the cowboy.

The chief looks impassively at the cowboy, down at his skittish horse, up at the rope that stretches to the treelimb, sizing things up. The cowboy looks at the chief. The chief looks at the cowboy.

The chief suddenly makes a booga-booga noise, eyes saucer-wide, spreading his arms to shake his feathered lance with one hand and a medicine-rattle with the other. The cowboy's horse stamps and shifts. The rope pulls taut.

COWBOY (CONT'D)

Whoa...

The chief screeches with laughter and saws his horse around and gallops off. The war party, finished with the posse, is mounting up as well.

Whooping and hollering, the Indians recede.

Wide. Bodies about. One man still moaning. The noosed cowboy under the tree leaning back in his saddle to give the rope what play there is to be had. Dissolve:

EXT. HANGING TREE - LATER

The noosed cowboy is leaning even further back.

With a motion of his horse the cowboy's throat gets cinched tighter. He rolls his eyes to look down at the animal.

Cropping the grass placidly enough, it has eaten everything at its feet and has taken a step forward. It continues to nibble.

The wounded man is still moaning. The cowboy's eyes roll toward him.

Dissolve:

EXT. HANGING TREE - LATER

Longer sun. The wounded man is now silent. Much insect-buzz around him.

The cowpoke is now stretched to the extremity.

The horse pulls up a bit of grass and raises its muzzle, chewing. It swallows. It takes a short step forward.

COWBOY

Nnnngh...

The cowboy's body, head now canted steeply back, can move no further. Munching from the horse.

Now, a new sound. The cowboy's eyes roll.

Entering his point-of-view: a steer. Trailed by another. More and more hoofbeats. Many steers. A whipcrack and a "Haw!"

COWBOY (CONT'D)

Nnnnngh!

The lone drover enters his point-of-view.

COWBOY (CONT'D)

(more urgently)

Nnnnngh!

The drover slows and then heaves to, taking in the tableau of gore.

After a staring beat he spurs his horse toward the scene.

He dismounts. He wanders among the bodies with smashed heads, slashed throats, pin-cushioned torsos. After a long staring beat looks up at the cowboy.

DROVER

Comanch?

COWBOY

Nnngh.

The drover nods understanding. He takes his six-gun out and sights on the rope. He fires. And misses.

At the report the cropping horse whips its head up and stamps forward. The cowboy is unsaddled and starts to slide down the horse's rump. The horse snorts and advances.

The cowboy's ass slips off the horse's rump and he swings.

DROVER

Aw, damme.

He sights again on the swinging rope and fires.

A miss. The cowboy continues to swing. The drover calls out:

DROVER (CONT'D)

... Hold still!

He fires again. Again a miss.

Three shots in quick succession. The last one tells: the rope is half-severed. Frayed twinnage ravel down and the cowboy drops.

EXT. RANGE - LATER

The two men ride side-by-side, driving the cattle.

DROVER

And the other cowboy says, Well I'm over'ta Bar Q Triangle Wavy Lines Two-Dot Backwards W Pawprint Triple Z Ranch. An' the first ol' boy says, Sounds like a big spread—lotta head a cattle? and that second boy says Nope. Not too many survive the brandin'.—Haw haw haw!

Our cowboy smiles and nods to acknowledge that it is a hell of a funny story. The drover chatters on:

DROVER (CONT'D)

... I sure do appreciate you helpin' with these beeves. Them two compañeros I hired t'help walk 'em t'Abilene started grousin' 'bout the wages once the weather turned hot'n finally they left out is how I come t'be here by my lonesome. That's what ya call a foul-weather friend I tell ya. Them boys didn't understand first thing about sidekickin'. Maybe you could sidekick up with me on a permanent basis, this drive works out. Ya seem trust-worthy enough is why I make the proposition. Why a sidekick should be a reliable man, that's the whole nature of the sidekick.

(MORE)

DROVER (CONT'D)

Like you watch my back'n I watch
yourn, you got to rely. Fr'instance
I was walkin' a fence one day at
the Purvis Tinkney spread when I
come across't a... a...

His voice trails off as his gaze fixes on:

A plume of dust ahead.

The drover works his mouth.

DROVER (CONT'D)

... Damme.

Discernible now, a group of men on horseback, galloping
toward us.

The drover abruptly reins his horse around and spurs it to a
pounding gallop in the opposite direction.

Our cowboy looks at the drover as he rapidly recedes, side-to-
side quirting his mount. The cowboy looks around at the
approaching horsemen.

As he sits puzzled, looking from one direction to the other,
the thunder of the approaching horsemen builds.

EXT. TOWN STREET/SALOON - DAY

THE COWBOY

He is shoved forward, hands tied behind his back. A dusty
town street.

Before him, a boardwalk fronting a saloon. Upon it, looking
down at him, a man with a great drooping mustache. He sits
behind a makeshift table of planking supported by two upright
barrels. He wears buckskin pants and a side-buttoned tunic
from an old Confederate uniform. His felt hat is aged and
stained. His mustache bear traces of meals eaten long ago.

The man who shoved the cowboy, a bailiff of sorts, now knocks
the hat off his head.

BAILIFF

No hats inna presence of Judge
Hobby.

JUDGE

What'd this sonofabitch do?

COWBOY

Sir, I—

The bailiff smacks the cowboy.

BAILIFF

Hold yer tongue.

(to the judge)

Sumbitch's a stock rustler.

The judge holds up a reproving finger.

JUDGE

Alleged.

BAILIFF

Yes Yer Honor.

COWBOY

Sir, I didn't—

The bailiff smacks the cowboy.

BAILIFF

Hold yer tongue.

(to the judge)

He was caught drivin' rustled
beeves.

JUDGE

Good enough. Hang 'im.

COWBOY

Sir, I never—

The bailiff smacks the cowboy.

BAILIFF

Hesh. Quiet there.

JUDGE

I don't wanna hear a lot a damn
excuses.

COWBOY

No, sir—

JUDGE

Or a lot a damn "Punishment fit the
crime." I'm runnin' a one-size-fits-
all kind of jurisprudence here I
ain't got time to tailor.

COWBOY

No sir, but—

JUDGE

Okay, next. Holy God! I've wasted
enough time with this sonofabitch.
Ya think yer the only one?!

EXT. GALLOWS - DAY

The cowboy stands on a four-banger gallows with three other men. All have their hands tied behind and wear nooses.

The cowboy is gazing out at the crowd. Prompted by a noise, he looks at the condemned man next to him.

The grizzled man is whimpering, terrified. Beyond him, at the far end of the line of condemned, the hangman slips a black hood over the furthest man and then proceeds to the next.

The cowboy, himself calm, gives the man next to him a smile somewhat patronizing.

COWBOY

First time?

The man glances at him, too scared to be puzzled. The hangman arrives at the man and starts to hood him.

The cowboy gives a wry cock of the head. He looks back out at the crowd.

His point-of-view: a sea of faces. One in particular: a bonneted, beautiful young woman, the face of a saint. She looks at the men about to be hanged with an expression of bottomless sadness.

To himself:

COWBOY (CONT'D)

There's a pretty girl.

Back to his point-of-view of the woman. It is wiped away when his hood is swept down to bring on black. The hood amplifies the cowboy's breathing and muffles the sounds of the crowd and the whimpering of the next man over. The sounds continue briefly in black until we hear the CLACK of the trapdoor and a very present SNAP: it stops the breathing. We hear the roar of the crowd.

Dissolve to: the last lines of the story: "... and then the sound of the roaring crowd, fading fast."

The page turns as we hear the crowd's roar fade into a howling wind and the paper is turned to a title page:

Meal Ticket

And then to a new illustration:

We are close on the face of a man orating. His face is painted with stage make-up, his hair coiffed in a roman style. He is under-lit by the warm glow of stage lights and his eyes are cast heavenward.

We travel down to a caption at the bottom of the page:

"The quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven."

A swell of music under the howling wind and we dissolve to:

EXT. HIGH COUNTRY - DAY

A horse-drawn cart rattles along in a very wide shot. A laden pack mule trails it on a lead. We are in the mountains going over a windswept pass.

On the man driving the cart: an Irishman of later middle age in a moth-eaten fur coat. His eyes water as he squints into the wind.

The cart: a boxy thing whose plank sides bear carny-style illustrations and florid lettering weathered well down. The lettering identifies the cart as THALIA'S SEDAN. The illustrations are of great scenes from the history of drama—actors declaiming in Elizabethan garb, in Greek masks, in costumes of the Orient and the Nile and Cadiz, crossing swords, addressing busts, kissing damsels.

Another landscape: the horse and cart and trailing mule clatter through a shallow stream.

EXT. TOWN STREET - DAY

The cart clatters along a mining-town street.

A HANDBILL

Being tacked to a wall.

The Artistry of
Edwin Horatio Harrison
Tragedian, Comedian
"The Wingless Thrush"

Performing

"The Quality of Mercy"
Great Monologues & Dramatic Verse
Sources Various

8:30 This Night
at

Hand-scribbled after the last printed word: Behind
McCormack's Feedlot.

EXT. BEHIND MCCORMACK'S FEEDLOT - NIGHT

A boom arm is swung out from its nest in the lower chassis of the horsecart. The cart wall is unpinned at its two top corners and lowered like a table-leaf to rest upon the projecting boom arm.

More inserts on the Irishman continuing his preparations:

Five pieces of tin cowling are placed at the forward edge of the lowered leaf.

A candle is put into each piece of cowling.

A sashcord is pulled to unfurl a painted drop at the back of the projecting leaf. The drop shows a vaguely medieval castle, stone steps, battlements, sky.

Straw is scattered upon the makeshift stage.

A roughhewn sawhorse-stand is scissored open and planted on the stage. Something bound in burlap is wedged into it.

Sashcord is pulled to lower a curtain before the stage, just upstage of the candle housings.

The candles are lit.

Now people are gathering. They seat themselves on the ground around the cart-stage, murmuring in anticipation.

The Irishman surveys the crowd. He pulls out a pocketwatch and flips its cover.

He considers. He repockets the watch.

He grabs a piece of cord and starts to pull.

The curtain: it starts to center-part, the two halves gathered by cinchcord.

The crowd gasps.

The Irishman's hand quickly wraps the curtain cord around a belaying wingbolt.

The crowd, stunned.

The Irishman, impassive.

Silence.

Finally, from the stage, a voice:

VOICE

When to the sessions of sweet
silent thought...

The voice is full, fluting, euphonious in the manner of an air-sawing Shakespearian actor of old.

VOICE (CONT'D)

... I summon remembrances of things
past...

We cut to the owner of the voice. He does not in fact see the air, for he has no hands—no arms—no legs. Edwin Horatio Harrison is but head and torso. His body is wrapped in a burlap tunic of sorts that is pinned at the shoulders and below the waist. He is wedged into the scissor-stand to face the crowd. He gazes into the distance as he continues to declaim:

VOICE (CONT'D)

... I sigh the lack of many a thing
I sought, And with old woes new
wail my dear time's waste...

The crowd stares, wide-eyed.

A montage of the show. We see parts of various speeches—"Is this a dagger I see before me, "Four-score and seven years ago," "I met a traveler in an antique land..." Intercut is the listening crowd, rough men and rougher women, weathered faces lifted toward the stage, awed by the beauty of the poetry.

The closing monologue is "*Our revels now are ended.*" During it the Irishman passes through the crowd with a hat, accepting money with murmured "T'anks very much," "God bless you," etc.

EXT. CAMPFIRE - NIGHT

Later.

The firelight falls off to flicker dimly on the parked wagon and the hobbled horse placidly cropping grass. Nearer the fire, on either side of it, the Irishman and Harrison eat supper. The seated Irishman uses a knife to stab pieces of meat from his plate. Harrison lies on his side, head craning to mouth food off his plate like a dog.

A long beat of eating. Sounds of chewing and lipsmacks.

Harrison's plate is now empty. He gazes across the fire at the Irishman who continues to eat.

HARRISON

... More meat.

The Irishman stares at Harrison.

At length he rises grudgingly to his feet. He crosses to Harrison and scrapes a few pieces of meat from his plate onto the torso's

He returns and sits.

The men, eating.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

Wide on the Irishman leading the cart-pulling horse by the reins, through a snowed-over road.

Inside the cart: Harrison rides just behind the front bench, wedged in by a duffle of necessities.

EXT. ANOTHER TOWN - DAY

THE HANDBILL

Tacked up in another town. The location scribbled at the bottom: Johansson's Lower Pasture.

At the wagon: close on the artist as the Irishman's hand enters to apply the finishing touches on his make-up. The hand withdraws, re-enters with a mirror. The artist appraises.

EXT. JOHANSSON'S LOWER PASTURE - NIGHT

The Irishman is tensed behind the cart, holding a large sheet of tin bowed against the ground. From the stage on the other side of the cart we hear Harrison's voice:

HARRISON

And it came to pass, when they were
in the field, that Cain rose UP
against Abel his brother and slew
him...

This is the Irishman's cue. He makes shudder the tin which emits the sound of rolling thunder.

HARRISON (CONT'D)

... And the Lord said unto Cain,
Where is Abel thy brother...

We cut to the stage as Harrison continues his recitation through the dramatically building thunder.

LATER

We hear "Our revels now are ended" as the Irishman winds through the audience.

IRISHMAN

Bless you, sir... T'ank you...

Later: the Irishman is chinking coins back into his hat, tallying the take. His look is grim.

EXT. MOUNTAIN STREAM - DAY

High on the wagon splashing through a stream running down a mountain gorge.

EXT. CAMPFIRE #2 - NIGHT

Snow falls.

The Irishman holds a spoonful of soup to Harrison's lips. Harrison blows across it, slurps it in.

The Irishman dips the spoon, raises it again.

EXT. TRAILSIDE - DAY

The stopped cart and waiting horse are soft in the background.

In the foreground the Irishman stands straining as he holds Harrison out in front of him at the height of his own chest, the two men facing the same way. They are cropped midbody but we can tell from the loose hang of Harrison's burlap tunic that it is uncinched at the bottom.

The Irishman looks off, grimacing under the weight he supports. Harrison looks steeply down. We hear water spattering against ground.

EXT. PERFORMANCE - NIGHT

Another night, another town: the artist performs the familiar poems and monologues.

EXT. CAMPFIRE #3 - NIGHT

We are on Harrison watching apprehensively as we hear the Irishman sing, loudly.

We cut to the Irishman across the fire. He clutches a bottle in one hand. The words of his old Irish song are slurred. His head bobs and dips. For the first time that we have seen he is smiling. The smile is ghastly.

He finishes the song and punctuates by hurling the bottle into the fire, where it shatters.

He rises tipsily to his feet.

IRISHMAN
We're goin' into town.

INT. SPORTING-HOUSE - NIGHT

The Irishman, led by a boozily laughing bawd, climbs a staircase that ascends from the main floor to a door-lined mezzanine gallery. The Irishman laughs as he staggers upward, impaired by liquor and burdened by Harrison whom he carries in a basket toted Santa-style on his back.

Harrison scowls.

INT. SPORTING-HOUSE BEDROOM - NIGHT

A corner of the room: Harrison is deposited on the floor. We are in a small private room—chair, bed, wood stand with basin.

Wider: the Irishman and the bawd laugh on. The bawd plops onto the bed and starts peeling down her garters. The swaying Irishman takes off his coat and starts to shrug his suspenders but stops short, eyeing Harrison.

He goes to Harrison and spins his basket so that he faces the wall.

We hold on Harrison, scowling, as laughter and sounds of clothes-shedding resume.

FADE OUT

INT. SPORTING-HOUSE BEDROOM - LATER

HARRISON

He is being swung around again to face out into the room.

The bawd sits on the bed, pulling clothes back on. She stands and reaches behind her back to button something and smiles down at Harrison. Addressing the Irishman:

BAWD

Wanna buy your friend some lovin'?

The Irishman, lacing his shoes, looks up. The question seems to put him in ill humor.

IRISHMAN

I don't t'ink so.

BAWD

He ever had any?

IRISHMAN

... Once.

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN

WINDY NIGHT

Harrison performs as a raw night wind eddies the stage straw and pelts the canvas backing with grit.

HARRISON

When, in disgrace with Fortune and
men's eyes, I all alone bewep my
outcast state...

The Irishman, arms folded, leans against a corner of the cart, grimly surveying:

The audience. A sparse six or eight people, hugging coats, clamping hats in place against the wind.

HARRISON (CONT'D)

... And trouble deaf heaven with my
bootless cries, And look upon
myself and curse my fate...

The Irishman leans forward and spits.

Later: quiet now.

The audience, such as it was, has dispersed. The Irishman is pinning up the stage leaf. His attention is caught by town noises brought in on the wind. He turns and looks.

The town's one street stretches away from our vantage point just outside of town. Midway down the street there is a saloon door out of which piano music weakly tinkles. Further along a crowd of people is facing away from us, toward some kind of outdoor stage. The crowd's approving roar, which first attracted the Irishman's notice, sounds again.

EXT. TOWN STREET - NIGHT

THE CROWD

We have jumped around so that the crowd now faces us, pressing in, all eyes fixed on the stage, off. The faces are warmly lit by footlight spill.

Approaching from the dark background is the Irishman, craning to see over the spectators' heads.

Another roar from the crowd.

An audience member's shout:

MAN

Eighteen take away five!

A rough voice echoes:

VOICE

Eighteen take away five.

A long beat of suspense. All eyes are trained forward except for the Irishman's who, having joined the crowd, looks around, taking in the audience and its delight.

A plinking sound. The audience again bursts into cheers.

Reverse: another makeshift stage of built off a cart. Painted canvases serve as stage backing and festoon. They identify the act as GALLUS MATHEMATICUS. Under the slogans "Genius of the Barnyard" and "The Pecking Pythagorean" there is a depiction of a pince-nezed chicken in academic robes and a mortarboard and tassel. A chalkboard behind the pictured fowl is densely covered with equations and runes.

Upon the stage is a moth-eaten old rooster. It has just pecked a tin disc upon which is painted the number 13—part of an array of numbered discs tacked to a plank frame. The rooster struts jerkily back to the center of the stage and emits a *blick-squawk*.

AUDIENCE WOMAN

The sum of six and four!

A man at the side of the stage, musclebound, baldheaded, with a large waxed mustache, echoes:

IMPRESARIO

The sum of six and four.

The rooster stares out at the audience, head jerking this way and that, seeming to fix different audience members with a look of perplexity or surprise.

At length it turns and herky-jerks back to the number array, head bobbing. It pauses. It snaps its beak against the ten.

Loud cheers.

EXT. TOWN STREET - LATER

The audience is gone, the cart closed up.

The Irishman is counting money into the hand of the impresario. The rooster, in a small wooden cage, emits an occasional squawk.

IRISHMAN

... He eat much?

EXT. CAMPFIRE #4 - DAWN

A crackling breakfast-fire over which a coffeepot is suspended.

A knife slits an opening in a bag of bird seed. The bag is then tipped over a small bucket. Seed hisses into the bucket.

The bucket is placed before the rooster who is staked by means of an ankle-cuff and line.

The Irishman plops down now before the fire, holding a tin coffee cup. He sips and then wraps both hands on the cup and stares into the fire.

Harrison is also facing the fire, a hardly-touched plate of grits to one side. He is staring at:

The rooster, tapping at the seed in the bucket, then tapping at the seed spilled on the ground around it. It paces jerkily to the short limit of its line, occasionally pecking at the ground. It pauses, looks up, seeming to return Harrison's look.

The Irishman is as before, gazing thoughtfully at the fire.

Harrison, looking at the rooster.

The rooster looking back, then resuming pecking.

The Irishman gazing at the fire. After a long beat he tosses the dregs of his coffee and rises.

EXT. SMALL RIVER OVERLOOK - FULL DAY

A picturesque high shot looking down at an overlook on a small river. Its fast-moving water boils and gurgles.

We hear the approaching rattle and clank of the Irishman's wagon. It finishes a tableau when it pulls into frame and stops on the rise. The Irishman pulls its brake and climbs down.

On the Irishman walking the bank. He is knotting a length of rope around a stone. He stops, looking down into the river. He tosses the stone and rope.

His point-of-view: The stone and mess of trailing rope hit the water together, the stone immediately sinking. The rope floats on the surface in a pattern that is peeled away as the sinking stone pulls the rope down-until none remains.

On the Irishman, looking.

He starts back to the wagon.

On Harrison in the cart, looking out the back.

In his viewpoint vignettted by the cart's tailgate and sidewall, the Irishman appears, approaches.

He reaches into the wagon, hoists Harrison, heads back toward the river.

The rooster, in its cage in the back of the wagon, looks this way and that, blick-squawking, head aimlessly bobbing.

EXT. LANDSCAPE - DAY

Later. The cart rattles along, small. Very faintly, the squawk of the rooster.

Fade in on a new title page:

All Gold Canyon

And the page turns to a new illustration:

We are at the very top of a Monterey Pine looking out past the back of a man who has scaled the tree and hugs close to the trunk.

Though we are behind the man we can see from the crook of his arm that he has raised his hand to shield his eyes from the sun.

The vista beyond is of mountain ranges that seem to stretch on forever, falling away one behind the other, fading into the hazy light.

We move down to the caption below the picture:

And in all that mighty sweep of earth he saw no sign of man nor the handiwork of man.

Dissolve to:

EXT. A CANYON - MIDDAY

A stream burbles down the middle of the canyon, descending from a pool.

A meadow covered in grass and wildflowers rises from one side of the pool, ascending to a scree of rocks that ends at the canyon wall.

We cut to a bee humming over and dipping toward the bell of one of the flowers in the meadow.

A ball of gnats boils into and out of the shade of a shrub.

A hummingbird arrives at a flower and hovers.

In the pond stands a deer, a many-antlered buck. He dips his head, drinks.

Silver minnows waggle in the water in formation, feeding on algae, little disturbed by the deer drinking nearby.

At the spout of the pond, where it feeds the stream, water gurgles out, lightly splashing over the rocks that form the bottleneck, the spray glinting in the sun.

An owl perched at the top of a tall pine surveys the canyon below. Suddenly the lightest breeze springs up, giving the tree a bit of life. The owl cocks its head. With the breeze we hear the distant sound of a singing voice.

The deer lifts its head from the pool and looks down-canyon.

The stream disappears below a curtain of vegetation—brush and shrub and pine trees—that closes off the view. Beyond that middleground curtain is a further one composed of rising rockface. We are in a contained space, hidden from the rest of the world, a box canyon.

We hear the singing voice a little more clearly: we can now make out words over the breeze in the trees:

VOICE

Sure I love the dear silver
That shines in your hair,
And the brow that's all furrowd
And wrinkled with care...

The deer stares, water dripping from its muzzle, then bolts.

The silver minnows dart away.

The owl takes clumsy flight.

The can hear clip-clopping horses' feet now, down-canyon, under the continuing singing:

VOICE (CONT'D)

... I kiss the dear fingers
So toil-worn for me,
Oh, god bless you and keep you...

EXT. CANYON - DAY

The curtain of vegetation is messily parted by a man leading a donkey. Both man and beast are stiffly brushed by the scrub as they push through, the pack and paraphernalia on the donkey clacking and jangling as they come through.

There are clanking pots, pans, pick, shovel, miner's pan, all disarranged by their noisy entrance into the canyon.

MAN

... My mother Machree.

The man—a vigorous geezer—has stopped, the donkey stopped also, silence now prevailing, for all of the animal noise native to the canyon has also disappeared. The man is staring intently up-canyon, taken by something.

His point-of-view: the pond feeding the stream, which we pan down to the foreground.

A tilt of the geezer's head. Still looking:

The side-hill, rising from the pond.

The man turns his head side to side:

The canyon walls, funneling to the side hill and the pond in turn.

The man, still staring, ruminatively gathers saliva and, still looking out, spits.

MAN (CONT'D)

Huh!

The donkey brays softly. In response:

He starts back toward the donkey but takes only two steps before abruptly stopping and looking back over his shoulder, just confirming, with a still beat, that the canyon hasn't changed and isn't about to.

Thus reassured he goes to the donkey and unhooks a shovel and a shallow pan.

He climbs to the pond, eying the stream as he passes it.

He dips his head to the pondwater and drinks.

He raises his head and, as he absently wipes his chin with his sleeve, looks down-canyon at the stream.

A staring beat and then with a grunt he rises and swipes his shovel and pan from the ground.

MAN (CONT'D)

We'll see... we'll see...

He goes to the most upstream point of where the sidehill touches the stream.

He digs a small shovelful of soil from the bank and dumps it in the pan and then squats at the side of the stream. Balanced over his heels he dips the pan into the stream and raises it out and swishes it.

He keeps dipping the pan and swishing it and lighter soil rises to the top and is sloshed away by the deft circular movement. He pauses the washing to rake out larger pieces of gravel with his fingers, then dips and swishes again to spill away more soil.

A last swish and outflinging of water discloses only the finest and heaviest black sand lining the pan-bottom like paint.

He looks at the pan. He raises it closer, squints.

In the middle of the black gunk, the tiniest golden speck.

No reaction from the man: stillness.

He dips the pan twice more and swishes.

He looks:

Now, two gold specks.

After a still beat he nods, then dips the pan up-and-downways into the stream and shakes it back and forth, cleaning it.

MAN (CONT'D)

Two.

He snaps two pieces off some straw and plants the two stalks next to the hole bitten out of the ground by the shovel.

He takes two steps downstream and digs another small spadeful of dirt into the pan and squats and starts washing the contents.

More washing, raking out, washing, examining. Finally:

MAN (CONT'D)

Four.

He washes the pan back-and-forth and then rises and snaps off four pieces of straw and plants them next to the new hole.

He goes two steps further downstream and the shovel bites into earth.

AN HOUR LATER

There is a line of shovel-holes along the stream bank. Straws are planted by each hole, sparsest upstream, swelling to a thicket of them seven or eight holes down, then diminishing again towards the hole before which the man now squats, panning.

His shirt is off. He has a farmer's tan: very red neck ending in a hard line of very pale torso, ending in red hands.

He is finishing washing, and now examines the pan-bottom: one golden speck.

He washes the pan, plants one stalk of straw, goes downstream and digs and pans.

Now, nothing.

He clamps his hands on his knees and rises. He looks up the hill.

MAN (CONT'D)

All right Mr. Pocket—I'm a comin.
You just set there, I'm a comin.

He goes to the middle of the line of holes—the hole with the most straw-stalks next to it. As he does so:

MAN (CONT'D)

Where are ye, Mr. Pocket—right,
left, er straight up the middle?

No answer from the hill.

MAN (CONT'D)

... Well, we'll see.

His shovel bites into the earth a couple paces uphill of the richest streamside site.

MAN (CONT'D)

... We'll see.

DUSK

The holes in the hill form a bendy triangle—the longest row of them lining the stream, the successively uphill rows growing shorter, and pulling to the right. The triangle is as yet incomplete, topless: the trapper has not quite reached the pinnacle, the focus of the gold.

The trapper is rising out of a hole—which is waist-deep, the holes being deeper as they climb the hill.

At the river he washes the pan. The end result: the pan-bottom is glittering with gold specks among the black, too many to count.

MAN

Heh! Almost enough to keep!

He plunges the pan into the stream and waggles it, washing the gold away.

He rises, stiff now.

He looks up at the canyon rim. There is radiance dying at the point beyond which the sun has disappeared. Evening breeze is stirring the trees at the rim.

MAN (CONT'D)

All right! I'm gonna getcha. Not today, but I'm gonna getcha. You can't run away Mr. Pocket!

As he goes down to his pack horse:

MAN (CONT'D)

... I'll catch up with you tomorra.
I'm old, but yer older!

He starts unpacking the horse.

DUSK

The trapper has built a campfire. He sits before it eating, humming as he chews.

His chewing freezes for a beat as he stares into the fire, focused. Then he resumes chewing again, chuckling.

LATER - DUSK

He finishes wrapping himself in a bedroll.

A loud exhalation, a quiet beat. Then, sudden and loud:

MAN

Good night, Mr. Pocket!

Chuckles, then he rolls over.

WIDE

By the hill the remains of fire, the man small. Faint chuckling and a faint:

MAN (CONT'D)

... Ahh me.

EXT. STREAM - DAWN

The prospector stands in the middle of the stream, the legs of his stained union suit rolled up to the height of the water.

He jerks on a length of string and pulls up a small silvery fish that twitches in the sunlight.

Looking up at the ridge above him he notices the owl alighting in the tall pine.

THE PINE - DAY

As the prospector, now fully dressed, inches his way up the pine, stepping on smaller and smaller limbs as he approaches the top. He has a burlap sling around his neck.

At a flapping sound he looks up.

In low angle we see the owl, disturbed by his approach, awkwardly taking flight.

Back to the prospector, hair stirred by breeze. A distant hoot. He looks around, raising his hand to shadow his eyes.

The horizon. Mountain after mountain softening with distance and haze. Nothing stirs.

He looks down.

An unfamiliar, high perspective on his hidden canyon. The stream. The line of holes at its bank. The distant sound of the stream.

He resumes climbing.

AT THE NEST

The prospector arrives. Five speckled eggs, barely bigger than chicken eggs.

The prospector is carefully loading them one by one in his burlap sling when something catches his look, arrests his egg-loading motion.

The displaced owl is perched on a tree maybe fifty yards distant. Its gaze is fixed on him.

The prospector looks at the owl, hand still arrested holding an egg.

The owl looks at him.

The prospector relents: he places the egg he holds not in his sling but back in the nest, next to the lone egg he had not yet taken. He mutters:

PROSPECTOR
I cain't do it!

He unloads the eggs already in his sling.

PROSPECTOR (CONT'D)
... Damny.

He considers.

PROSPECTOR (CONT'D)
Mebbe just one.

He restores one egg to his sling and starts his descent.

PROSPECTOR (CONT'D)
... How high can a bird count,
anyway...

EXT. CANYON - DAY

FRYING EGG

An egg and a small fish sizzle in the frying pan.

THE PROSPECTOR

Eating, staring fixedly off as he chews.

His point-of-view: the line of holes at the riverbank.

The prospector, still chewing.

PROSPECTOR
Yep... yep...

He sets the plate aside, rising:

PROSPECTOR (CONT'D)
Ya ready, Mr. Pocket?

MINUTES LATER

He is in a hole further up the hill, a little more than halfway up a prospective triangle not yet defined fully to the top by the progressively shorter lines of holes.

He claws small nuggets from the earth now, wipes them and blows them clean of dirt, puts them in a sack.

PROSPECTOR

Keepers now... gettin to keepers...

LATER

The sun is high.

The prospector climbs from a hole sweating, shirt off, further up the hill, his sack of nuggets half-full.

PROSPECTOR

Lumps'n chunks... lumps'n chunks...

He steps back, looks at the shape of his bendy, not-yet-finished triangle.

He drops the sack, picks up the spade that is planted by the last hole, and walks up the hill referring to the downhill holes.

A look back and forth and then he decisively plants the shovel at a spot: the presumptive apex of the triangle.

PROSPECTOR (CONT'D)

... Right here! I got the almighty cinch on you, Mr. Pocket! You're settin down there a-waitin for me!

He picks up a canteen, tips his head back and pours water over his sweat-stained face.

He blinks up at the hot sun.

PROSPECTOR (CONT'D)

... Hold on sun, hold on. I'm almost there.

LATER

The prospector is almost neck-deep in a hole about five feet in diameter. He looks up at the sun, closer now to the western ridge.

He gets down on his knees and claws through the dirt at the bottom of the hole. Nothing but dirt and rocks. Standing again he works on the walls of the hole, widening it so he can swing a pick.

AGC14 LATER STILL

The sun is lower. We see only the tip of the pick as it swings up above the lip of the hole at the apex of its arc. The hole is about eight feet deep now and the sun slants in at a steep angle.

AGC15 INSIDE THE HOLE - DAY

As the pick bites into the soft earth. It strikes something hard. The prospector grabs the spade and starts frantically shoveling the earth and tossing it away. He drops the spade and sinks to his knees and starts pawing at the dirt. A chunk comes away in his hand.

He swipes it clean: it is half rotten quartz, half virgin gold.

PROSPECTOR
Mother Machree!

The quartz/gold seam comes apart with just a little twisting pressure from his hands. Still on his knees he tosses the huge gold chunk onto a burlap sack on the floor of the pit. He pulls another chunk from the pit wall in front of him—like the first, but even more of this one is gold. And another chunk. And another.

PROSPECTOR (CONT'D)
Hello Mr. Pocket!

The pit, out of direct sunlight, is warmly lit by the late sun filtering in through the dust raised by his digging and clawing. But now the light, animated by the motion of the dust, is subtly disturbed.

The prospector freezes. What was it? Not a shadow. Was it anything? Whatever wavered in the cloud of light and dust, is now still.

We are very close on the prospector who faces into the pit, only his eyes turned back, not daring to turn his head. He thinks. After a long beat his eyes return to the gold lump in front of him. More stillness.

Not knowing what to do, not wanting to turn around, he stiffly reaches with one hand to brush dirt from the lump.

When we cut from the lump to a close-up on his face it is a new, lower angle, showing an out-of-focus figure standing at the lip of the pit, above and behind the prospector.

The prospector clears his throat. He self-consciously whistles, attempting a show of nonchalance, tipping his head to admire the lump of gold.

The soft silhouetted figure above is silently reaching something from his coat.

We cut to a high angle over the man's shoulder, the prospector below, facing away from us, on his knees, whistling. Motion in the body of the foreground man shows him continuing and then completing the action of getting something from his coat. Now he is still.

Back down to the prospector. We are now very close, his face filling the frame. The prospector is beading sweat, looking at the lump, trying to think what to do, not coming up with anything. His whistling dries. In the quiet, a small, sad, shake of his head.

A loud roar and his body slams down out of frame.

He hits the ground and is still.

Renewed quiet.

The man looking down: a young man, almost a boy, clean-shaven, neater than the prospector, a six-gun smoking in his hand. He holds still, the stillness confirming that his prey is dead.

At length he relaxes, his gun no longer pointing but his look still down at the body in the pit.

The prospector's limbs are in an awkward tangle. He has the ragdoll attitude of a corpse. Blood leaks from his back.

The shooter slowly seats himself on the lip of the pit, legs dangling.

His eyes still on the corpse he sets the gun down and fishes a rolling paper and a tobacco-sack from his pocket. He curls the paper, taps in a line of tobacco, finishes curling the paper, licks it shut, lights it.

As he inhales his look moves, for the first time, off the prospector. It wanders out over the stream and up the pines to where a shape moves: the owl alighting.

Evening breeze stirs the man's hair. He gives a long exhale of smoke, looks back down into the pit.

Seeped-out blood covers the back of the prospector's shirt.

The shooter, his look unemotive, sighs, licks forefinger and thumb and taps them against the end of the cigarette, killing it. He puts it back in his pocket, for later. He picks up the gun.

He braces both arms against the lip and drops himself into the hole, his gun above his head as he lets go of the edge.

Just as he lands the prospector, twisting with a wheezing roar of effort, grabs the shooter's ankle and upsets his balance. The gun goes off with a roar thudding into the side of the hole and filling it with smoke.

Collapsing at the bottom the shooter tries to lower the gun but his wrist is grabbed and wrenched to the side as the gun goes off again. The two men tangle in the confined space a riot of flailing limbs. The prospector does not let go of the young man's wrist even as he lowers the gun to shoot.

Suddenly the prospector throws a handful of dirt into the shooter's face and wrenches the gun away.

The shooter raises his other hand in front of his face to shield it just as, from offscreen, the gun roars again, the bullet passing through his hand and into his face, killing him.

The prospector struggles wheezing to his feet, discharging the revolver two more times into the young man's body.

The gunsmoke rises and the last gunshot rings out to leave the prospector sobbing, looking down at the dead man covered in blood. Blood drips from the prospector as well, draining down the arm holding the gun still pointing at his assailant.

PROSPECTOR (CONT'D)

Ya measly skunk! A-campin on my
trail and lettin me do the work an
then shootin me in the back!

He kicks at the dead man's foot.

PROSPECTOR (CONT'D)

... IN THE BACK!

Sobbing and moaning, he crawls out of the pit.

EXT. LIP OF THE HOLE/STREAM - LATE DAY

He claws his shirt off as he staggers downhill to the stream.

PROSPECTOR
... Ya measly SKUNK!

He drops the gun at the riverbank and plows into the water. Not deep enough: he does knee-bends to clear the blood so as to be able to examine his wound.

He moans with pain and effort with each bob as he sloshes water against himself.

The exposed wound is in his midriff, to one side. He raises that arm and twists to look at the exit wound in his back.

PROSPECTOR (CONT'D)
... Went clean through. Didn't hit
nothing important. Just guts! JUST
GUTS, YA MEASLY SKUNK!

The shout is directed up the hill. The prospector reverts to moaning as he bobs and slaps water, cleaning the wound.

He staggers out of the stream and goes to his little campsite and pulls some cloth out of a bag, yelling uphill:

PROSPECTOR (CONT'D)
... Don't worry, Mr. Pocket, I'll
come back!

He rips a length of cloth and we cut on the rip.

EXT. HOLE - NEXT MORNING

AGC7

Early light.

The holes.

The dead shooter, caked with dirt and blood, lies at the lip of the topmost hole having been dragged out. On the other side of the pit uncleaned lumps of gold lie on the burlap bag. Wheezing is audible within the pit.

The prospector, now bandaged, is inside. The pit's uphill wall is now concave, the pocket of gold having been clawed out. The prospector runs a hand along the concave surface, looking, pulling out a clod, satisfying himself that it is little more than dirt.

PROSPECTOR
Okay... okay...

He emerges from the pit.

He plants a toe under the corpse and, with one hand clamped against his injured side to keep it compressed while he strains, he rolls the dead man into the pit.

PROSPECTOR (CONT'D)
 ... That's yer share, ya measly
 skunk!

EXT. CANYON - DAY

THE LOADED HORSE

Clanking and jangling with pots and pans. It is now also loaded with two bulging burlap sacks.

PROSPECTOR
 There's a spot in me heart
 Which nobody may own
 There's a depth in my soul
 Never sounded or known...

The prospector is leading the horse through the downhill curtain of vegetation.

PROSPECTOR (CONT'D)
 There's a place in my mem'ry
 —My heart—that you fill
 No other can take it
 No one ever will...

His singing voice fades as the shrubs and branches close over him and he continues his descent unseen.

High: the owl's point-of-view of the canyon. The burbling stream, the hill beside it marred by the strange geometry of gouged holes.

The distant voice fades to nothing. The sounds of the canyon return.

FADE OUT

As we dissolve to a new title page we hear the sound of distant barking:

The Gal Who Got Rattled

The page turns to a new illustration: wide on a rolling prairie. In the painting a line of conestoga wagons recedes into the distance; a lone rider coming from the wagon train is about to meet a man on foot, his back to us, who carries a winchester on his shoulder. He is trailed by a small black terrier.

We move down to the caption at the bottom of the picture:

Mr. Arthur had no idea what he would say to Billy Knapp.

We dissolve to:

INT. BOARDERS' DINING ROOM - NIGHT

A YAPPING DOG

A little terrier wanders beneath a long table, among the boots and high lace-ups of the nine or ten diners.

A male hand reaches under the table with a scrap. The dog hurries to it.

VOICE

His cough did not respond to any
kind of syrup or elixir...

At the table: a half-dozen boarders among whom are Gilbert and Alice Longabaugh. Gilbert is just withdrawing his hand from under the table.

The speaker is a young salesman.

SALESMAN

I bought him every kind of remedy,
out of my own pocket. Nothing
palliated. Although one of them he
drank avidly. And it was an
extremely rattly cough. No, I was
not sad to see Mr. Kincaid leave.

LANDLADY

It was not a contagious cough.
Nobody here became ill. It was a
nervous cough. I would not rent to
a contagious cougher.

SALESMAN

I have never heard of a nervous
cough.
(turns to Mrs. Longabaugh)
I understand you are about to leave
us.

LANDLADY

There is no medical affliction but
that doesn't have a nervous
variety. The nervous system spreads
its tendrils throughout the body. I
saw a picture of it in a book.

SALESMAN

The nervous system does not have
"tendrils."

LANDLADY

I don't pretend to be a physician,
or a botanist. I know that the
nervous system extends through the
body and I presume that that is how
it learns of the various physical
conditions that it imitates.

ANOTHER MAN

Mrs. Flannery is quite right, I
have seen that picture.

LANDLADY

My point is only that Mr. Kincaid
was not a contagious cougher. I
don't rent to such.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN

Is there any more chicken and
dumplings? The bowl came to me
last.

LANDLADY

Yes there is more! We don't stint
at this table. Grandma Turner looks
to be finished. Are you finished
Grandma Turner!

An old lady stares off, her mouth open.

The landlady nods.

LANDLADY (CONT'D)

... Grandma Turner is finished.

SALESMAN

(to Alice)

Leaving tomorrow? Jumping off the
map, so to speak?

ALICE

Yes indeed, my brother and I are
setting off in the morning, for
Oregon.

SALESMAN

Oregon! You have people there, or
a—

LANDLADY

Just scoop from her plate, Mrs. Halliday. Grandma Turner is quite done.

ALICE

No, I, not exactly—that is, my brother does.

GILBERT

Well go ahead and tell him Alice, don't be tongue-tied. She has exciting news.

ALICE

I'm... I'm to be married. Or at least I may be, to Gilbert's... associate.

GILBERT

He's well fixed out there.

The salesman can't quite make out the situation. He looks at Alice, puzzled.

SALESMAN

You're not certain whether you're going to be married? Has the gentleman not proposed?

ALICE

Well, he—

Alice looks up with embarrassment.

GILBERT

He will propose. Once they meet each other I'm sure Alice will pass muster. The match is a good one. I'm joining him in a business opportunity. And he's declared himself ready to marry when he finds a suitable match. Alice can be very sociable and attractive when she has a mind to be. She doesn't always have a mind to be.

LANDLADY

I think she is just the picture of charm and we will be so very sorry to see you go, Miss Longabaugh, you and Mr. Longabaugh both.

(MORE)

LANDLADY (CONT'D)

And of course Mr. Longabaugh's dog,
little President Pierce, bless him.
Where is he now?

EXT. PRAIRIE - DAY

DAYS LATER

We hear the steady yapping of a small dog but we are close on an ox, in harness. We lead the ox; it is looking past us with watery, sad brown eyes.

Reverse: the wagon ahead. The terrier stands inside with its forepaws up against the tailgate, looking out the back, steadily yapping. We can tell from its body that its tail is furiously wagging. It is keeping steady eye-contact with the ox behind.

Alice trudges before the wagon in which the dog yaps. She wears a broad-brimmed hat. Gilbert walks slightly ahead. Ahead of both a young man, seen only from behind, leads their team of oxen.

After a long beat walking:

ALICE

Gilbert.

GILBERT

Yes, sister.

The dog is still yapping, and indeed yaps throughout.

Alice is hesitant:

ALICE

Two people have asked me about
President Pierce.

GILBERT

Asked?

ALICE

Well... complained.

GILBERT

About what?

ALICE

The barking.

GILBERT

Indeed. Why to you?

ALICE

I believe they assumed he was my dog.

GILBERT

Well I don't know what to say. President Pierce is a nervous creature, and excited by animals larger than himself.

ALICE

Almost all animals are larger than President Pierce.

GILBERT

(nettled)

Well what of it?

ALICE

People are... wondering if he will bark all the way to the Willamette Valley.

GILBERT

What if he does? There are property rights. The dog is my property. My property barks. There you have it.

They walk in silence. Then:

GILBERT (CONT'D)

What did you tell them?

ALICE

... Well. Not that.

GILBERT

Yes, I can only imagine what you said. Alice: sometimes you have to tell people what's what.

Gilbert raises his hand and coughs into it, probably from the choking dust.

EXT. PRAIRIE - NIGHT

DAYS LATER

Night. On the prairie.

Alice sits on the ground against a wagon wheel, in distress. Her knees are drawn up and her hands clamp either side of her head. She is hyperventilating.

The little dog is near her, yapping up toward the wagon.
 From inside the wagon, moans building to a scream of agony.
 The scream is succeeded by heavy breathing and then a rasping voice:

GILBERT

Alice!

Staring at the ground she shakes her head, still hyperventilating.

She looks up.

Peeking out over the tailgate of the next wagon in the circle is a small child. He stares at her.

GILBERT (CONT'D)

Alice!

EXT. PRAIRIE - NEXT MORNING

Gilbert lies inside the wagon gazing upward, dead.

Alice stares down at him.

Early sunlight is diffused by the wagon's canvas skin.

VOICE

Ma'am... Um, Miss... condolences...

A man nearing sixty, mounted, looks in over the tailgate. It is Mr. Arthur, one of the two trailbosses. He is uncomfortable:

MR. ARTHUR

Condolences—goin back?

Alice stares at him. It is as if she has not heard. Her mouth hangs open.

Mr. Arthur grows only more uncomfortable under her stare.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)

... You, uh, goin back now, er...

As we hear approaching hoofbeats Mr. Arthur's panicked look shifts to the approaching rider, appealing for help.

BILLY KNAPP

Did you lose him?

She stares at Billy Knapp. Gathering that she is not ready to talk, his tone is gentle:

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)
I am so very sorry. I will get a spade.

She finds her voice:

ALICE
Yesterday morning he was fine.

BILLY KNAPP
It is very quick, cholera.

Mr. Arthur has withdrawn a half-length behind Billy Knapp, to whom he mutters:

MR. ARTHUR
She a go-backer?

BILLY KNAPP
Will you be goin back, Miss? Or pressin on?

She stares at him.

He waits, and then a gentle prod:

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)
... Goin back, or, stayin with the train?

ALICE
Goin back where?

BILLY KNAPP
Uh...

ALICE
I... don't have people.

BILLY KNAPP
Anyone ahead? In Oregon?

ALICE
... There is a gentleman... but I have not met him. I know his name.

BILLY KNAPP
Well... I'll get a spade.

EXT. GRAVESITE - LATER

Billy Knapp is walloping the ground with the flat of a shovel. His close-mouthed colleague Mr. Arthur watches from his horse, arms draped over the saddle horn.

Billy Knapp notices Alice approaching and in deference stops packing the earth; he presses at the ground with his toe.

She draws up, looking at the patch of earth.

BILLY KNAPP

Don't want him dug up. Uh... you want a marker of any kind, or...

She is staring at the ground. She looks up at him. No answer. He takes it as answer.

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)

Well. We'll leave it at that. Better anyway not to advertise to the Indians. They will scavenge.

She looks at him with alarm, which he notes.

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)

... They don't bother us, none. Too much trouble attackin a wagon train, too little reward. You got a hired boy don't you Miss Longabaugh?

ALICE

Yes. Matt.

BILLY KNAPP

'N he'll handle the team.

ALICE

He has been. Gilbert did very little.

BILLY KNAPP

Very well. You call upon myself or Mr. Arthur if you...

She looks from one man to the other.

Mr. Arthur says nothing. He turns his horse and rides away.

EXT. TRAILBOSS' COOKFIRE - NIGHT

Two men sit at a campfire: facing us, Mr. Arthur, and facing away, Billy Knapp, who is just lifting a brand from the fire to light himself a cigarette. The men sit in contented quiet, comfortable enough with each other to not talk.

When Mr. Arthur sees Alice walking up he catches Billy's eye and hastily rises, and Billy Knapp follows.

BILLY KNAPP

Miss.

ALICE

Please, sit down. Could I ask your advice, Mr. Knapp?

BILLY KNAPP

Certainly, miss. Will you have a coffee with us?

ALICE

No thank you. My hired boy, Matt. He told me that my brother promised him half his wages when we get to Fort Laramie.

BILLY KNAPP

Yes miss?

ALICE

Well...

BILLY KNAPP

What'd he say that was?

ALICE

Two hundred dollars.

BILLY

Two hundred dollars is half?

ALICE

Yes. And the other half when we get to the Willamette Valley.

Billy Knapp and Mr. Arthur exchange a look.

MR. ARTHUR

A high price.

These words—the first we've heard Mr. Arthur speak—have been addressed to no one in particular. Billy Knapp addresses Alice:

BILLY KNAPP
It is an extravagant wage.

ALICE
Is it?

MR. ARTHUR
That's a high price.

BILLY KNAPP
Do you think the boy is telling a story? Now that your brother is no longer...

ALICE
I don't know.

The two men again look at each other.

ALICE (CONT'D)
... Gilbert was not a good business person. He had an enterprise in Iowa City, that ended poorly... And earlier, another that...

There is no judgment in the question:

BILLY KNAPP
He was a failure?

ALICE
I suppose.

BILLY KNAPP
Still, the boy...

MR. ARTHUR
That's a high price.

ALICE
Well. There is another problem. I... I cannot find any money in the wagon. I believe Gilbert kept it in his waistcoat.

Again, the two men look at each other.

BILLY KNAPP
Then he's still got it.

MR. ARTHUR
One day's ride.

BILLY KNAPP

Yessir but, what, midday tomorrow,
I smoothed it, kicked scrub over
it'n who knows what passed in the
night. No, I don't think so. No.

He turns back to Alice. He thinks. At length:

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)

... I suggest you not argue with
the boy til we get to Fort Laramie.

ALICE

And then?

Quiet.

BILLY KNAPP

Well, maybe I will talk to the boy,
see if I can shake him loose from
his story. Four hundred dollars. I
don't know. I will have to think on
this one.

EXT. PRAIRIE - NEXT DAY

We hear dog yapping.

We are looking at the back of a young man in a battered felt
hat who trudges along leading a team of oxen.

He looks over his shoulder. He is an unprepossessing young
man.

Behind him: Alice. She does not react to the boy's sullen
look.

EXT. ALICE'S COOKFIRE - EVENING

Alice and the young man are eating wordlessly at their
cookfire.

Intermittent yaps from the dog.

Billy Knapp walks up.

BILLY KNAPP

Miss, could I have a word?

ALICE

Certainly Mr. Knapp, can I offer
you supper?

BILLY KNAPP

Thank you, miss, I have had mine.
I—

The young man, having given Billy Knapp a hostile look on his arrival, now rises and leaves with his plate of food. Billy Knapp watches him go, then looks back at Alice.

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)

This is awkward miss, but people have complained to Mr. Arthur and myself about your little, uh, President Pierce. I have no doubt but that your dog is—

ALICE

He is not my dog.

BILLY KNAPP

... Miss?

ALICE

He was—Mr. Longabaugh's. I know it's terrible, the noise. I don't know what to do.

BILLY KNAPP

I see. I see. Well then—I thought he was your dog—maybe this is quite a simple matter, uh... could I put him down for you, miss?

ALICE

All right. Well. Could we not just scare him off?

BILLY KNAPP

Well no, we are his food so he will try to follow, long as he can. And then—a wolf might play with him before he eats him. Faster is better.

ALICE

Yes. I understand. Yes, thank you very much, if you would take care of it.

BILLY KNAPP

It will be no trouble at all, miss. I will attend to it right away.—Oh
(lowered voice)

(MORE)

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)

I regret to have to tell you—I talked to your boy Matt. I could not get him to budge.

ALICE

Well. Well. Thank you Mr. Knapp, you are very kind to extend yourself.

BILLY KNAPP

It is no trouble, miss. Here we go, little dog...

He stoops, coaxing the terrier in with an extended hand. He scoops it up.

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)

... All right, miss.

He touches his hat and walks away, dog in the crook of his arm, around the wagon toward a nearby rise.

Alice watches the spot he left.

She rouses herself, takes another bite of food.

No appetite. She sets the plate down.

She reseats herself leaning against a wagon wheel. She draws her knees up, brings her hands up to cover her ears.

A long wait.

A *pop!* She flinches.

She slowly lowers her hands.

She starts to rise, and then:

Pop!

She is puzzled.

Then, two more in quick succession: *pop! pop!*

She goes around the wagon, looks out.

The nearby rise.

After a beat, Billy Knapp appears. He walks toward her, gun at his side. He looks sheepish.

When he arrives:

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)

I set President Pierce down and he moved just as I fired. He skittered off, miss—I don't believe I hit him a'tall.

ALICE

Oh. Oh my.

BILLY KNAPP

I am truly sorry, miss, I should have deputized Mr. Arthur. That man is a crack shot. I did not expect it to... to...

ALICE

Well. It was very kind of you.

BILLY KNAPP

I do not think you will see President Pierce again...

ALICE

Yes. Yes, thank you Mr. Knapp.

EXT. PRAIRIE - DAY

Trudging. Alice somewhat behind, the sullen youth leading the oxen.

EXT. TRAILBOSS' COOKFIRE #2 - NIGHT

Mr. Arthur and Billy Knapp are at their cookfire. Billy Knapp swirls a little coffee in a cup, takes a last sip and tosses the dregs. He takes a plug of tobacco from his shirt pocket and bites off a chaw.

Nearby Mr. Arthur turns his empty cup upside down and taps the grounds into the fire. Billy Knapp hands him the plug.

MR. ARTHUR

Obliged.

He looks up at the sound of footsteps. Alice approaching. Billy Knapp rises quickly to his feet. Mr. Arthur remains sitting.

ALICE

I'm, I'm sorry to trouble you again. There's no need to—

BILLY KNAPP
You are no trouble, Miss
Longabaugh.

ALICE
I do apologize, Mr. Knapp,
interrupting your supper.

Mr. Arthur has risen to his feet. He walks off towards the horses.

BILLY KNAPP
Miss, please set your mind at ease.
I have hired on as trailboss and it
is my duty to guide the train and
meet square any unexpected problem.
You have full call on my services.

ALICE
Well I am grateful whether it is
your duty or not. But things are
developing for the worse. Matt—my
boy—

BILLY KNAPP
Yes?

ALICE
Matt has asked me to affirm his
arrangement with my brother. He
asks me to declare that he will
receive his two payments—at Fort
Laramie, and in Oregon. He says if
I will not affirm it, he will
depart. He will join the first
party of go-backers we meet.

BILLY KNAPP
And leave you. Leave you here with
the wagon, high and dry.

ALICE
Yes.

BILLY KNAPP
Well well well. The impertinence.

ALICE
Yes, but...

BILLY KNAPP
Please set down miss. We had better
talk about this.

She does.

ALICE

I don't like it. But I don't know that it is wrong of him to ask. He is doing a job, for pay.

BILLY KNAPP

Well. You are very broadminded, to see the other side of it.

ALICE

But then what shall I do, Mr. Knapp? Shall I confess I have no money? What is right?

BILLY KNAPP

What is right.

He nods. They both stare into the fire.

Billy Knapp finally stirs.

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)

Miss Longabaugh. I cannot offer to drive your team or tend your wagon in place of the boy. Mr. Arthur—

ALICE

I would not ask you to do so!

BILLY KNAPP

Indeed, these are my thoughts not yours. Mr. Arthur and I have to ride one in front of the train, one behind, we take turns pilot and drag. But... Will you trust me for a day?

ALICE

Well. Certainly. But how so?

BILLY KNAPP

Tell the boy that you affirm the agreement. I want to think on this for a day. I have a notion that you may think is crackpot, but I do not believe it is.

ALICE

I'm sure it is not crackpot.

BILLY KNAPP

Well we'll see. Give me a day. I must talk to Mr. Arthur. Then we will talk tomorrow, and if you think it is a bad idea, why, then, we will only have taken one extra day of the boy's labor.

EXT. PRAIRIE - DAY

Mr. Arthur rides in the dust haze at the back of the wagon train, bandana around his lower face and hat brim pulled low as protection against the dust stirred by all the wagons he trails.

Billy Knapp trots oncoming and wheels around to ride with him. He pulls his own bandana up.

BILLY KNAPP

Afternoon, pardner.

MR. ARTHUR

Afternoon.

A beat of silent riding.

Then, with jollity:

BILLY KNAPP

Which is worse, pardner, dust or mud?

MR. ARTHUR

Both I guess.

Another beat.

BILLY KNAPP

... Say, I am thinking of proposing to Miss Longabaugh.

The shortest beat.

MR. ARTHUR

That right.

BILLY KNAPP

Yes, and if she accepts, well then, I plan to settle in Oregon. This would be my last wagon train...

Another beat.

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)
 ... I will farm.

MR. ARTHUR
 Uh-huh.

BILLY KNAPP
 Well. We'll see how she takes it.

Mr. Arthur says nothing.

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)
 ... Well, I will head back up.
 Unless you desire a swap.

MR. ARTHUR
 Nope.

BILLY KNAPP
 ... Afternoon.

MR. ARTHUR
 Afternoon.

Billy Knapp gallops off.

EXT. CIRCLED WAGONS - NIGHT

It is night and two fiddlers play for a gathering within the circled wagons. Alice stands among the people watching those who dance. Billy Knapp enters.

BILLY KNAPP
 Miss.

ALICE
 Good evening Mr. Knapp.

As he joins her she turns back to the dancing, and both stand watching for a beat.

BILLY KNAPP
 May we talk for a moment?

ALICE
 Yes, of course.

The two amble to get a little distance from the noise.

ALICE (CONT'D)
 So. Your crackpot notion.

BILLY KNAPP

Yes. Yes. Before I expose it—may I ask something?

ALICE

Certainly.

BILLY KNAPP

What... possibilities do you look forward to in Oregon?

She slows and they find themselves stopping at a tilted-up oxcart. Alice seats herself on it and, as she considers her answer, Billy plants one foot on a drive shaft and drapes forearms over his knees.

ALICE

I don't quite know. Gilbert knows—knew—someone there, a Mr. Vereen, who owns an orchard, or maybe more than one orchard, and a cartage company. He was vague about his connection with Mr. Vereen and, and about his own prospective position. I don't wish to slight my brother's memory, but, he could... exaggerate the nature of an opportunity. As I have told you, he had little aptitude for business. And Mr. Vereen's interest in... myself—I fear that may also have been speculative...

BILLY KNAPP

I see. I see. So this is no definite prospect of marriage, no contract.

ALICE

I—no.

BILLY KNAPP

Well my idea then is this. And I submit it in respect, Miss Longabaugh. I propose to assume your brother's debt to the hired boy, and to... to ask you to marry me.

ALICE

Oh!

BILLY KNAPP

I submit it in respect.

ALICE

Oh! Oh.

BILLY KNAPP

I... my notion is to farm in the Willamette.

ALICE

... I don't know what to say.

BILLY KNAPP

I have ambushed you, I am very sorry.

ALICE

No, no.

BILLY KNAPP

I should clarify what brings me to say these things or I will seem like the veriest bounder. I have found myself thinking about certain matters, um. I have been bustin trail for fifteen years, the last twelve with Mr. Arthur. Mr. Arthur is a top man. Top man. But he is getting older, and... slower to straighten in the morning. Sleeping on the ground, miss, to have no family and to sleep on the ground.

ALICE

Yes. Yes. It cannot be easy.

BILLY KNAPP

Yes, looking at him, well... I myself have come to the age where, either I will settle, and have children who can take care of me when I am old. Or I will not. That time will have passed.

ALICE

Yes.

BILLY KNAPP

So I have found myself thinking, well, if I met a, a maiden, or a widow of honor, uh, perhaps I would...

ALICE

Yes.

BILLY KNAPP
Present myself...

ALICE
Yes, I see.

BILLY KNAPP
Uh...

They both gaze into the fire, the most neutral place to look.

At length, but still looking in the fire:

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)
You're acquainted with the 1872
Grant?

Alice looks at him.

ALICE
I am not.

He is still looking in the fire.

BILLY KNAPP
Settler in Oregon can claim 320
acres. Married couple can claim
640. There is a, um... In Fort
Laramie there is a Mr. Bourgeois
who can sanctify marriage.

After some thought.

ALICE
Do you engage in divine worship.

Now he looks at her, finding relief in a matter-of-fact
question.

BILLY KNAPP
Yes, I am a Methodist. Yourself,
miss?

ALICE
I am Episcopalian.

Again they lapse into a silence, but not a troubled one.
Religion does not seem to be an impediment.

Then:

ALICE (CONT'D)
What is your... Christian name, Mr.
Knapp?

BILLY KNAPP
William. I am Billy Knapp.

ALICE
I am Alice Longabaugh.

He nods.

Alice looks into the fire.

ALICE (CONT'D)
Well... now I suppose it is my turn
to think.

He rises.

BILLY KNAPP
Of course. We will um... We will
let the boy keep working for the
moment? On his assumption of
payment?

Alice looks at him, draws breath to answer, but stops,
frowning. She does not move.

Billy Knapp looks at her, trying to read her look, wondering
whether he should be dismayed by it. Then he too frowns.

We begin to hear it: a distant yapping. It fades, grows,
fades, as the wind rolls it back and forth across the border
of audibility.

EXT. PRAIRIE - NEXT DAY

On another wagon: a woman rides on the jockey box with a babe
in arms.

Two bigger children, boys, walk in front of the wagon. One of
the boys is walking backwards. The other is laughing.

WOMAN
What are you doing, Israel?

BOY
Walking backwards. Gonna walk the
rest of the way to Oregon
backwards.

WOMAN
Don't do that.

BOY
Why not?

WOMAN

I said don't do that.

The father, walking by the oxen with a switch, turns and whips the boy's back.

FATHER

Don't do that.

The boy stumbles round, surprised and smarting. The father turns back to the oxen with a dark:

FATHER (CONT'D)

... Listen to yer mother.

EXT. PRAIRIE/SMALL STREAM - DAY

HEAD OF THE WAGON TRAIN

Today Mr. Arthur is in the fresh-aired vanguard.

He draws his horse to a halt at the brink of a gentle declivity to a small stream lined by cottonwoods. He looks side to side, assessing.

Mr. Arthur gives a look up at the sun, considers.

He reins his horse around and backtracks to meet the approaching lead wagon, holding up one hand.

MR. ARTHUR

Noon here.

EXT. SMALL STREAM - MINUTES LATER

The *chunking* of wagon wheels has stopped at the cut, replaced by clatter and wallah of people preparing food and chatting and tending to chores.

Billy Knapp descends toward the stream, dusty and sweating.

Reverse on Mr. Arthur, sitting before a cookfire and eating. Many people have come down to eat by the stream, or to wash things in it, or—children—to play in it.

Mr. Arthur's back is to us. Responding to the sound of Billy Knapp's approach he glances back over his shoulder. As Billy Knapp draws up and sits Mr. Arthur hands over a plate of dinner.

BILLY KNAPP

Thank you.

The two men eat.

EXT. PRAIRIE - LATER

The train has resumed; Alice trudges behind her wagon.

VOICE

Miss, uh...

She looks around. Billy Knapp, mounted, is trotting up from behind.

BILLY KNAPP

I thought I should add, miss, to my proposal?

ALICE

You may call me Alice.

Billy dismounts and leads his horse to walk alongside her.

BILLY KNAPP

I thought I should add, Alice—lest I seem hard-nosed—if you see fit to decline my proposal, why, there is more than one way to skin a cat. We might find a boy from another wagon to drive your team, use your oxen as payment in Oregon. Someone might be willing. Or distribute your necessities among other wagons. We will get you to Oregon, safe and sound, I don't wish to present myself as the only alternative to ruination. It would be wrong to take advantage.

ALICE

The thought does you credit, William. But I'm inclined to accept your proposal.

BILLY KNAPP

All right. All right.

ALICE

I didn't take your offer to be opportunism and I don't take yourself to be hard-nosed.

BILLY KNAPP

That puts my mind at ease, I am glad to hear it.

ALICE

My dear brother was very hard-nosed. But never very successful. Those two things, in combination—it made life a frustration for him.

BILLY KNAPP

I see how it would. You feel badly for him.

ALICE

I do. Now. More than I did. Other people didn't care for him. He had only me And I had only him.

BILLY KNAPP

I am very sorry that you have lost him. But he is with his creator. His way is easy now.

ALICE

Yes, of course. Yes, his way was difficult. I must say, it was difficult to be with him, he never found calm and he never gave calm. I was very nervous being with him. Not afraid of him—he would not hurt a fly—I was just—not at ease. I was eaten up by nerves at the thought of talking to Mr. Vereen for instance. The thought of meeting him was an agony. I don't know how I would have done it. And yet you are so very easy to talk to.

BILLY KNAPP

Perhaps we'll find comfort together, spiritual ease—that was my hope as well. Alice.

ALICE

Yes. William.

EXT. PRAIRIE - DUSK

Billy Knapp is bent low, hobbling his horse. He speaks to the horse's front feet.

BILLY KNAPP

Well, it... it appears that Miss Longabaugh is inclined to accept my proposal.

He straightens up. Mr. Arthur has unsaddled and hobbled his own horse and is now at their pack mule, examining its load.

MR. ARTHUR

Uh huh.

BILLY KNAPP

Yes, it uh... Of course you will do fine, solo, no doubt about it, a man of your skills will always be in high demand.

Mr. Arthur is picking through the pack.

MR. ARTHUR

... Wheres'at mecate rope?—Neb mind, here it is.

EXT. ALICE'S COOKFIRE #2 - NIGHT

Billy Knapp and Alice sit at Alice's fire, both gazing into it, Billy Knapp holding a cup of coffee.

A long beat.

ALICE

... When will we see buffalo?

BILLY KNAPP

Oh soon, very soon.

Another beat. Billy Knapp's musings are directed at the fire:

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)

... Used to hunt the big shaggies, provisioned for the army. Did some trapping. Years. Found myself missing animals't walked upright. Started piloting. Partnered up with Mr. Arthur.

ALICE

What did Mr. Arthur do, previously?

Billy Knapp thinks, realizes:

BILLY KNAPP

Don't know...

More fire-gazing.

BILLY KNAPP (CONT'D)

... That man is a wonder. He can read the prairie like a book. To see him cut for sign, well—you'd think the good lord dealt us each our five senses, then bottom-dealt Mr. Arthur one extra. Still... he is old. I don't know how it will go with him. His affairs may... I can't help feeling in the wrong.

ALICE

Your first responsibility is to your household.

BILLY KNAPP

Yes, but...

ALICE

I'm sorry. I should not dismiss it with an easy apothegm.

BILLY KNAPP

Yes.

Quiet.

ALICE

Gilbert had a saying for any situation. A ready bit of wisdom. He was very certain.

BILLY KNAPP

He was a doughface?

ALICE

How did—oh, yes. He was an admirer of President Pierce, yes, very much so. He had fixed political beliefs. All of his beliefs were quite fixed, even those that... fortune did not tend to endorse. He would upbraid me for being "wishy-washy." I never had his certainties. I suppose it's a defect.

BILLY KNAPP

Oh, I don't think it is a defect at all. Oh no. Uncertainty—that is appropriate for the matters of this world. Only regarding the next are we vouchsafed certainty.

ALICE

Yes.

BILLY KNAPP

I believe certainty regarding that which we see and touch—it is seldom justified, if ever. Down the ages, from our remote past, what certainties survive? And yet we hurry to fashion new ones. Wanting their comfort.

(shakes his head)

“Certainty”—it is the easy path, just as you said.

They are both looking into the fire.

ALICE

Strait is the gate...

BILLY KNAPP

... and narrow the way. Indeed. Indeed.

EXT. STREAMBED - DAY

Mr. Arthur sinks into a squat in close shot, looking down at the ground.

The soft ground in the streambed he has stopped at, shows hoofprints.

Back to Mr. Arthur. His look swivels to his left, following the line of prints.

He slowly rises, his appraising look directed at the horizon. The wagon train in the background—behind him—continues to advance toward us, its lead wagon almost arrived.

Mr. Arthur's point-of-view shows a gentle rise but not much other punctuation on the horizon. Peaceful as can be.

The man walking before the first wagon in the train is drawing even. He calls out:

MAN

Sign, Mr. Arthur?

MR. ARTHUR

Horses.

(a gesture forward as he mounts up)

Keep on. Gonna talk to Mr. Knapp.

EXT. PRAIRIE/WAGON TRAIN - DAY

MR. ARTHUR

At a canter, going down the line of wagons.

A puzzled look as he draws even with the wagon led by Matt, Alice's sullen employee.

MR. ARTHUR
Wharza woman?

MATT
Tsat?

Mr. Arthur reins his horse around to walk abreast with Matt as they talk.

MR. ARTHUR
Mrs. Longabaugh, wharshe?

MATT
Went o'er air.

A vague wave to the left of the wagon train—the same perpendicular traced by the hoofprints.

MR. ARTHUR
O'er air? Whyzat?

MATT
Huh. I'dno. Heard that mutt barkin'. Pres'dent Pierce.

There is some concern now in Mr. Arthur's look toward the horizon.

MR. ARTHUR
Whenshe go?

MATT
Wull. I'dno.

MR. ARTHUR
Whenshe go?!

A shrug from Matt.

MATT
Half ar.

MR. ARTHUR
Uh-hnghh.

A beat looking and he spurs his horse to the left.

EXT. PRAIRIE - MINUTES LATER

Mr. Arthur is spurring and reining his horse in a forward-sideways diagonal, looking intently down at the prairie grass just in front of him. The wagon train is in the deep background, several hundred yards behind Mr. Arthur now, separated from him by—to our eyes—unmarked prairie grass.

Mr. Arthur abruptly tacks, taking the opposite-ways diagonal forward, eyes still trained on the grass just before him. He stops the horse, looks up.

His point of view, since he now has a bit of elevation, shows gently receding waves of prairie grass. No human yet visible.

He spurs his horse forward.

EXT. PRAIRIE DOG VILLAGE - DAY

FURTHER ON

Mr. Arthur tops a rise and reins his horse in to look down into the swale below. Ms. Longabaugh is sitting on a small hillock holding a yapping President Pierce.

In front of her the earth is disturbed by a multitude of small mounds and holes out of which, every now and then, pops the head of a prairie dog.

Mr. Arthur looks around from his high perspective then gentles his horse down the rise toward the woman.

A MINUTE LATER

Mr. Arthur arriving. Alice, smiling, sits on her horse holding President Pierce, beguiled by the little animals at which President Pierce barks. Her eyes stay on the animals as she talks.

ALICE

What are they, Mr. Arthur?

MR. ARTHUR

Prairie dogs, ma'am. Uh, ma'am...
We best, uh...

She still watches the little animals, one or two of whom give little chirping barks back at President Pierce.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)
 ... Ma'am, there's uh—

ALICE
 Aren't they darling?

MR. ARTHUR
 Yes'm. We'd better—um, gittin
 late.

She laughs.

ALICE
 It's hours till dark.

Mr. Arthur's look has latched onto something on the horizon.
 It locks there.

ALICE (CONT'D)
 ... I believe President Pierce is
 trying to understand whether those
 creatures are other dogs, or—

Mr. Arthur abruptly dismounts. He strides over to Alice's
 horse.

MR. ARTHUR
 Git down.

ALICE
 Why, Mr. Arthur—

He pulls at her with an urgency that precludes resistance.

MR. ARTHUR
 Git down now, Miss.

He has half-pulled her down but she has landed on her feet
 and the dog has left her arms to yap at the prairie dogs.

Alice is alarmed by his sudden change of attitude.

ALICE
 Mr. Arthur—

He is not even looking at her: he is hobbling her horse.

MR. ARTHUR
 Set below this rise here.

He goes to hobble his own horse as she watches, bewildered.

ALICE
 But—we're not going back?

MR. ARTHUR
Not directly.

A short gesture with his head.

She looks—and gives a sobbing little cry.

An Indian on horseback, motionless, silhouetted on the distant rise.

Mr. Arthur rises from his horse and takes five strides out toward the Indian, holding his hand out toward him head palm-forward. He stops, fixed in the palm-out pose.

No motion from the Indian.

Mr. Arthur returns:

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)
We're in for a fight. He won't
answer m'peace sign'n he's a Sioux.
(shakes his head)
We can't make a run for it through
this dog-town.

She is agitated but tries to calm herself with a thought:

ALICE
There's only one savage.

Mr. Arthur laughs.

MR. ARTHUR
Keep lookin.

Other Indians are joining the first, forming a facing line. There are perhaps twenty of them all told. Mr. Arthur is dragging the saddle off his horse, plants it as fort on a small hillock.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)
... They'll crush us. Course, dog-
holes as bad fer them as fer us,
and they don't know how to fight.

He unscabards his Winchester and checks the breach, gets out his revolver and checks it, talking as he works:

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)
If they was to come in on all sides
I couldn't handle 'em, but they
rush in a bunch, like damn fools!

He chuckles—but then catches himself at the bad language.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)
 Beg pardon, Miss. Now you set
 there, take this.

He is giving her the revolver. She will not reach for it; he
 grabs her wrist and closes her hand over the gun.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)
 Take't now. Two bullets in it.

She is starting to tremble.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)
 Don't mean f'you to help me. You
 can't help me, don't even try, jus'
 keep tucked low here below the
 crest. If I see we're licked, I'll
 drop back'n shoot you and then
 shoot m'self, so that's okay. But
 if you see that I'm done for, well,
 you'll have to do fer yourself...

He puts a finger on her forehead.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)
 You put it right there so's ya
 cain't miss.

ALICE
 No no—

MR. ARTHUR
 This is business Miss Longabaugh.
 They ketch you well it won't be so
 good. After they... take off ever
 stitch a yer clothes n'have their
 way with ye they'll stretch you out
 with a rawhide to each of yer
 arms'n legs. Then they'll drive a
 stake through the middle of your
 body into the ground and then... do
 some other things. And we can't
 have that.

She is shaking.

Now he reassures:

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)
 We ain't licked yet. But if we are,
 you know what to do.

She vigorously nods.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)

... That first injun there, he's
the mucky-muck'n if I shoot him
well that's bad medicine'n I think
they'll all lose their spit'n light
out.

He chuckles again.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)

They're a funny bunch.
(starts down the hill to
his saddle)
Anyway, we'll have a GOOD fight!

He covers, making himself comfortable behind the saddle,
rifle resting on it.

The Indians have started to move, the center of their line
easing into a canter and the ends moving toward the middle to
fall into line behind: a ragged charge of a two-abreast
column.

Mr. Arthur projects:

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)

They'll start makin noise now,
sposed to skeer us but it won't
bother us none will it Miss?

She returns a rather tremulous—

ALICE

No, Mr. Arthur.

—as the whooping starts.

Crack!—the first rifle shot from one of the Indians. A
couple more. Mr. Arthur is sighting but not firing.

MR. ARTHUR

Well that's a waste a bullets.

More gunfire from the Indians as the column starts to split,
each side peeling off but still advancing.

We now hear the whistle of bullets going by close. Divots
spring out of the earth near the saddle, spraying earth

Mr. Arthur does not react, but now he fires. A forward horse
goes down, dumping its rider.

Mr. Arthur tracks another rider as the incoming fire continues. But the horse suddenly spills without his firing. He bellows:

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)
... Dog-hole!

He swings to track another forward rider: the man with the headdress, the lead Indian.

He fires: a miss.

More and more incoming bullets, nearby impacts. Alice's horse screams and rears, hit, its hobbled legs awkwardly pawing air until it collapses, still screaming.

Mr. Arthur fires at a rider now at the forward-most part of the two advancing, peeling columns. The man is hit.

He swings his gun to the rider on the mirroring side, fires, hits the horse. As it goes down its rider leaps clear.

The two columns have now peeled completely and are winding back in retreat.

The Indian whose horse was shot is running forward though, still whooping. Mr. Arthur takes leisurely aim, and fires, ending his charge.

The whoops of the other Indians continue but are fading, in retreat.

Mr. Arthur eases up from the saddle. He again takes careful aim at something:

The Indian struggling to his feet by the dog-holed horse, which itself is flopping awkwardly, screaming.

Mr. Arthur fires. The Indian is hit.

Mr. Arthur relaxes.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Okay, they got the lay of the land.

He reloads his gun, attention split between it and the Indians.

Their whoops have abated, but they are reforming on the ridge.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)
... This time they'll come with a purpose. You all right Miss?

ALICE
Yes Mr. Arthur.

He goes to Alice's whimpering horse and shoots it in the head. He goes to his own horse taking out a knife, and with one slice severs its hobble. He smacks it on the rump, sending it galloping off.

The whooping is starting again as the Indians begin their second charge. Mr. Arthur walks unhurriedly back to his saddle-fort.

MR. ARTHUR
They ain't gonna do it all day.
This'll tell the tale.

This time he doesn't bother with cover but remains standing, sighting.

Distant cracks of gunfire.

Mr. Arthur is sighting at the man in headdress. A loud *crack*—a miss.

Nearer incoming fire.

Mr. Arthur aims at the next man in line as the leader pulls to the side and—*crack*—hits him, unridering the horse.

The Indians do not display the formation of their first charge. They are more chaotic: they now seem to be everywhere, whooping.

Crack!—Mr. Arthur hits another Indian who has drawn almost even and then quickly pans to aim at a rider passing on the other side. *Crack!*—he fires, and misses.

He rises—

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Leave'm to me, Miss!

—and fires and the Indian is shot off his horse.

Crack—an incoming bullet flaps Mr. Arthur's shirt.

He spins and quickly sights the incoming chief. He fires and the man's arm is hit and rifle lost. Mr. Arthur quickly fires again and the man is thrown from the horse.

He is on the ground, not far away. Mr. Arthur advances on the struggling man and, rifle at his hip, fires, hits him square in the chest.

He raises his rifle looking for a new target. But the Indians start to rein their horses away, scattering, leaving the field. Some of them fire at nothing as they withdraw, an impotent gesture.

Among the milling horses are three now riderless mounts jiggling this way and that. Mr. Arthur turns from the horses, targets a retreating Indian, and shoots him.

One of the loose horses is heading toward him from behind.

Mr. Arthur turns at the sound and lowers his rifle to appraise.

The horse, which looks like it will pass him wide, suddenly veers in and a rider swings up from its offside and in the same motion swings an arm down with a club.

Mr. Arthur is caught square on the head and falls back, landing limp and motionless.

The rider pulls his horse up and vaults down before it has even stopped, his momentum sending him toward Mr. Arthur as he pulls a knife from his belt.

As he reaches the inert body—Mr. Arthur's right hand rises with a revolver and fires.

The Indian falls dead.

Mr. Arthur woozily rises. He gazes out at the field.

The last of the Indians are disappearing. The occasional distant gun pop.

Quiet returns. The only near sound is the rasping of a fallen horse tripped by a dog-hole.

Mr. Arthur turns back to the crest of the hill where President Pierce jumps and yaps.

Near the dog is Alice, lying on her back, a bullet hole in her forehead.

Mr. Arthur comes up short, staring.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Oh my.

He stares. He shakes his head in deep distress.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Pore little gal. She hadn't ought to have did it!

He turns away stunned, the dog yapping at his feet.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)

... Oh my.

He walks woodenly away.

MR. ARTHUR (CONT'D)

... Oh my.

An Indian by the rasping horse is struggling to his hands and knees. Mr. Arthur shoots him offhandedly as he passes.

Dissolve to:

EXT. ANOTHER RISE - DAY

In an endless sea of grass.

Mr. Arthur crests the rise on foot, the Winchester slung across his shoulder, the yapping dog still following.

Before him, in the distance, the wagon train lumbers away. A small figure riding out from the end of it to meet him, is Billy Knapp.

Beyond the wagon train, the rolling prairie.

FADE OUT

FADE IN on the title of the last story:

The Mortal Remains

We hear the rumble of wheels over gravel and dirt as we dissolve to the last illustration.

Looking steeply up the side of a stagecoach in full flight, at the coachman, framed against a twilight sky. He is dressed in a greatcoat, his collar and scarf hiding his face. The wind blows his scarf behind him as he cracks his whip. We pan down to the caption:

*He gave no sign that he had heard the Frenchman bellowing
into the wind.*

We hear someone humming, then singing to himself—merry but not loud: "It Makes Me Love Her All the More" as we dissolve to the inside of the rattling stagecoach.

INT. STAGECOACH - LATE DAY

We are looking in turn at the occupants of the coach: a dapper Frenchman with a small mustache and a neat string tie, gazing, bored, out the window. An imposing woman of late middle-age, reading a small book with marbled pages and a red ribbon bookmark, her lips pursed. An elderly man with unruly white hair and an ill-trimmed white walrus mustache who is asleep, chin on chest, bouncing with the motion of the coach. A burly man in a too-tight suit.

And finally the singer: a middle-aged man impeccably dressed, almost a dandy.

He finishes the verse with perhaps a bit too much energy: the dozing elderly man jerks his head up and blinks and focuses.

The singer, Nelson Thigpen, has a British accent:

THIGPEN

Oh, I am sorry. Didn't mean to wake you, sir.

TRAPPER

(querulous)

You did not wake me!

He works his mouth, wets his lips, swallows.

TRAPPER (CONT'D)

... For I was not asleep.

Thigpen humors him:

THIGPEN

Oh, not asleep, I see.

He looks smilingly at the other occupants, and winks at the starchy lady. But she will not be enlisted in derision: she looks dryly back to her book.

Thigpen's cheer is undimmed.

THIGPEN (CONT'D)

... Well I apologize for disturbing anyone else. If I did.

He looks around to no reaction. The invitation to conversation is not taken up, but the trapper, who has been looking out the window, now wonders aloud:

TRAPPER

How much to go d'you reckon?

THIGPEN

Oh not a great distance, not great at all, we're making good time. You haven't been to Fort Morgan before, I take it.

TRAPPER

Me? No. You?

THIGPEN

Oh yes many times, many times. Ferrying cargo.

A glance upward indicates the unseen cargo on the coach's roof. The trapper follows the glance.

TRAPPER

Him's yourn?

THIGPEN

As much as he's anyone's, isn't he, Clarence.

The burly man nods.

LADY

A loved one?

THIGPEN

(giggle)
By somebody, perhaps!

FRENCHMAN

You did not know heem?

THIGPEN

(giggle)
We knew him only at the end.

CLARENCE

(confirming smile, gazing out the window)
At the very end.

A beat of silence. Bouncing springs.

A sudden loud eruption:

TRAPPER

No!
(all turn to look at him;
he licks his lips)
I have not been to Fort Morgan. I know little of cities.

(MORE)

TRAPPER (CONT'D)

I am a trapper, living mostly alone these last years. But I would descend into town, ever so often, with my pelts. Sell 'em. And talk, keep m'hand in. Talk. You have got to keep your hand in, talkin. Even if you live in the wild.

A moue of agreement from the Frenchman.

FRENCHMAN

Ees true. Practice.

TRAPPER

In town I would talk to them was innarested. Saloon mostly, till I was asked to take m'bidness elsewhere. What sense does that make, there was only the one saloon! The keeper called me tedious. Tedious? Me?

(spits the word:)

Townsmen. Why, if tidings from the greater world are tedious, if the greater world, not trammeled by... by...

THIGPEN

(helpful)

... human—

TRAPPER

(plowing on, unmindful)

I would descend from the mountains, not having talked for many months, with much to tell. Much to tell, having stored considerable. Though for many years I was not alone in the wild, I did have a consort, a stout woman of the Hunkpapa Sioux, we had a companionship of sorts but there is a lady present. A life together marked by the passing of the seasons and the corresponding travels of game. In the latter she took little interest—wal, her duties was domestic, I would track and trap and she would tarry hearthside. We did not talk: she did not have English and I am not schooled in the gibberings of the nations.

(MORE)

TRAPPER (CONT'D)

Wal I say we did not talk but we sometimes would, each in our own tongue, often at length, without benefit of understanding the other. But the sound of a human voice is a comfort when you're cabined up in the woods'n all'd otherwise be but the murmur a wind and the plop a snow from an overloaded branch. I say not understanding each other but twarn't entirely so, I could often read by means of the tenor of her speech and certain facial expressions the emotional import a what she was sayin and she was often vexed with me, I seldom knew why. And then she moved on.

Silence. The passengers in the rattling coach absorb the story.

An afterthought, loudly directed at the lady who is looking at him with a distaste to which he is oblivious:

TRAPPER (CONT'D)

There was no issue.

Another beat. And then, warmly sympathetic, in an Irish lilt:

CLARENCE

Did you love her?

TRAPPER

Oh I don't know I never even knew her name but I will say this: the nature of them vocal intonations and the play of feelin upon her face helped me to gather that people are like ferrets. Or beaver. One pretty much like the next. Yup all alike I don't doubt it's the same even if you travel to Siam.

LADY

People are not the same. There are two kinds, utterly distinct.

Thigpen steps in as moderator:

THIGPEN

What would those be, madam, the two kinds?

FRENCHMAN

Lucky and unlucky.

CLARENCE

No, hale'n frail. Difficult to knock to the floor, or wilting.

LADY

Those are not the two kinds. You well know the two kinds.

TRAPPER

One kind, ain't two kinds!—less you mean trapper'n townsman.

LADY

Upright and sinning. Don't be a fool.

TRAPPER

Fool! Yes, I know, tedious fool, you are not the first to lodge that complaint—without grounds. I challenge you for yer credentials madam, fer assessin human worth. People're like ferrets.

LADY

People are not like ferrets, and I speak not on my own authority but on that of the holy bible.

TRAPPER

Wal the bible, people read it diffurnt—

LADY

Yes—rightly or wrongly. And here I speak with high authority. My husband, Dr. Betjeman, was an expert, a lecturer at the Chattaqua on moral and spiritual hygiene, now retired. I have the benefit of his insights.

THIGPEN

Moral hygiene.

LADY

His lectures were spectacularly attended. He was—he is—considered an expert on spiritual betterment.

(to trapper)

Jacob's ladder. Betterment.

(MORE)

LADY (CONT'D)

But I don't suppose you have ever
been much occupied with the
betterment of your soul.

TRAPPER

Well, I am not an enemy of
betterment.

(a beat as he gums)

But I am kept very busy with
m'traps.

The lady gives a mirthless hoot.

A rattling silence.

At length:

THIGPEN

Your husband isn't with you.

The lady is prey to sadness.

LADY

We have been separated for some
time. He has been... East. Illness
has kept him but now we shall
reunite. It will be a great joy.

THIGPEN

He awaits you in Fort Morgan.

LADY

Yes. I have been living with my
daughter and son-in-law these last
three years.

The Frenchman *tsks*.

FRENCHMAN

The parent should not burden the
child's household. This was wrong
of you.

LADY

I was not a burden! I was welcome
in my daughter's house!

Her imperiousness belies her own claim, and the Frenchman
meets it with a skeptical smile and tilt of his head.

FRENCHMAN

She would say so, of course. But no doubt you could read in her facial expressions, as pointed out by the tedious man, that your presence was not wanted. We each have a life. Each a life, only our own.

LADY

You know nothing about me, or my domestic affairs!

FRENCHMAN

I know that we must each spin our wheel, play our own hand. I was once at cards with a man named Cipolski—this was very many years ago—

TRAPPER

He a Polack?

FRENCHMAN

He was Polonaise, yes. And we were—

TRAPPER

I knew a Polack.

The barking interruption nettles the Frenchman. He glares at the trapper, awaiting the tiresome story to come, but gathers from the ensuing silence that that was the whole of the trapper's digression.

The Frenchman draws new breath.

FRENCHMAN

We were at cards. My hand was poor; I folded. Cipolski and four others remain, but Cipolski says to me, I am in distress, René, you play for me while I perform *mes nécessités*—my necessaries. I say, friend, I cannot wager for you. But of course you can, he says, we know each other well—wager as I would do. But this is quite impossible, no? How a man wagers, it is decided by who he is, by the entirety of his experience of poker up until the moment of that bet. I cannot bet for you. *Pourquoi pas?* I cannot know you. Not to this degree. We must each play our own hand. No, Cipolski, I say.

(MORE)

FRENCHMAN (CONT'D)

We may call each other friends, but we cannot know each other so.

TRAPPER

You can know'm. People are like ferrets.

LADY

(explosive)

People are not like ferrets!

FRENCHMAN

You misunderstand, *mon vieux*. We can know each other—to a certain level. But to know entirely—*impossible*. Poker is interesting because? Because I do not know your hand, yes. But also because—I do not know you. I see what you wager; what does it mean?
(a shrug)

I can guess—I cannot know. Or there is no poker.

He leans back smiling, case closed.

LADY

Poker is a gambling game. You have pursued a life of vice and dissipation—and you are no doubt expert in such pursuits. But no conclusions drawn from such a life, will apply to a life rightly lived.

Another shrug and smile from the airily superior Frenchman.

FRENCHMAN

Life is life. Cards will teach you what you need to know. You speak of your life, with your husband who awaits. You fly to him in certainty that he loves you as he did three years ago. Well, three years. There was a flame. You do not know that there is.

LADY

(heated)

Among decent people relations may be eternal. Decent people stay true—to others, to themselves.

The Frenchman shakes his head, *tsking*.

FRENCHMAN

Life is change. And all is unknowable. Even my own life: I wager knowing my hand now, not my final hand.

TRAPPER

Unknowable! But yer talkin like you know more'n the goddamn almanac!

The Frenchman smiles.

FRENCHMAN

I am French.

LADY

You are a presumptuous man! You tell me my daughter doesn't love me, that my husband no longer does—

FRENCHMAN

If he ever did! No offense, Madame, my point is that we never know to the deepest level, and the word "love" can have different meanings.

TRAPPER

Hold on there, Mister Almanac—

LADY

I know what "love" means! One thing! You—

FRENCHMAN

Your husband was an educator; a lecturer; would you say a man of charisma?

LADY

He was! He is!

FRENCHMAN

(shrug)

Bon, "love" would mean something different to such a person, who commands the love of a crowd, than it would to a person who can only coax love, through subservience.

LADY

I did not COAX love from Dr. Betjeman! I am not a WHEELER.

(MORE)

LADY (CONT'D)

My husband's love was freely given!
And endures!

FRENCHMAN

His love is different from yours,
it's all I say. The person widely
admired accepts love as a tribute.
It is his due. He confers his own
love as an honor, for, coming from
him, it must have great worth. But
you, Madame, would not receive that
gift, eh, splendidly, as one who
has no need, but would grasp at it
as a beggar.

The lady stares at him aghast.

The trapper, looking from her to the Frenchman, fills the
silence:

TRAPPER

Ain't no call for that kind of
talk.

LADY

How DARE you—

FRENCHMAN

And of course the great man, the
admired man, might well accept
other loves, simply as his due,
from some of those who admire him.
Why not, if the admirer is comely.
It is love of a different kind than
the domestic of course, but in
France we s-AHH!

LADY

YOU! FILTHY!

She is batting at him with her furred umbrella. As he parries
blows:

FRENCHMAN

Please! Madame!

LADY

YOU! DEPRAVED—GAARGGH!

Her frenzy—face white, eyes unblinking, body rigid except
for the arm striking out with the umbrella—has turned into
something else: her eyes now roll back and she abruptly drops
the umbrella to hook a finger in her high collar as she gasps
for breath.

TRAPPER

You given her a fit, Frenchie!

THIGPEN

Oh dear!

The lady twists in her seat, gasping. The trapper takes off his hat and fans her with it. Clarence, the burly man, takes her free hand in both of his, patting on it.

CLARENCE

There there, miss, that's all right, then...

FRENCHMAN

We—we must stop the coach! Let her walk, move the limbs!

Thigpen shakes his head. The information is offhand:

THIGPEN

Coachman won't stop.

FRENCHMAN

He must stop! We are the passengers!

THIGPEN

Coachman won't stop.

The Frenchman looks at him in brief puzzlement, then sticks his head out the window.

EXT. COACH

Steep down on the Frenchman looking up, wind in his face.

FRENCHMAN

Coachman! I say, coachman!

His steep point-of-view up: the man driving, framed against a dramatic sky of dark but delineated clouds. The coachman's face is not much visible from our steep angle. We see his coat flowing in the wind; we see his leather gloves, flaired to cover the wrists, as he raises a whip and snaps it forward through sky; we see his pulled-low hat with broad brim; we see a flash of full walrus mustache.

The Frenchman yells over the wind:

FRENCHMAN (CONT'D)

... We must stop! Coachman! A passenger is discommoded!

The coachman presents the same windswept picture, driving the team forward, not hearing, or perhaps not listening.

The Frenchman pulls his head back inside.

INT. COACH

The Frenchman looks around, dazed.

FRENCHMAN
He will not stop.

THIGPEN
He never stops. Policy.

The lady is somewhat recovered, now limp rather than writhing.

CLARENCE
That's all right, miss...

The trapper continues to fan her with his hat as he addresses Thigpen:

TRAPPER
Don't stop? What if we had to perform necessaries?

THIGPEN
Have you had to?

TRAPPER
No—

LADY
Please...

All look to her. Her head is lolled back but she is looking at the trapper:

LADY (CONT'D)
... Stop doing that.

This arrests the fanning of his hat. The trapper holds it frozen for a beat, abashed, then puts it back on.

Rattling silence.

Then, singing:

VOICE
As I was a walking down by the loch
As I was walking one morning of late
(MORE)

VOICE (CONT'D)

Who did I spy but my own dear comrade
 Wrapped up in flannel, so hard was his fate.

The lady slowly emerges from her distress to look in wonder at the singer: Clarence. His rough look would not have led us to expect this beautiful tenor voice.

The old Irish air he sings is the ancestor—and has the familiar melody—of "The Streets of Laredo."

VOICE (CONT'D)

I boldly stepped up to and kindly did ask him
 Why was he wrapped in flannel so white?
 My body is injured and sadly disordered
 All by a young woman, my own heart's delight.

The other passengers, like the lady, are taken out of themselves. They slowly turn to the source of the song as sunflowers toward the sun, struck, haunted.

VOICE (CONT'D)

Get six jolly fellows to carry my coffin
 And six pretty maidens to bear up my pall
 And give to each of them bunches of roses
 That they may not smell me as they go along—

Hooting sobs.

All turn to look:

Thigpen is weeping into a handkerchief.

He waves their looks away:

THIGPEN

I'm sorry... I do apologize. He
 sings it every trip, and it always
 does this to me.

He loudly blows his nose, then stuffs the handkerchief into his breast pocket.

THIGPEN (CONT'D)

... You'd think, with the business
 we're in, I wouldn't be so—so...

TRAPPER

What is your business?

THIGPEN

I like to say that we're...
 reapers. Isn't that right,
 Clarence?

CLARENCE
 (affirmative musing)
 ... Harvesters of souls.

THIGPEN
 We help people—who have been
 adjudged to be, ripe.

TRAPPER
 Whatsat mean?

A beat, Thigpen struggling.

THIGPEN
 ... Well... some would call us—Oh,
 it's an ugly word—

TRAPPER
 Yer bounty hunters!

THIGPEN
 Literal man! Cruel man! Yes, fine,
 "bounty hunters," an ugly title, as
 if emolument were the point. It's
 an honest calling—is the cobbler
 not paid for his shoes? I don't
 apologize for it, and neither does
 Clarence.

Clarence half-nods to confirm, half-shakes to decline to
 apologize.

TRAPPER
 So him on the roof, he was wanted?

THIGPEN
 Mr. Thorpe was very much wanted,
 judging by what they're paying for
 him.

TRAPPER
 What'd he do?

THIGPEN
 Oh I don't know, does it matter?
 Just as you said, Madame, there are
 two kinds of persons. In our
 business they are: dead, or alive.

CLARENCE
 That's what they say.

THIGPEN

But for us it's a distinction
without a difference.

CLARENCE

Paid either way.

FRENCHMAN

So you will take zem alive?

THIGPEN

I didn't say that.

Rattling silence.

It is punctured by one of the trapper's eruptions:

TRAPPER

I don't either! take 'em alive.
Course, not exactly the same
business. And I work alone.

THIGPEN

Oh yes, we're a duo. A tandem. A
team. They're so easily taken when
they're distracted, people are. So
I'm the distractor, with a little
story, a little conversation, a
song, a sparkle!—and Clarence does
the thumping, while their attention
is on me.

Clarence is chuckling.

CLARENCE

He's very good, that one. You
should see him.

THIGPEN

No, he's good.

CLARENCE

(modest)
I can thump.

THIGPEN

Mr. Thorpe up there. A typical
case. I told him the story of the
Midnight Caller.

Three loud raps, widely spaced: Thigpen, banging a heel
against the seat. He looks around, eyes wide.

THIGPEN (CONT'D)

Someone is outside! Knocking! Oh who can it be! Don't open it, Mother—what living thing would be out in such a storm!

(smiles it away)

You know the story, but people can't get enough of them, the familiar stories, like little children. Because they connect the stories to themselves, I suppose, and we all love hearing about ourselves, over and over. So long as the people in the story are—us, but not us. Not us at the end, especially—the Midnight Caller gets him, never me... I'll live forever...

His reflective look has drifted to the window. Now his attention returns to his audience, brightly:

THIGPEN (CONT'D)

... So I tell the stories. And Clarence thumps.

CLARENCE

He's very good.

Latening day: it has grown darker in the coach. Everyone drifts away from Thigpen to think their thoughts—but they are brought back to him when he suddenly speaks to himself, having been working on something:

THIGPEN

I must say it's always interesting watching them after Clarence has worked his art. Watching them negotiate the... passage.

All eyes are on him.

FRENCHMAN

... Pah-sahge?

Thigpen looks at the Frenchman.

THIGPEN

To the other side, here to there. Trying to make sense of it as they pass to that other place. I do like looking into their eyes as they try to make sense of it, I do, I do.

TRAPPER

... as they try to make sense of
what?

After a beat:

THIGPEN

All of it.

More silence.

The lady is hesitant to ask, perhaps fearing a negative answer:

LADY

And... do they ever... succeed?

Thigpen looks at her gravely, considering. He looks at the others, who are looking at him, then returns to the lady and smiles.

THIGPEN

How would I know? I'm only watching.

VOICE FROM OUTSIDE

Hyah, whoa!

INT. COACH/FORT MORGAN - DUSK

It is the coachman stopping the team, as we see from the inertia of the bodies in the braking coach.

Thigpen looks out.

THIGPEN

Well—Fort Morgan. I presume we're all at the hotel? Including Mr. Thorpe—too late to drop him with the sheriff!

The window shows that we have stopped square to a hotel. It is dusk outside, but a cloudy dusk that paints the exterior all in shades of gray.

Dead quiet. No people outside, no movement. The only color in view—and the only motion—is the flickering yellow flame in the gas lights on either side of the hotel's door.

The three passengers looking out show no particular eagerness to disembark. Thigpen is all cheery business, however, and climbs down, followed by Clarence.

THIGPEN (CONT'D)

... I suppose Mr. Thorpe will be staying in your room, Clarence. Don't fancy having him in mine!

CLARENCE

Whatever you say, guv.

The coach shifts with the weight of the coachman who is working up top. We hear ropes being loosed.

THIGPEN

Or we could sit him in the parlor, a little surprise for the guests in the morning!

CLARENCE

Give him a newspaper, sir! And a glass of port!

Through the window we see Thigpen and Clarence looking up, waiting to receive the body off the roof. We hear friction noises, and a canvas shrouded-figure is eased down towards them feet-first, feet grabbed by Thigpen.

The attempted hand-off of upper body to Clarence is fumbled, Clarence losing his grip and the body thudding to the ground out of sight.

THIGPEN

Clumsy fool!

CLARENCE

Sorry guv.

THIGPEN

Don't apologize to me! It's Mr. Thorpe, isn't it!

They bend out of sight and then straighten with the body.

The coach rocks as the coachman descends.

Thigpen and Clarence, with the body, lumber into the depth, toward the hotel. In the still air their footfalls raise poofs of pale dust which do not dissipate.

The coachman overtakes them and takes the two steps up to the boardwalk fronting the hotel. Thigpen and Clarence's voices are becoming faint and thin, but remain perfectly audible in the dead air:

THIGPEN (CONT'D)
All joking aside, your room, I
think, Clarence.

CLARENCE
If you say so, sir.

THIGPEN
No worries about him snoring!

CLARENCE
I'm not worried, sir.

THIGPEN
(affectionate)
You never worry. One of your
virtues.

CLARENCE
T'anks very much.

The passengers are watching. No one yet moves to get out.

A *creak* of the hotel door opening, the coachman holding it
for the two body-bearers. He follows them in and closes the
door behind. Nothing of the interior has been revealed.

We have stayed with the passengers and in their perspective.
Now, with nothing to look at, they look uneasily among
themselves.

The trapper, by the coach door on the hotel side, gestures
the Frenchman toward it.

TRAPPER
Go on ahead.

The Frenchman runs his tongue over his lips.

FRENCHMAN
Après vous.

The trapper casts about. To the lady:

TRAPPER
Ladies first.

She is no more inclined than he. She comes up with:

LADY
... I must be helped down.

The trapper clears his throat, reaches for the door, pauses, then finds his resolve and pushes it open and steps gingerly down.

He turns back and extends a hand up to the lady. She cannot but descend. And then there is nothing for the Frenchman to do but follow.

The three head single file—lady leading, trapper second, Frenchman third—toward the hotel. Outside, their faces—now that they are no longer in the warm-wooded cabin of the stagecoach—are somewhat pale.

The hotel's front door creaks open, the coachman emerges. He stomps toward them, and then past them, all coat and gloves and boots—hardly any face visible, just a glint of eyes between the low hatbrim and the great mustache.

The three passengers ascend to the boardwalk. The lady draws up before the hotel's front door but doesn't reach for it.

An uneasy beat as we hear the coachman, off, clambering back up onto the coach.

Finally:

LADY (CONT'D)

Will someone open the door for a
lady? My husband is waiting.

INT. FORT MORGAN HOTEL

The trapper opens it.

Visible past the three, the hotel interior. Its light lies in warm, weak pools. Lamps in the parlor give a feel of the heavy Victorian furniture within each's feeble reach. Though each light is low, they seem to have great depth: the building goes way back.

There is a staircase to the right with a burgundy runner. It too is far from bright. But we can see Thigpen and Clarence awkwardly climbing, the canvas body between them.

THIGPEN

... and... step and... step and...
step and...

The trapper follows the lady in, and the Frenchman is about to enter also—but his look is drawn by a whipcrack.

VOICE

Hyah!

We hold on the Frenchman looking out at the street and thus we do not see, but only hear, the stagecoach turning. The Frenchman's eyes track it as it clatters off, back the way it came, with the jingle of tack and the cries of the coachman and the pounding of hooves.

The sound fades.

The Frenchman, trying to maintain his lofty insouciance—and, to some degree, succeeding—turns, enters the hotel, and closes the door behind.

FADE OUT