

KINGS

Not having a disposition to work and often full of brewed spirits, Jadie Black spent much of his life as a drifter. Those who came across his path had little trouble discovering rather quickly that the man had few admirable traits.

One day, on the seventh of October, Jadie rode into the fair town of Westview, which sat along the Fergus River. Accompanied by a sense of dread, he elicited sour looks from the townsfolk as he traveled past the boardwalk of Main Street. The man just had that countenance about him. Jadie kept on riding down the middle of the street, offering a brief glimmer of hope to merchants standing in their doorways that he might just be passing through.

When he came to the last building on his right, he got off his horse and tied the reins to the hitching post. Jadie approached the blacksmith, as the smithy pulled a flattened fiery rod out of the furnace.

“Howdy,” said Jadie. “You reckon you could fit my horse with a new shoe for his foreleg.”

“I reckon I could do that,” answered the smithy. “It’ll cost you...”

Before the smithy could finish, Jadie tossed him a shiny gold dollar in advance of the work—a sum twice the usual charge.

“Whereabouts is the closest church in town?” asked Jadie.

Momentarily set aback by the question, cause folks like Jadie normally didn’t see much in a church, the smithy named Matthew replied, “Just go down to the first street on the right and you’ll come up on it.”

“Thanks,” said Jadie.

“You gonna be there long?” asked Matthew. “Cause it’ll take about an hour on the shoe.”

“I reckon it’ll be a lot longer than that before I get back. I gotta go talk to the preacher about a cactus.”

“A cactus?” questioned Matthew. “What about a cactus?”

But Jadie didn’t answer the smithy. He had already turned and walked away towards the church.

“I reckon that you been spending too many lonely nights in the wild,” said Matthew aloud to himself.

Later that afternoon, as Matthew finished the shoe on Jadie’s horse, a man approached his workshop. Clean-shaven and rather dapper in appearance, the man asked Matthew if he’d finished with his horse.

“I reckon there must be some mistake, pardner,” said Matthew. “I only got one horse to work on and it belongs to some drifter who just come into town.”

“Does this look familiar?” asked the gentleman, showing Matthew a shiny gold dollar.

“Yeah ... the drifter gave me one just like it,” said the smithy. “You ain’t...?”

“Yes, I am that man.”

“Yeah, I ... uh ... uh, just finished him up,” said Matthew.

Tossing the smithy the second gold dollar, Jadie mounted his horse and rode out of town.

Matthew thought the whole thing so curious that he decided to make his way on over to the church. When he reached the front steps, he looked

back to see a crowd of about a hundred people following him. Johnny Walker had overheard Jadie talking to the clerk at the hotel where the drifter had gotten cleaned up and he started to spread the word around town. Newt Johnson told Nellie Muldoon, and she told ... and so on.

Sitting in the front pew of the church, Rev Dobbins penned the last line of his sermon for the upcoming Sunday. Startled by the large crowd of people coming into the church, the preacher immediately stood up and stepped out of the pew. When the townsfolk got up to the preacher, they began throwing out all kinds of questions about the stranger.

“Ah, yes, a changed man, indeed,” replied Rev. Dobbins.

The crowd’s thirsty minds wouldn’t settle for such a simple answer. They lusted for some kind of fantastic story. Despite the reverend’s claims of holding to an oath of confidentiality, the crowd grew more intense in their demands. Finally, the preacher surveyed the many people in front of him and realized he was looking at about double the average attendance at any given Sunday service. He then gave the hungry souls a tale worthy of their

appetites, without revealing the stranger's real identity, of course.

“The gentleman told me of an experience he had while on the edge of a forest,” said Rev. Dobbins. “What follows is his story in his own words, more or less.”

“I was bedded down for the night just outside a large grove of dense trees. I'd been ridin hard all day and was pretty tired, so's it didn't take me long to fall asleep. Somewhere in the middle of the night, I heard voices acomin from the trees. Naturally, the first thing I did was to reach for my old carbine, just in case. As I sat and waited, I listened to words that was as clear as the cloudless sky I was asleepin under.”

The trees said, “Let us go forth and ask the apple to be our king.”

But the apple said to them, “Why should I leave my orchard to be your king? See my branches. They are loaded with sweet fruit. The farmer takes good care of me, giving me everything I need. No, I quite prefer to stay where I know I can count on the security of good food being provided.”

Then the trees asked the juniper to be their king.

But the juniper said to them, “Why should I leave my beautifully landscaped estate to be your king? Look at how well I’m trimmed. The gardeners pamper me every week to make sure I always look good. If I were to be your king, I would have to return to such a wild and untamed life. No, I quite prefer to stay where I know it’s civilized.”

“Now, reverend, I know I’ve been known to take a nip now and then, but I’m atellin you I hadn’t had a drink in nearly a month. When it comes to hearin trees atalkin, well, I just decided I better get outta there. I threw my bedroll on my horse and hightailed it away from that place. I’d been ridin for a long time, but I didn’t seem to be makin any distance between me and them trees of the forest. All of a sudden, my horse stepped in a hole and I went head over heels right into this here cactus. When I got done pickin out all them needles from my hide, I looked up to see all them trees had been afollowin me all the time. Then I heard them trees ask this here cactus if he’d like to be their king. Well, once again, I didn’t particularly feel like awaitin around for an answer from a talkin cactus. Gettin back on my horse, I gave him the spurs.

After ridin bout two hours, I finally got up the gumption to look back again. At last, I'd got shed of them trees. I figure that there cactus musta accepted the position.

Bout a month later, I had occasion to go back the same trail I had gone before. As I was acomin across a narrow stretch of desert, I ran into this group of dried up trees. Now I been travelin for a lotta years and I ain't never seen so many dried up trees in one spot. Naturally, bein a curious type fella, I couldn't help but wander over for a closer look. You know, sittin in front of that whole group of dead trees was this here cactus, justa growin to beat the devil. Now, I ain't a real educated man, but plain old horse sense told me that this weren't no ordinary sight. I decided right then and there that maybe I oughta look into this a little further. So's the first town I came to, I decided to look up a preacher man."

Rev. Dobbins paused as if there was nothing more to the story, but the crowd would not have it. They cried out, "What did you say to him? What could make a man change so?"

"Well, I couldn't be absolutely sure with that gentleman, knowing little else about him, but I believe most every soul longs for answers at some

point. I didn't have hours to prepare an answer for the man, so I had to speak what I felt was the simple truth of his experience."

"What was the truth?" yelled Newt Johnson from the back of the crowd.

"Yeah, what, Reverend?" asked a woman at the front of the crowd.

"I told him that he needed to be really careful about who he chose as the king or leader in his life."

The crowd stood in silence. Rev. Dobbins didn't know if their silence was from disappointment, or if they were trying to understand such a simple warning.

Then the rugged blacksmith said, "Well, Reverend, it appears as though that stranger done took those words with him when he rode off."

"Yes, Matthew," said the preacher. "I think that man had the good fortune to see something that many folks don't. Of course, now, the truth doesn't always have to come in the form of talking trees. We read it right here every week ... yet ... I suppose ... when you consider that the pages of this Bible are made from ... trees."

