

GUNSLINGER'S LAMENT

Wiley Jackson was a gunslinger, plain and simple. He made his living with his wit and skills with a variety of firearms. Many hired guns of the time did not possess an active conscience. Most died young, not because somebody faster came along, but because they were ambushed.

Wiley had managed to reach the age of thirty-five by being very, very careful and by being very selective in who he worked for. He did not fit the mold of the typical gunfighter, in more ways than one.

On one particular summer day when temperatures and dispositions ran equally hot, Wiley had the task of trying to get Abel Coles and his gang to stop harassing the stagecoaches along the Carrock Trail, particularly in Gullet Pass. The gang always robbed the passengers and sometimes they got lucky with a strongbox full of gold coin. They did not hesitate to shoot anyone who resisted. The law along the Carrock Trail near Gullet Pass did not exist from a practical point of view, so the stage lines looked to outside help. Wiley Jackson fit their

parameters and after talking with the stage line's representatives, he took the job.

The first thing Wiley did in any job he took was to study. In this case, he studied the trail; he studied the accounts given of past incidents; he studied the stagecoaches; and he studied what was known of Abel Coles and his gang. While the Carrock Trail had patches of forest on either side for many miles, there were also many open areas. The last stretch before Gullet Pass had nothing but low barren rock lining the trail, which could be tough for a gang on horseback to get over. Once a stage entered Gullet Pass, it became a different story. With plenty of cover for hiding and with the stage's team laboring to climb the grade, it became a frequent ambush area.

Trailing behind the stagecoach about a quarter of a mile, Wiley brought his horse to a halt. Up ahead he could see six masked men come out from cover and surround the stage. He nudged his horse closer so he could get a good picture of the gang. Suddenly one of the gang, riding a speckled mare, fired his gun and hit one of the passengers. Wiley could see where they came out in the pass and where they rode when they finished with the stage.

Wiley rode the trail numerous times before in his studying, looking for the most probable ambush site. He also rode the area completely around Gullet Pass and knew how to move quickly and quietly through or around the terrain of the pass. He made a guess as to where they would come out again on the trail as they made their getaway. Veering off the trail on the left, he led his horse down a narrow path in the rock. Once in the open, he rode his horse at a breakneck pace until he reached an area of tall, rocky cliffs. He stopped, grabbed his Winchester, and got off his horse. Climbing onto a ledge, he crawled to the edge and looked below. Abel and his men were walking their horses through a narrow opening. He had to make a quick decision, or they would get through the opening and be out of his sight. Aiming his Winchester, he fired and hit the last man in the column, who was the one with the speckled mare, just before he got out through the opening. The shot's echo seemed to go on forever. One of the other men in the gang came back to the opening on his horse and tried to help the fallen man, but Wiley let off another round and hit the second man in the leg with the bullet piercing through to the horse. Horse and rider fell to the

ground. Wiley could see a third rider enter the opening and start to help the second man onto his horse, but the first man's horse now stood in the opening, blocking his view. By the time the horse made it through the opening, Wiley could no longer see anyone. He didn't see the second man, so he guessed that the third man had gotten him onto his horse and got away. He ran back to his horse and took another shortcut path to try to catch up with the gang, but when he got back to the trail, they were kicking up dust on the trail far beyond any hope Wiley had to catch up with them.

Wiley headed back to the opening where the first man should still be. Along the way, he found the man's horse and led the animal back with him. The first man lay unconscious on the ground, but the bullet had only torn through his shoulder, so Wiley figured he must have hit his head when he fell. He wasn't dead, so Wiley got him back onto his horse and tied him to the saddle. When they reached a small watering hole, Wiley made up a mud patch and packed the bullet wound to stop the bleeding. Eventually, he caught back up with the stage along the trail and followed it into the next town. The stage driver and his partner carried the

dead passenger over to the undertaker's and the gang member over to the doc's. Wiley went to see if he could find the sheriff and tell him what happened. He found out they didn't have a sheriff, but according to the blacksmith at the livery stable, a marshal would be around in about a month. The robber woke up quickly in the doctor's office and talked up a storm. He let slip the gang's next target—a large shipment of gold on the stage line. They had planned on taking out the stage in their usual spot in Gullet Pass. How the gang knew of that shipment could only mean they had someone on the inside. That made Wiley a little nervous, because he didn't know if an inside man knew of his presence or not. He would have to be extra careful. In the meantime, the blacksmith said they had a holding cell to keep the robber in till the marshal got there.

Wiley and the stage line came up with a plan for the gold shipment based on what the gang member had said. The stage with the gold had a second stagecoach following it. Just before the last patch of dense forest before Gullet Pass, the stagecoaches pulled over out of sight of Gullet Pass. Since there was someone on the inside, the stage had to leave

the depot with a normal load of passengers to not look suspicious. Only Wiley and the top security people of the stage line knew of the second stage. The first stage with the gold and the passengers stayed put out of sight. The second stage had four armed men from the stage line in the cab. Wiley told them to give him a fifteen-minute head start so he could get in position in the pass. Wiley couldn't be sure that there were only four men left in the gang. Abel could just as easily have recruited added help for such a large haul. Whatever the case, Wiley felt his position on the ledge gave him a prime advantage.

When the stage arrived at the most vulnerable area of Gullet Pass, Abel Cole and his gang, now seven other men, emerged and surrounded the coach. Expecting compliant passengers to come out of the coach, they were caught by surprise when those inside came out with guns blazing. Wiley picked off several of the gang from his position above. A quick change of guns and he continued firing. When the sound of gunfire no longer filled Gullet Pass, eight outlaws and two stage security men were dead. Wiley felt bad for the security men and wondered if they had any family. He

had no such feelings for the outlaws. For the first time in his life, he felt his blood run cold, and he didn't like it.

Wiley collected his money from the stage line and headed for Wichita. In a modest hotel room overlooking Main Street, he laid out on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Though the street below buzzed with activity, he tuned it out. He was tired, and he couldn't shake the feeling he had at the shootout. At some point over the years, he lost track of how many men he had killed. One thing he knew for sure—there didn't stand an innocent man among them. Even though he tried to get them to give up, it almost always came down to kill or be killed. Many times, he had to kill an evil man to save an innocent person from being killed. That's just how it was when no law was around.

As he laid there on the bed, he started thinking about his family. He had one brother and one sister left. His ma and pa both died when he was a teenager. Closing his eyes, he could remember sitting on his ma's lap while she read him from the Bible. She made the Old English come alive in a country voice and heart.

His pa didn't talk a whole lot, but he taught his kids the simple truths of right and wrong. Sometimes he wished his pa was still around to help him sort out the rights and wrongs of what he did today. Had he crossed a line somewhere along the way to now be in the wrong? It could be a fine line, but it had always been his decision. He thought about the commandment—thou shalt not kill. Did God mean never? Did God mean if someone was trying to kill you or your brother or sister that you do nothing to stop them? If an innocent person was about to be killed and you do nothing, is that a greater sin than if you shoot someone to stop them—maybe even kill them because no man is a good enough shot to always miss an artery? What if you make your living trying to stop people? Does that change anything, even if your intent is to never kill anyone, but to just stop a wrong—sometimes a deadly wrong? That feeling after the shootout when he felt his blood run cold, was that God telling him enough? Was he wrong to only feel for the innocent or the victim? Should he grieve for the killer as well? Maybe his growing sorrow meant the end of it all was near.

Eventually, he drifted off to sleep without his questions being answered. In the morning, he packed his bag and decided to head to Texas to visit his brother. A short walk to the livery and he would be on his way. As he stepped onto the wooden boardwalk in front of the hotel, he heard someone call his name. It was not a friendly voice, especially when accompanied by the sound of a gun being cocked. Instinctively, he dove behind the horse trough to his right, as bullets flew by his position. He rolled to his left and came up firing his 44. He hit the would-be assassin straight in the chest. His first reaction after shooting the man was to look around to see if they had hit a bystander. Then another shot rang out and Wiley felt a burning pain from his back to his chest as he fell to his knees. The man had an accomplice, and he had missed that. He always knew this day would come. Quietly, he said to himself, "Sweet Jesus, I'm coming home". He took his last breath, confident that his questions would receive answers now.

