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"So you never did come up against any Indians?"

The old man emitted a grunt. He was going to peel this grape. "Matter of fact, it wasn't too long after the incident with Nigger Horse that I did come up against Indians. Real close." He paused to be sure that the young man had taken the bait, and continued.

"When we got back to the plains, we found good hunting in the breaks of the Salt Fork of the Brazos. A herd of close to two thousand was watering along the bottoms. They were priming toward their winter coats, shaggy and thick. In the first twenty days, we had a thousand hides. The herd was scattered across the bottomland for miles. New animals showed up in droves every day. The shooting was good and easy. We hunted the days we could. Days it rained, we stacked the drying hides under tarps and spent most of the time playing cards in the lean-to.

"Come late November, there was snow on the ground. One morning I took my skinner, Joe, with me to one flank of the herd. We took the wagon to bring back some of the hides we'd pegged out to dry. I left Joe looking for the hides under the layer of new snow and set off on foot.

"Well, I hadn't gone more than a mile when I came up on a clump of buffalo, about twenty in all. My position was on a little rise about a hundred feet from them. I got down in the snow behind a mound and picked a cow that had started to stray.

"You see, I wanted to keep them all in the same area to make the skinning and the collecting of the hides as easy as possible.

"I aimed for the lungs. She gave a jump when she was hit and did a queer little sideways dance before she dropped, blood streaming from her nostrils. A couple of young bulls lifted their heads and began milling slowly in a circle. I brought down one that had started to wander off, and then another one that bolted from the opposite side. Now they were pawing the ground and bellowing, but I had them whichever way they turned.

"I paced my shooting so as not to overheat the barrel of my Winchester, and in no time at all I had about fourteen laid out in a neat little circle. Then the others, half a dozen or so, began moving away from me. I ran down, got behind the carcass of a big bull, and picked off all of them but one. I worked my way toward it and got close enough to bring it down when I realized that I was right on top of a closely packed herd.

"There were so many animals that their frosted breath made a wide flat cloud over the lot of them. They were more or less boxed in by the steep bank behind, and they had to pass my position to get out. I dropped a young bull, then a cow that had come up to investigate. Two old bulls tried to bolt but I brought both of them down and their bodies made a barrier that corralled the rest of the herd. I spent most of the day picking out the best hides and only stopped when I ran out of cartridges.

"Then I went back and gave the skinner a hand. He was still working on the first bunch. I'll have to say, it wasn't something he had the stomach for.

"I had him cut around each animal's neck, down the belly to the root of the tail, and then down the inside of each leg. I wrapped a rope around the wooly scruff at the neck and tied the other end to the mule while Joe, he staked the animal's snout to the ground with a wagon rod. Once that was done, I cracked the mule on the rear and he jumped a good six foot and yanked that hide right off."

"Was that when you come up against the Indians?" The young man had been following the old man's story patiently.

"No, not exactly," the old man said, taking his time to answer. "That was the next day. I had Joe with me again and we took up where we'd left off skinning. The wind was particularly bad that day as I recollect, whipping the powdery top layer of snow sideways. The herd had moved on overnight and I went off by myself to scout up more buffalo but the wind had sent them out into the open and I had to go back for the wagon.

"Well, old Joe, he was blubbering about having to skin the frozen carcasses, and even though it wasn't anything to cry over, I'll admit that it was a hell of a chore. I stayed back and gave him a hand. That wind never did let up, and even with the cold, the butchered buffalo were beginning to stink something furious. About the time we were finishing up for the day is when I felt my backbone start to crawl up under my hat. I turned to see that we were surrounded by Indians."

The old man paused and stared at the space between the horse's ears. He was enjoying himself. Ash would have been proud of him. The young man's eyes questioned him, a slackness had developed in his jaw.

"I had never been face to face with a wild Indian before," he continued. "There wasn't a pleasant looking one in the whole dark, greasy lot. They were wrapped in buffalo hides and Army blankets astride their ponies, and there was no telling who if any was fingering a trigger."

"What happened then?" the young man blurted. He'd been anticipating this part.

The old man knew he'd hooked him good. "Why, hell, they killed us!"