

A Sparkling Gem In Short Fiction Selected From the Literary Output of One of the World's Most Forceful Story Tellers.

A Vivid Picture of a Stirring Lower Texas Episode

The Difficulty With Windy Walker

-BY-
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THE sun was hot upon the land, and Double Mountain fork, which emptied itself into the Brazos miles to the northward, steamed between its banks. The sheep lay in their camps about the scanty mesquite and the cut banks of the creek and under a couple of cottonwoods rooting in the slow waters. It was the time of day to do nothing, to say nothing and to take lying down all the hammering that the sun and wind could give. Jeff said so, and he lay down under his cottonwood, near which the sheep panted, while he played lazily upon a rickety old mouth organ. And he knew just about as much of his tunes as the Old Man of Arkansas did. Like him, Jeff broke off in the middle. And, unlike him, no stranger rode by to eke out the tale end of the music. His father came along instead, for the old man roused himself from his bed in the old shack by the creek and stared into the radiance of the day with one shaking hand over his eyes.

"Jeff!"

"Yep, paw," said Jeff as he scrambled to his feet.

He was a long, lean and lank son of the prairie, sandy, freckled, hard and fifteen years of age.

"Get up the pinto," said old Jefferson Dexter. "I'm a'min' to go into the city."

Young Jeff was respectful because he had been so all his life. It never occurred to him to be anything else, for the old man had a heavy hand, a fierce eye and the temper which gives his cutting edge to an American. But now he "reared" a little, and, according to his own notion, there was reason for fiving. He scratched his shock head and put his mouth organ away inside his shirt before he spoke. When he did speak he uttered a fact without the least sense of reproach behind it.

"You was full last night when you come home, paw," he said.

"I was," said his father.

"And maybe you don't recollect what you told me."

Dexter shook his head.

"My son, I don't recollect one word. Did I speak? I'd a sort of kinkle I was speechless."

Young Jeff shook his head in turn.

"Far from it, paw, for you sat on the table a good while, and you yanked me under bed to hear."

"What did I discourse of?" asked his father. "I do hope I said nothing unbecom' your father, Jeff. But since your poor mother passed away into the eternal beyond I've had less sense than I should have. Did I blaspheme any?"

Jeff nodded.

"Oh, my, paw! You said awful things—most awful."

"Can you repeat any of 'em, Jeff?" asked his father anxiously.

"A lot I can," replied Jeff promptly. But old Dexter raised his hand.

"My curiosity is sinful," he said, "and I'll curb it. I'll offer up a general repentance scheme when the stiffness goes out of my knee. And you forget what I said mighty quick or I'll say you some. I will. Get up the pinto, Jeff."

Jeff showed reluctance to move.

"Paw, you mostly cussed one person."

Dexter, who had turned to go back into the shack, faced his son again.

"I do," said Jeff.

"You know, and so far as I could gather up the tale in the confusion of your shoutin', you appeared to have had some sort of a difficulty with Mr. Walker."

Dexter's face was as black as a thundercloud when he heard what Jeff said. He nodded and stared at the boy from under his heavy eyebrows, which drooped like bent thatch over his burning eyes.

"I do recollect," he said at last. "Him and me had words, I know—bad words—and I've a notion the boys pulled me down and held me. I knew, Jeff, I had business in town and couldn't properly locate in my mind what it was. That man sure insulted me in some way, having done it before, sayin' I'd brand navericks as soon as eat pie. And he went on to throw out hints as to brand burnin'. Jeff, my son, a naverick ain't nothin'; there's no reason a man shouldn't brand any beast as his owner ain't keener to put a mark on. But brand burnin' is a loss of another color, and the insult hit into me. I feel in my bones he up and said things. Get up the pinto, Jeff."

There was visible distress in the boy's eyes, and he followed the old man into the house.

"Paw, don't you reckon it would be wiser to wait a day? After your lambores your hand will shake some, and they do say that Mr. Walker shoots like death. There's many he's killed, and you don't use your gun once a year."

"Get up the pinto, boy," said Dexter. "I can't wait a day to learn what he said to me in the American House last night."

When Jeff opened his mouth again the old man beat his brows on him till his eyes were almost invisible.

"Get up the pinto, Jefferson," he said, and poor Jeff ran out of the shack into the burning sun as the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"There's no one but me, and sis she's in old Virginy, and Mr. Walker will kill him for sure if they tell the truth of him. But now paw's mad; he's mad, and maybe his hand won't shake."

He brought up the pinto and hitched the skid wheel into the rattling old wagon which was the carryall for everything on Double Mountain fork. And when it was ready old Dexter was ready, too.

"I'll be back by midnight," said Dexter. "Git up, thar!" And he struck the horse over the flank with the double lines, and so far as Jeff could see the old man never turned his head after the pinto once got started. But the boy stared across the prairie down the track which Texans call a road till he could see nothing but the brown grasses of summer and the dancing haze of noon-day heat.

"Like enough," said Jeff, "I'll never see the old man no more. He's stiff and rheumy, and he can't get out no gun fast enough for Walker. I dew wish that Walker would run up again some one like Ben Thompson. Ben Thompson would have made him look like a Mexican's blanket—more holes than wool. But Walker don't take no chances that away. He's no more than a poor fool killer, and paw's a fool."

Jeff wiped away a tear and made himself some coffee by heating up the remains of his dad's breakfast. It was a hard life that he led, and he never knew it. The world was big, so he had heard, but West Virginia was the end of it toward the east. A remote California was in the far west. The round and broken prairie was his world and the slow creek his river. He wondered how much bigger the Mississippi was, for his mother, now in the cemetery at the "city" toward which the old pinto was going, had come from Memphis.

"I'd like to go to sis in old Virginy," said Jeff as he took his mouth organ out of his shirt and went to look at the sheep. "I reckon they don't care much for bone gas in Virginy. I dew wonder some why paw bankers after sheep when he has cattle. A sheep is shew much to a steer."

He sat by the bank of the creek and played his poor bits of tunes, and presently, as the sun westered and the thin shadows of the mesquites stretched two hours' journey on the grass, the sheep rose from their camp and started browsing. Jeff whistled for his dog, a lean mongrel with a big head and watery eyes, and started to lead the way the hard of sheep went. He played as he walked. Once more young Paw piped, and the haze at last faded. But his heart was heavy.

"I can't play worth a darn," said Jeff. "I'm mighty anxious about paw."

He put away his instrument and played no more. He spoke to his dog.

"Beh, old son, if that Walker puts lead into the old man, I'll blow a hole threw him a rat could crawl throu."

Now, though he piped no more, the whole world danced through his tears.

"I'm durned sorry for the old man," whispered his son. "He ain't had no circus of a life. Things was tough back east, so paw used to let on, and here they was tough, and then she died. He ain't bin the same since, but more fierce and contrary, and he gets full three to one to what he done when paw was alive. I



dew wish I'd had the savvy to go in with him. But he'd never let me."

At sundown he corralled the sheep and their lambs in a straggling mesquite corral against the raids of coyotes and went back to the shack. He cooked a mess of flour and a bit of bacon and ate his supper, washing it down with a drink from the creek.

Then he sat outside on an upturned keg which had once held milk and played a little more as the night came on. The stars broke out in the east, and then they shone over him, and the west was blue at last as the moon rose in the east. The solace of the time was upon him, and for a little while his heart was easier.

"The boys won't let Walker shoot him up any," he said hopefully. "They're a fine lot of boys to the city, and I reckon some day they'll make Walker like a slave. But when he went into the house he took down his father's old shotgun and looked at it."

"I'll be the only one left," said Jeff as he put it back in its place, "the only one but sis."

But nevertheless he slept soundly when he was once in the blankets, and he never woke till it was past midnight and the high moon made the prairie almost as light as day. When he woke he sat up suddenly.

"Paw," he called. "Paw, ez that you?"

But there was no answer, and he came to himself.

"I thot I heard the old man," he said, and even as he spoke he heard the sound of a horse coming across the prairie at alope. He sprang out of bed and ran to the door.

"That ain't paw unless he's left the wagon to the city," he said. "There's times he will, when he ain't sober and ain't rightly full."

Yet he knew how unlikely it was that the old man should do so now. There was seldom a time that poor old Dexter wasn't "rightly full" when he came back home. And the sound came nearer, nearer yet. In another minute the horseman pulled up outside the shack.

"Ez that you, Jeff?" he asked.

"Why, certainly, Bill Davies," said Jeff with a sinking heart. "What's brot you this way? Hev you come from the city, and hev you seen my dad?"

Bill Davies got off his pony and, leaving it with the bridle reins on the ground, came up to Jeff. He was a cowboy from Engis Creek and was not often that way.

"He rode out to tell about him," said Bill quietly.

"Oh," said Jeff. "I know, he's dead, Bill."

"He's gone, Jeff."

"And Walker shot him?"

"He's the third Windy Walker has shot and killed in two years," said Davies. "And I'll be self defense, Jeff. Your old man started to pull on him and was as slow getting out his gun as a mud turtle on dry land. And Walker pulled down on him and shot him through three times before he reached the ground. The poor old man is dead, Jeff. Don't grieve, Jeff."

But Jeff swallowed his tears.

"I ain't grieve'n now, Bill Davies. I'll find time when Walker's dead," he said in a choking voice.

Bill Davies shook his head.

"I was self defense, Jeff. It was, sure, for las' night they had a sort of difficulty, and we held your old man down, and he said he'd shoot Walker on sight. And Walker laffed. And we got your dad out of town fightin' somethin' awful. And he pulled his gun first. There's four to take the stand and say so. There won't be no trouble for Walker. He says he'll do the thing hard some and bury the old man in style."

Jeff threw up his head.

"You ain't defendin' Walker now, are you, Bill Davies?"

The cowboy shrugged his shoulders.

"He defend him, Jeff? He's the meanest sort of murderer. He don't take chances with any but old men and tenderfeet. He ain't the man to kill when it ain't self defense. He looks for self defense and is greedy for it. I'd like to see him laid out cold, and before I buried him in style I'd see the dogs eat him."

"I'll kill him," said Jeff. "Will you sleep here, Bill, and lend me your pony, so's I can go into town and see paw? I'll send the pony back early."

"You can ride," said Bill. "I'll stay here. Do you mean what you say, Jeff?"

"Sure's death," said Jeff. "Ain't he killed paw? Who else is there?"

Bill Davies took him by the hand.

"You're a man, Jeff, and I'll be proud of you. But recollect, he's quick on the trigger. Don't take no chances. He won't give none."

"I'll give him none," said Jeff.

"You're a boy after all," mused the cowboy, "and if you kill him there'll be those that'll sympathize with you. But perhaps you'll better go back to Virginy to your sister."

To say so was to ease his mind of a hard duty. Bill Davies felt much easier after it.

"I'm goin' back soon," said Jeff.

And he rode through the moonlight to the town. He sent the pony back as soon as he found his father's body, which lay in the back store of the man they usually dealt with. And the funeral was next day. Walker did not pay for it, for Jeff sent him a message.

"He looked tolerable wicked," said the man who took it to the slayer.

"Did he?" sneered Walker. "You can tell him to keep out of my way. See?"

Walker felt an injured man.

"Good God," said Walker. "Shall I have to kill a boy?"

But Jeff went back to his place on Double Mountain creek, and the memories of men in the west being short, the death of old Jefferson Dexter was a thing forgotten in a week. But the young one didn't forget. And perhaps Walker did not, for the

"Oh," said Jeff, "I know, he's dead, Bill."

pride of a man who kills and is not tried or who is tried and acquitted is something strange to see. He glories in his strength and his quickness and takes up attitudes in the little world in which he shines. And quiet men said to themselves that Windy Walker would not die in bed. But the trouble is that quiet men do not kill unless they are obliged to, and some men who looked Walker in the eyes with a savage challenge found him loath to take offense.

"I put up with a mighty lot now," said Walker. "A man with my record should. I want peace."

He still held his own at the American House, where the trouble with old Dexter had begun, and he lost a few dollars regularly to the gamblers who ran the faro and keno tables. They sneered at him, but found him a paying streak in bad times. If he guessed a little they let him pass. And the citizens of the city endured him. There were some quiet men who did not talk who wondered when his end would come, for Bill Davies said a thing or two to friends of his.

"The boy hev a right to kill him," said Bill, "and the right to get the drop unseem. He's a boy."

Jeff sometimes came into town, but he came in mostly by night, and no one knew of his being there at all. He used to tie up the old pinto outside the town and come in quietly. He mostly lay about the empty town lots that were at the back of the American House and the Green Front, the chief saloons in Colorado street. The gambling saloons of both houses were at the back, and the windows looked upon a waste of old boots, old horseshoes and empty tomato cans. But the blinds were usually drawn. In such a "city," even though law and order were gradually and with great difficulty establishing themselves, there were many who had a deeply rooted objection to standing in a bright light visible to those who were in darkness. There was never any knowing who might be outside.

And very often Jeff was outside. Sometimes he heard the voices of men he knew. Bill Davies was in there at least once a week. He heard Simon Keats, to whose store his father's body had been taken, for Simon, though a respectable storekeeper by day, had a passion for faro, which blossomed after sundown. And sometimes he heard Walker. But the window was shut and the blind was down.

That year, as it happened, September opened with a blaze of heat that the most hardened old timer felt. The sky was brass, and the wind that came up out of the Gulf, growing hotter on the far farn lands of lower Texas, might have come from the pit. The high plains across which the Texas Pacific railroad runs were burning. Stock died of drought. The prairie was fired by the furies of locomotives. In the city, smelt between sand and hills, the heat was intense, and the nerves of men gave way. They came out only at night, and then the saloons filled.

"By gosh, it's hot!" said Davies, who had been taking three bars in town. "By gosh, it's hot! Sam, don't you reckon it might be a trifle cooler if that window was open?"

The bartender, down whose face the moisture ran in streams, admitted that the experiment might be worth making.

"Though whether it's better here or outside or in hell I can't say," he answered.

"Who's afraid of hell in this weather?" asked Windy Walker coolly. "Open the window, Sam, and let me have a John Collins. I've a thirst on me as if a prairie fire was runnin' down my throat. I duuno what foolishness brought men to Texas."

Sam went to the window and pulled up the blind. By a curious instinct, for it was hardly conscious, Walker and two or three others moved out of the direct line between it and the big lamp that flared the room. But Bill Davies moved farther than any one. Then Sam opened the window top and bottom and pulled the blind down again. But it had been up long enough to show some one outside that the window was open.

"That's better," said Walker, and he went to the faro table and laid down a dollar.

"I don't get between him and the window," said Davies—"not much I don't. Three times this month I've seen young Jeff ridin' along to town at sundown, and if he gives Walker a chance he's

a fool. If I was a boy and had the same against Walker I'd say 'Look out, Windy!' when he was dead."

But the room was crowded, and the play went on. Davies didn't play. His nerves were on the stretch. Something seemed to tell him that Walker's time was coming. He felt as some do when thunder is brewing in a great and heavy calm. And suddenly he went curiously white.

"That blind's higher than it was," he said, "but no one else saw it. They faced the tables. The talk of the faro dealer went on. A lucky man cried 'Keno!' They swore and cursed and drank. And then Davies saw fingers at the blind cord—only fingers. The

blind went up three inches. He drew back farther and stood against the wall with an extinguished cigar between his teeth and his cow hat over his eyes. He looked at Walker, who was in a crowd.

"Darn my luck," said Walker. "That's \$5."

He made a motion to get out from those who stood with him, and Bill Davies almost called out to him.

"It's not my funeral," he said grimly as he restrained himself. And he looked again at the window. On the sill close to the corner he saw something move a little.

"That lets me out," said Walker, cursing as he stepped back clear of his companions. And as he did so there was a deafening report. Bill saw flame leap from the muzzle of a gun, and Walker threw up his hands and gasped horribly. Then he pitched upon the floor and lay there. A dozen men had their "guns" in their hands at the sound.

"By —," said one of them, "that was from the window!"

One man, quicker than the rest, put up his hand, pulled the string of the lamp, and the room was in darkness. Bill Davies jumped to the window and through it and came upon Jeff Davies with his shotgun in his hand. The boy was crying dreadfully. Before they could speak other men followed Davies, and soon came round the house from the front.

"It's Jeff Dexter has done it," said Bill.

There was a curious gasp of relief from those who stood by him and Jeff. Old Simon Keats was the first to speak.

"Boys, he had a right to," he said. "Walker killed his dad, and he's a boy. He had no call to speak to Windy first under the circumstances."

But Jeff still sobbed.

"What'll we do, boys?" asked Bill Davies.

"We'll save the boy trouble," said Keats. "It's allowed young Jeff ain't done no harm in killing Windy?"

"That's so," said the bystanders.

"Then send him back to Virginy to his sister," said Keats. "There's the eastbound express due in less'n twenty minutes. Will you go, bub?"

"Of course he'll go," said Davies. "Hev you any money, Jeff? Jeff had none on him. A dozen men offered him bills and silver."

"And I'll buy you out, stock and all, Jeff," said old Keats, "at a price that all here will say is fair."

"Heav, heav!" said the crowd.

"And, what's more, I'll go with you to Fort Worth," said Keats. "Come along, sonny; there's no time to lose."

They walked toward the railroad depot.

"One of us 'll go to the city marshal and say Windy's gone up the smoke," said Sam, the bartender. "And we'll drop a hint the boy has rode back to his ranch."

And as they walked Jeff held Bill Davies' hand and trembled violently.

"Mr. Keats, I'd like to give Bill my dog Hob and my old pinto pony," he said. "Will you take them, Bill?"

"To be sure," said Bill.

"The pinto's tied to a mesquite t'other side of Wolf creek," said Jeff. "He's a mighty good pony for slow work."

"I'll not trouble him," said Bill, and they reached the depot just as the eastbound express came in.

"Buck up," said Bill. "You done right, Jeff."

"Did I?" asked Jeff.

"Sure nuff," said Bill. "Windy's dead."

AUTUMN IS HERE.

By JOHN KEATS.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom friend of the maturing sun,
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch eaves run—
To bend with apples the mossed cottage trees
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core—
To swell the gourd and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel—to set budding, more
And still more, later flowers for the bees.
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For summer has o'berbrimmed their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store!
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft lifted by the winnowing wind.
Or on a half reaped furrow sound asleep,
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Sparres the next swath and all its twined flowers,
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook,
Or by a cider press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings, hours by hours.

Where are the songs of spring? Aye, where are they?
Think not of them—then hast thou music, too—
While barred clouds bloom the soft dying day,
And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue.
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking, as the light wind lives or dies,
And full grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn.
Hedge crickets sing, and now with treble soft
The redstart whistles from a garden croft.
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.