

Chapter 3 - Slight of Hand

The coffee was good and hot, but it was missing that extra 'something'. Jittery Jim stood and walked around the raging campfire and retrieved his oilskin bundle. He unwrapped it and spread the oilskin out to dry, and returned to his stump with the bottle of scotch. He poured out about a third of the coffee and replaced it with scotch. After a slow satisfying drink, Jittery held the bottle out to Youngblood, "'ow 'bout a wee bit o' warmth for the innards me friend?" Youngblood tilted his large wide brimmed hat back a tad and looked over to Jittery, "You tryin' ta gain the advantage in a card game or sumtin? That stuff'll burn a hole in ya. Now this here Kentucky mash will warm ya up right quick, and its good for lightin' fires too..." He smiled and pointed to the campfire.

"Now that there is mighty fine fire, I thank ya for that." said Jittery as he readjusted the heavy woven Dakota Sioux blanket. His clothes soaked in the warmth of the fire, drying nearby. "That's a Tatanka prayer blanket there, it's good luck for those in possession of it. I am known as 'Ska Sunghidan' or 'White Fox' by the tribes West to Wyoming. The Dakota Sioux are a great tribe and part of an amazing culture of the Plains Indians. We white men could learn a lot from these peoples. They respect and honor the land and the creatures on it. Nothing is wasted and everything is respected for its purpose and place on this Earth". Youngblood reached behind him, grabbed another small log, and threw it on the fire. "I have always been curious about the Indians', said Jittery. "I had a friend as a child who was part of the Ottawa tribe in Southern Canada where I was born. During the Civil war I spent time with the Potawatomi Indians because they were part of the Council of Three Fires, an alliance of the Ojibwe, Ottawa, and Potawatomi tribes. They clashed frequently with the Iroquois tribes, and I had the unfortunate occasion to do battle with them several times.

I too was given a name by the Potawatomis. {Nbenikan nwiyan 'Megate Kno', gwlsen ogama gigdawgumgok 'Harry Jonah', Mbwe Sussex Canada Cmokman.} (My Potawatomi name is 'War Eagle' son of Tribal Council Chief 'Harry Jonah' of the Sussex white men.) "Bohzo nikan" (Hello my friend) replied Youngblood. "Seems we make quite a formidable force, a fox and an eagle!" Jittery Jim nodded and said, "As long as we stay away from the water..." Both men shared a hearty laugh and downed their alcohol laced coffee. Quiet fell over the campfire as both were lost in their thoughts for a time. As the sun began to rise over the trees along the shore,

Youngblood stood, turned toward the sun, and began to recite quietly a short prayer. After he was done, Jittery stood and gazed at the shimmering sunlight now dancing across the river. The harbor and the gathering of ships danced in the water silently. They were too far away to hear the sounds of the port. "I need to get back to the steamboat and gather my horse and tack, I figure we're gonna need it. I think I will head further West now, a change of scenery is in order." Jittery was finally dry and warmed up sufficiently to think about the days challenges.

"Well, I need ta see a man in Duluth about some guns, so you'll hafta fend for yerself today." said Youngblood. "I plan ta return here to camp tonight, then head out tomorrow, probably by train toward Cheyenne. You're welcome to tag along if'n ya want." Jittery smiled and turned as he shed the Tatanka blanket. Underneath he wore only his dirty red long johns, his gun belt, and holsters. What he did not realize was the reason he was havin' trouble gettin' warm was simple, his trapdoor was open. "Oh my" laughed Youngblood at the sight before him. "What?" said

Jittery. Youngblood managed to pause between fits of laughter, “Now ain’t that just Precious”, Youngblood sat heavily on the log by the fire and continued to laugh for several minutes. Jittery was plenty warm now... “Dokum!” (Be quiet!).

By mid morning both men were ready to set out on their respective chores for the day. The campfire had been doused and the gear stashed in the trees. Youngblood mounted his horse and grabbed the reins of the pack mule, preparing to ride to Duluth. “When ya see that man today, keep an eye out for something to replace these aging Walkers, will ya?” said Jittery Jim. “I think the drenching they got in the Mississippi last night may have done them in.” Jittery had spent over a hour earlier cleaning and oiling the guns, cursing quietly as he did so. Luckily his powder and caps had survived the river, wrapped in his oilskin bundle, but not so his guns and leather. The gun belt was drying nicely in the sun, and was dry enough to wear, so he was sure it would dry and mold just fine to his body. The holsters were still pretty wet, giving rise to a concern about the reliability of the Walkers sitting in the dampness. Jittery decided he would take just one Walker and wear it tucked into his waist. As uncomfortable as that was, at least he was pretty sure it would work if needed.

“Will do”, replied Youngblood. “I expect to be back late tonight, so get some grub in town if ya can, unless you’re a mind ta cook out here. The trail to the port is well traveled so you should make good time, and when ya get your mount, the trip back will be quick.” Jittery Jim Jonah walked over to Youngblood on his horse, reached up and extended his hand. “I’ll keep the fire goin’ and a hot pot of coffee for ya.” Youngblood smiled and twirled the cigar in his mouth. “Just remember ta keep your trapdoor shut this time, Precious!” With that he gently spurred his steed and trotted off down the trail. “Why you rotten skunk...”. It was too late, he was out of earshot already. “Forward march soldier” said Jittery out loud and headed in the opposite direction toward the harbor, chuckling to himself as well.

It was just past noon when Jittery Jim Jonah reached the docks. He made his way toward the “Mistress of New Orleans” scanning the crowds for any sign of trouble. Knowing there had been bodies discovered both onboard and in the water he was careful to blend in with the bustling harbor dwellers as he approached. No sign of the ‘authorities’, which did not really surprise him. Violence was pretty common on the docks, and unless a prominent local was directly involved, most of the crimes went unanswered.

The port of Superior, Wisconsin, was a small port by comparison to most along the Mississippi. The area was first settled by fur traders and The first-known inhabitants of what is now Douglas County were Mound Builders. These were an advanced group of people that appeared on the shores of Lake Superior sometime after the last glacier receded. They mined copper in the Mining Range and at Manitou Falls on the Black River. They pounded this metal into weapons, implements, and ornaments, which were later found buried in mounds with their dead. Their civilization was eventually overrun by other tribes, mainly of Muskogean and Iroquois stock, and disappeared as a distinct culture in late prehistoric American times.

The first-known white men to visit the area were the French. In 1618, Stephen Brule, a voyager for Champlain, coasted along the south shore of Lake Superior where he met the Ojibwa Indians. Upon returning to Quebec, he carried back some copper specimens and a glowing account of the region. In 1632, Champlain’s, map appeared showing “Lac Superior de Tracy” as

Lake Superior and the lower end shore as “Fond du Lac. Soon after, fur trading companies established settlements, while missionaries came bringing the first touches of civilization. The Hudson River Company forged the early trading routes and for decades held a firm foothold on all trading business in the region. Mining had recently taken a sizable chunk of the manpower here as Copper mines sprung up on both sides of the Mississippi. Miners here were not accustomed to the high wages (by local standards) paid and the chance to stake your own claim and a chance for wealth. The port quickly became a favorite stop for steamboats traveling the river, bringing some of this regions wealth all the way South to the Gulf of Mexico. There was already talk of a major rail line extending West to the Pacific Ocean. Turned out, Duluth won that battle along with St. Paul, Minnesota in 1870. The Railroad extended West To Washington state in 1872.

As Jittery Jim Jonah rounded the corner of Dock 3 he saw Stoker standing by the boarding ramp. There were four men with him. They were listening intently as Stoker spoke. Jittery managed to creep within earshot using the crowd and stacked freight as cover. “Keep a man near the freight ramp and make sure he knows what this ‘Jonah’ character looks like. He and that croaker ‘Youngblood’ shanked two of our men last night and I am sure he won’t leave without his flea bitten hag of a horse. Find the freight master and find out which horse is his, then post a man ta watch the horse as well. Now get moving!” Jittery almost reached out and strangled Stoker right then and there. That ‘flea bitten’ horse was a gift from an Ottawa Indian chief, and was among the finest horses to be found in the eastern states. He was quick, strong, and smart. Jittery was sure the horse could understand English, and would probably have kicked Stokers teeth out for that comment. He was a black and white paint, about 7 hands tall. A bit small by Eastern standards, but was a fine animal and friend.

No longer could he just walk up and claim his horse and tack. Jittery slid back into the crowd and scanned the docks for an accomplice. He found one about a block away. A young man, about 13, hustling his able body to passengers in need of assistance with their baggage. He was a strapping young man who was aware of everything going on around him. Jittery Jim was almost 25 feet away when the young man turned toward him and called, “Good day sir, you need a good strong arm today?” “Why yes I do. What’s your name son?” asked Jittery. “Harry, sir, what can I do for ya?”

Ten minutes later Harry was on his way to the local eatery to recruit two cohorts for the job he had just been hired for. With \$45 dollars in his pocket he knows just who will be his partners. On his way he stops at a blacksmith shop for some charcoal dust and a wagon. He then stops at the harbormaster’s office to get a list of ships docked today. Harry recognizes all the names on the list and quickly selects one name. Forty minutes later he returns to ‘The Mistress of New Orleans’ and locates Jittery at the aft end of the boat near a freight wagon. He hands him a piece of paper with the name of the ship he selected earlier on it and walks toward the freight ramp. Jittery immediately leaves the area heading to dock 4 and the ship selected by Harry. Harry approaches the freight master at the top of the ramp and asks to retrieve a horse and gear for one Jittery Jim Jonah. The freight master recognizes Harry from previous jobs and sends a worker to retrieve the goods. As he has Harry sign the release manifest he gives the high sign to Stokers’ henchman standing across the dock. The man nods and tips his hat, signaling his accomplices they will soon be on the move. A few minutes later a fine looking paint emerges from the freight ramp , saddled up, and carrying two saddlebags. Harry thanks the freight master, hands him a silver dollar, and heads off down the dock walking the horse slowly, making sure the men watching all see him and where he is going.

On the main street facing the docks Jittery spies a leather makers shop and enters. He asks the owner for a good place to find some 'Injun boots'. The man eyes Jittery and his clothing. Wearing a trapper shirt with a leather laced front, cavalry pants, and boots that have certainly seen better days, he directs Jittery to the rear of his shop and through a small door. Inside the room is an outrageous collection of Indian gear, clothing, and weapons. Jittery lets out a whistle. Abraham, the owner says "If'n ya cain't find what yer lookin' fer here, it ain't ta be found. Every trapper and trader worth his salt brings his best goods ta me." It was clear the goods spanned the entire range of cultures and tribes within easily a hundred miles. It did not take long for Jittery to find what he wanted as well as several additional items.

Jittery continued on his way with a nice pair of Elkskin boot moccasins, a pair of leather gauntlets, and two ornately decorated possible bags, one as a gift for his new friend Youngblood. He was pleased to find each bag decorated appropriately for the Dakota Sioux and Potawatomi tribes. He reached dock 4 and the bow of the 'New York', a large side-wheeler towboat, just as a young couple arrived pushing a small wagon. He approached and greeted them saying, "Good day my friends, I hope you are not here for a wake." The young woman smiled and replied, "Certainly not my dear sir, I am waiting for my brother Harry to arrive from Duluth." With that the woman handed Jittery a large black duster, which was to cloak his clothing and help Jittery become a bit more invisible. The 'New York' was of unique design that was perfect for the scheme now in motion. It boasted the ability to load from both the bow and the stern with dual loading ramps.

Jittery turned to see Harry coming toward him on the dock leading his horse. As they passed by, 'Chucky', his horse, perked his ears, snorted, and turned his head toward Jittery. Jittery raised his forefinger over his lips in a 'shushing' motion. His horse immediately turned back forward and followed Harry's lead quietly. All three watched as Harry led the horse to the stern freight ramp and entered the ship. Jittery watched as three men followed Harry trying to look like they were not following someone, stopping at the bottom of the stern ramp. Harry signed in, paid the freight master, handed him a small package, and watched as the horse was led into the hold of the ship. Harry then walked to the bottom of the ramp and sat down on a piling and looked about as if waiting for someone. The three men watched him intently, just as planned.

About ten minutes later a worker emerged from the bow freight ramp leading an all black horse. He approached the wagon, Jittery, and the young couple. The man handed the reins to the young man, nodded, and walked back up the ramp. The mans' hands were covered with black coal dust. Jittery walked to the horse and whispered in its ear. Howdy Chucky ol' buddy, time to lead the show off stage right. He hitched 'Chucky' to the single harness at the front of the carriage, climbed into the back of the wagon, and the young couple led the wagon off the dock and down the street toward the center of town. Jittery noticed two more of Stokers men at the end of the street. They ignored the wagon and its passengers. After all, they were looking for a lone man on foot, in a fancy shirt.

Just outside town, Jittery Jim Jonah thanked his nameless accomplices, and gave them an additional 3 silver dollars for their time. He unharnessed 'Chucky' as Harry rode up with a harness horse. "Those boneheads are STILL waiting by the freight door for you to show up! This was the easiest money I have made in a month! And what fun it was too!" Jittery watched as the troupe rode off down the trail toward town to celebrate their good fortune. He tipped his hat to

their backs and rode toward camp whistling an old Irish lullaby. Today was a good day. He looked at his hands and said to Chucky, "You need a bath pard, you're covered in coal dust!"