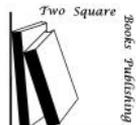


B etween
the R ivers



Jane MacGregor

Two Square Books Publishing
Hangtown, USA



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Long May She Wave

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Published by Two Square Books Publishing
Hangtown, USA
twosquarebooks.com

FIRST EDITION

ISBN 9780989076418

CASWELL CROSSING

Established: West of Civilization

Year: 18-ot whenever

Population:

Horses

Cattle — scattered

not so many — Chickens

2 ~~4~~ Pigs — eaten

stolen — More Horses

Informant — *unwilling*

riled — People

determined — Outlaw — *innocent*

guilty — **Caught**

Elevation: Yodel-ayyy-hee-heee

CHAPTER 1

Gandy's Question
Vultures For Prospects
Ring Around The Mountain
Cross Purposes



QUESTIONS. That sheriff sure enough had some. Only Gideon was flat stuck for answers. In the last few months, occupying a jail cell had risen to the top of his 'Possible Futures' list. At the moment, incarceration— or possibly a rope— was once again edging around the bend to jump him with a vengeance. His best option was to light a shuck, get clear out of the territory and then some. That plan had a hitch, though. Bullet holes tended to slow a gent down— and Gideon had acquired three. In his condition, a long ride would end very shortly with his body being collected at the sheriff's convenience.

That's where this whole mess had started: with a body and with a vengeance.

GIDEON FLETCHER sat in the red dirt, listening to a bunch of complete strangers argue over who would haul him to jail. He had to admit, at least to himself, that he did not particularly take to the notion of visiting whatever pile of bricks stood as a prison in this fine territory of Utah. New Mexico? Kansas? Fact was, Gideon didn't know 'where' he stood any more than 'when'. As far as he was concerned, the year was 18-ot something— and that was close enough. As for

territorial borders, they received the same lack of attention to detail. The States United and their associated hallmarks of civilization were, thankfully, far away to the east. For those who desired hospitality somewhere where questions such as ‘What did you do?’ were never, ever asked, Mexico lay to the south. That was about all Gideon needed to know.

Whichever side of the territorial line he currently straddled, the upside was that nobody had suggested a rope, a definite possibility when one is found standing beside a herd of mixed stuff wearing brands that are not your own. If it could be ridden or eaten, it had been stolen. There had even been a few madly flapping chickens. . . well, up until yesterday.

“You ain’t bossin’ this outfit, Rivers!”

“No, I am!” the sheriff elbowed his unremarkable five foot nine into the growing ruckus. He leaned in, inches from the angry face of a rancher twice his age. “I give the orders, Herrick, not Rivers, and certainly not you. I’ll need everyone I can get when we catch up with those rustlers. One man is plenty to handle a skinny kid. You have a problem with that?”

Rancher and sheriff held in a stiff tableau, horns locked. Gideon wondered who would blink first. The rancher was no pushover, but, if he figured to square with that lawman, he was going to have a real job to do. Gideon had given the sheriff his own measure of trouble; all it earned him was the ropes that now bound him hand and foot.

Herrick gave a heave of his shoulders and a burst of a sigh. He pointed a furious finger at Gideon, who paused in the middle of trying to shift away from a bothersome rock digging into his backside.

“So long as that thief ends up hanged,” the rancher grudgingly relented, “I guess it don’t really matter who drags him to a noose.”

So much for no one suggestin’ a rope.

Gideon couldn't have prevented the thought even if he tried; dark humor had become a close companion. He did wish he could have done something to make the tetchy rancher press his point. A roaring good fight would have provided a useful distraction. Unfortunately, with the details of prisoner custody put firmly to rest, the sheriff’s men quietly turned to settling themselves in for the night. Huge pine trees, filled with the tiny rustlings of creatures who inhabited the dark, surrounded them. A campfire whispered and popped as the sounds of men gradually faded away.

Now, a body wishing to remove themselves from the company of the law had two choices. They could bide their time waiting for the right opportunity, or jump the nearest guard the first chance they got. The odds of the latter working out might actually have been slightly in Gideon’s favor, since anyone with half an ounce of sense knew only a fool would try it. Or someone with the right motivation and nothing to lose.

That's got ya a-comin' an' a-goin', ain't it?

Yep. Only I'd prefer the goin'.

Dark humor wasn't the only habit Gideon had acquired. After countless miles of nothing but cactus for company and vultures for prospects, he had become quite comfortable talking to himself. What he had yet to grow accustomed to was the notion of listening to himself and, although in this case admitting it to himself was the last thing he wanted to do, he kind of wished he had.

The guard on duty sized up sort of small. He was lean, black-haired and sun-browned with barely the need to shave. The important thing, though, the thing a prisoner would do well to keep squarely in mind, was that the guard was not the one tied up. At least, not yet.

Sure ya don't fancy a-waitin' 'til mornin'?

Nope.

Come sunrise, there ain't gonna be but one fellah 'round a-fixin' to drag ya to jail.

I reckon he's gonna be mighty lonely.

Ya do know there's a dozen armed men itchin' for any excuse to help ya to a grave?

It might have seemed crazy, even to himself, but there were reasons Gideon would not, could not, wait. In the darkness he fished out a small blade. To call it a knife would have been a grand overstatement; this was nothing but a mere inch or so from a broken straight razor. Hidden under his blanket, he set the blade to the ropes around his wrists.

That there guard done put his back to the fire.

It was an important observation. People had a

tendency to lean into a fire, cradling its warmth. It was something in the human species; fire drew them like a moth. Young or not, this gent knew better. No matter how comforting the light, it did nothing good for one's night vision. This guard could still see clearly.

"Hand me that canteen, will ya?" Gideon bluffed, mentally cursing lawmen in general and this one in particular, even if he were only a temporary deputy.

"That all you wanted?" said the guard, and the tone smugly added, 'If you say yes, you are the biggest liar ever known to mankind.'

Gideon secreted his knife, took a long swallow from the canteen, and scrunched back down to the sound of what might have been a snigger. Several thoughts came to him regarding what could be done to that upstart of a tin-star, and he amused himself with the possibilities until the guard eventually changed.

Impatiently, Gideon waited. Sitting in the dark, no one to talk to, nothing to do, and your prisoner sound asleep? Not exactly exciting. The guard would grow bored. And that meant a prisoner might stand a fighting chance. Gideon knew about fighting. He knew about running too, but mostly he knew about fighting.

Din't do neither so good this time, did ya?

Shutup.

Just sayin'.

I telled ya, we're a-gettin' shut-a this mess.

You done made a habit-a travelin' by dark lately, boyo. Keep it up an' you're gonna plumb forget

whatall daylight looks like.

Ain't me as asked for nothin' nor started it.

Gideon really had not seen much daylight lately, a state of affairs that seemed unlikely to change anytime soon. If he waited until morning to make his play, with all the world as his witness, he would probably end up right back as a prisoner—and one long step closer to a jail cell.

That in mind, Gideon inched himself up.

The unmistakable sound of a handgun being cocked suggested this might not be an entirely healthy move. Where Gideon was certain he could escape, he wasn't so confident about his ability to outrun a bullet. He was going to have to sit tight.

There are times one makes a choice knowing it will be a life-altering decision. Gideon Fletcher had not known. If he had, he would have gladly taken his chances with the bullet.

THE SHERIFF'S posse rattled and banged its way through sunrise. Gideon rolled over and ignored them. He could feel the men moving about and, eventually, heard them ride away. In the relative silence that followed, and in no real hurry, he sat up and stretched as best he could. Across from him one man still hunkered by the campfire, its black coals already quenched and cool. He must have been around twenty; Gideon had never been good at guessing ages. The man would be tall when he stood and his trim frame

suggested good meals balanced with hours of hard work. Light brown hair, fashionably trimmed, could not quite decide if it might prefer to be blond. Store-bought, dark gray britches— precisely tailored; a green cotton shirt— buttoned down and tucked in; and an unblemished broadcloth coat all pointed to a single verdict: gentleman. The only mar upon this picture of perfection was a fresh cut along one cheek haloed by a nasty bruise.

The guard peered over his coffee cup, as though waiting for Gideon to bid him good morning.

“Dodge faster,” said Gideon, unsympathetically.

“Run faster,” the man countered, and his hazel eyes smirked, although his face showed none of it. “Coffee?”

Gideon didn’t care for the bitter stuff, but it was warm while the morning was not. Besides, why not let the lawman get a nice friendly feeling?

Poor innocent, that’s me.

Yeah? When?

Gideon snorted softly and sipped the awful coffee.

“You a-whistlin’ daisies or the real kind?” he asked.

The sheriff’s man frowned. “How’s that?”

“You a-packin’ a star for keeps or just a-passin’ the time?” Gideon repeated.

“Call it fulfilling a civic duty.”

“A do-gooder?”

“I suppose you could say that.”

Gideon smiled inwardly. His prospects were looking up. He had met do-gooders before. A bowl of soup, a few

heartfelt words of compassion, and they felt relieved at having done their soul some good by polishing up yours.

“What’s your name?” the man asked.

Silently, Gideon returned the empty coffee cup.

“Come on, everybody has a name,” the do-gooder coaxed, stowing the cup. “No? Well, you’re entitled to keep it. Mine’s Aspen Rivers. You ready to ride?”

“Need to, um, see a man ‘bout a horse,” Gideon stammered, “if’n ya get my meanin’. I’m kind-a shy.”

This’s too easy. Man, I do surely wish I could muster up a blush, though.

Careful, boyo. This fellah mightn’t be entirely addle-headed.

Against all expectation, Rivers actually knelt down and untied his prisoner. Gideon promptly tucked behind a clump of bushes, giving no regard to the revolver somewhere close behind him. Just yesterday he had stumbled upon a nightmare of loose rock and steep hillside just waiting for any luckless soul to fall upon its sharp edged misery. Gideon had thought at the time that it was the perfect place to avoid with a passion. Now he headed straight for it, shut his eyes and leapt with abandon.

From first to last, his fate rested with the doubtful mercies of the mountain. Although ‘rested’ was far too serene a word for what came next. Sliding, slipping, tumbling, careening— even these couldn’t sum up the adrenalin overdose. The net result was that Gideon had become an insignificant bit of flotsam, a play thing for

the mountain.

The clatter as several thousand rocks kicked up their heels, as if they couldn't wait for the next geological shivaree, left Aspen Rivers with little doubt as to what had happened. For a fraction of a second he wavered, mostly because he had a brain in his head and it worked just fine, but there was no choice. Standing there hollering politely for his charge to stop probably wouldn't work. Decision forced upon him, Aspen ran.

He stared in momentary horror at the rocks, and even more at the act of insanity he was about to perpetrate, and committed himself to the slope. Within seconds, he was hoisted onto ancient granite shoulders and carried will-or-nil into a highly doubtful future. It was just possible the experience might be the end of every last bone in his body. It was absolutely definite, provided he survived, he would be having a few words with his prisoner.

It took an eternity to reach the bottom which, paradoxically, happened in about two great thumping heartbeats. By some miracle, Aspen arrived in one piece and legged it for the thick pine trees stretching out at the base of the slope.

Gideon didn't look over his shoulder or even listen for the pounding of feet catching him up. The goal was to get away, not make a long goodbye out of it. He ducked a low branch, deftly hurdled a half decayed tree, skidded around an inconvenient boulder, and then—

Mind the log! Jump!

The message reached Gideon's legs a mite too slowly to do him any good. A foot snagged and the ground rose up to meet him. He tried to catch himself, arms flailing wildly, but it was too late. Aspen Rivers had done the catching for him.

Gideon tugged, twisted, slipped from his oversized coat, ran again, and was tackled flat.

"Will you stop? You're hurt," Aspen tried to talk sense to the madly scrabbling human beneath him and received an elbow in the eye for his effort. "Oww!! Hold still! You hear me? You're caught for Pete's sake!"

Aspen dodged another elbow and then, on the basis that his captive clearly was not hearing him, he twisted the boy's arms up behind his back.

Gideon struggled, but nothing doing. Stuck he was and stuck he stayed. When he finally quit, his breath came in great billowing heaves.

"Worked that out of your system?" the duly deputized nuisance straddling him inquired.

Gideon remained still. The fingers gripping his wrists cautiously eased. The weight on his back lessened. In a sudden burst of energy, he shot up— only to be shoved back down.

"No, you haven't. Guess that settles it. See, Pa and Luke had a bet going. Not a real bet, mind you; Pa's not the betting kind." As Aspen spoke, all neighborly like, he retrieved a pair of iron handcuffs from his coat pocket and secured Gideon's wrists. "Pa said I wouldn't need these. But Luke, that's the sheriff, he disagreed.

He said we wouldn't get two steps without them."

Aspen Rivers glanced back up at the hillside he had just careened down.

"We'll leave it to them to decide who was more wrong, shall we?" He took the handkerchief from around Gideon's neck. "I'll just borrow this, thank you."

And around Gideon's ankles it went.

That there's dirty, so it is.

You got you any helpful suggestions?

Don't get catched?

You're right funny, you are.

Gideon yanked his feet up to clobber his guard upside the head.

"Try that again and I will hog tied you, my friend," Aspen said, leaning away from the clumsy blow.

The way Gideon reckoned things, he could just about come to hate Aspen Rivers.

BIRDS SANG. Insects buzzed. Gideon Fletcher silently cursed the world. He lay over Aspen's horse like a sack of grain, only with considerably more awareness of the discomforts of such treatment. The rocking of the horse, on top of bruises and cuts, beat cadence with the pounding in his head. An eon ago they had stopped at a stream where Aspen treated the gash on Gideon's leg. Gideon would have rather the infernal man jumped off a cliff. Twice, for good measure. No such luck prevailed, this not being Gideon's year for luck.

He had gotten a bit of his own though and grinned

at the memory. Aspen had reached out to toss him back on the horse and Gideon had used the only weapon left to him: his teeth.

Now, hours later, Aspen rode between the pines, following no obvious trail, humming softly to himself, pleased with the world and every little thing in it. Gideon could have kicked him. Well, metaphorically anyway. He may not have been on speaking terms with comfort, but he and his imagination were getting along very well indeed filling the miles by contemplating what exactly might be done to Aspen Rivers.

The sheriff's hired man attempted conversation off and on, questions or comments meant to prize out information, but Gideon would have none of it. He knew money determined truth— and right— and the more money involved the more the rule held.

In his experience, the average human had a horrible habit of believing in fancy clothes and let themselves do as they were told without bothering to stoke up a fire in their own brains. They would think themselves safe, for one misconceived reason or another, and then, when things really went south, they would wake up to find they were no longer invited to think, nor the least bit safe. They would be amazed to discover that the person to whom they had handed over their freewill and say-so was now disinclined to give it back, no matter how nicely one asked. Provided they ever woke up at all. A fearful lot of folks went around letting other people do their thinking from cradle to grave.

Aspen had the markings of money. There was nothing ostentatious about him, yet he was well-spoken and well-dressed and very well-mounted. Gideon had met that kind before. Men like that could say the word and less powerful men would hang. Gideon was not in a hurry to become one of those lessers.

As the light began to fade, taking the temperature with it, a rough, one-room cabin came into view. A meager corral joined up with the back wall and, somewhere nearby, was swift moving water. Amber sunlight danced across the tall treetops. Dusk made everything seem richer, stronger, more possible; it was a time in which Gideon usually found solace. All he wanted right then was off that danged horse.

Coincidentally, Aspen chose that very moment to dump his passenger unceremoniously to the ground. Without so much as a glance, he walked his horse over to the corral, swung down and pulled off the saddle. He rubbed the bay down. He cleaned his hooves. He ran a careful hand over the horse, looking for sores. Finally, Aspen turned the bay out to eat the wild grass growing within the enclosure.

Only then did he go back to his charge.

“Well,” he said, standing over Gideon, “how yet resolves the governor of the town? This is the latest parley we will admit.”

Despite himself, Gideon returned Aspen’s ghost of a grin. “Therefore to our best mercy give yourself?”

Aspen blinked. Not a crumb of conversation does he

get all day, not a word, and now Shakespeare?

“Or like men proud of destruction,” he said, picking up the next line, “defy us to our worst.”

Gideon tipped his head. Looking up at the civic minded do-gooder took some doing. Six foot four measures a fair distance when you’re the one sitting in the dirt. He gave a shrug that was half a nod and generally meant, for the time being, he could consent to being agreeable.

Aspen knelt down, eye to eye with him.

“If you run,” he promised, “I will shoot you.”

“Nah,” Gideon replied, utterly failing to be intimidated. “Wounded man’s too much bother.”

Inside the cabin, Aspen secured his prisoner to the side rail of a rope frame bed— there was nothing else of substance. Two stools hunkered under a table barely big enough to hold a checkerboard. A fireplace, wood laid but covered in a thin coat of dust, took up the better part of one narrow wall. A rickety shelf on the adjacent wall proved to hold flour, sugar and a few mason jars of beans and peaches. These too were dusty, but, other than that small lapse in housekeeping, the shack was clean enough.

"Where did you come across Henry the Fifth?" Aspen asked, as he began preparing supper.

Leave it to a rich man to think someone like us couldn't possibly know nothin'.

“Books get ‘round,” Gideon answered short.

And they did. It was amazing where one might find

a volume of Shakespeare, or a copy of *The Odyssey*. Saddlebags, valises, canvas sacks— none were an entirely improbable transport for good literature.

Aspen eyed his charge sidelong and decided to make use of the leverage he had been given.

“Henry was a pretty hard walker,” he suggested mildly, deliberately twisting the story. “England wasn’t big enough, so he gathered up an army and declared war on France.”

Gideon studied the middle distance.

“Wouldn’t you say so?” Aspen pressed.

“Mister, that copy a-yourn must’ve lost a page. Henry done checked his brand.”

Aspen stuck a glob of biscuit dough on the end of a stick and held it near the fire. He tried to draw Gideon out, but the boy clammed up, resisting all nudging. When biscuits and beans had been placed upon the table, a second spoon scrounged up, and a single dented plate located, Aspen installed his prisoner on the other side of the table.

Well, great stampedin’ bison, I do b’lieve he means to feed us.

First the soup, then comes the sermon. That there’s how do-goodin’ works.

True for you.

Gideon was handcuffed to his guard, but food was definitely in the offering. He took the plate he was given and had at it without ceremony. He could scarcely remember the last time he had forked a decent meal.

Aspen Rivers was amazed. He had never shared a table with anyone who could swallow entire mouthfuls without chewing and utterly flunked *Silverware Techniques For The Complete Beginner*.

More decorously, Aspen ate his own makeshift supper and considered on his prisoner. The young man's cheeks were hollow, his frame thin. He was strong, no question, but there was nothing extra about him. Worn out boots circled at the ankles by homemade straps, a work coat barely holding itself together— even the patches had patches— and britches that were both too short and torn at the knees. A cotton shirt, several sizes too large, might have once been a light cream color, but now was an amalgamation of unspeakable stains. The whole noisome collage was topped by a thatch of unruly auburn hair that argued between being brown or red, curly or straight. And all the time he radiated. . . what? Anger at being caught? Indignation at the world?

Being in possession of more than a fair helping of curiosity, Aspen found himself wondering why. Why had the boy come to this state? Why had he been involved in rustling? Wasn't there anyone to kick him in the backside for even thinking about breaking the law? Aspen surely would have felt a boot or two. And why had he failed to make use of soap in. . . hmm. . . call it a year? One thing was certain, his prisoner wasn't going to explain one iota more than strictly needful, and that only if he were pinned to the wall while being asked.

Silence held until they made dessert of the peaches

and then, out of the blue, Gideon spoke around a mouthful of sweet fruit.

“I reckon as Henry were like a rancher,” he declared, “just a-sortin’ out his prop’ty line. Din’t mean to crowd no one, only keep what were his. Can’t fault that. Real crim’nals were his council. They done did set that boy up.”

He was right, Aspen knew, despite Gideon’s near run struggle to grasp the fine details of spoken English.

“I suppose you weren’t crowding anyone either when you stole that livestock,” Aspen suggested idly, “just taking what should have been yours?”

Gideon speared a peach and threw the accusation back. “I s’pose you live mighty comf’table on what ya done tooked an’ decided were yourn.”

“Meaning?” Aspen prompted.

“You’re an edgicated boy, you fig’r it out.”

“Alright, I think you’re packing a grudge. You’ve decided the world owes you. Well, let me tell you, boy, if you collect in other men’s property, someday, you will end up hanged. Nobody deserves to have what someone else worked hard to achieve.”

Gideon shook his head. “Lots-a folk steal beef, mister. Devil only takes the hindmost.”

“How old are you?”

Nobody so far from having gray hair should be that bitter. Or that stubborn. Aspen received no answer, but that came as no surprise. He returned Gideon to the floor, locked the handcuffs around a bedrail, and tidied

up the dishes. One thing the cabin did have in ample supply was woolen blankets. Aspen took a generous armful and tossed them to Gideon. He then added logs to the fire and stretched out comfortably on the bed.

“We have a long ride tomorrow. Sleep well.”

“Reckon I’d do that better if’n ya undid these,” Gideon pointed out, rattling the handcuffs.

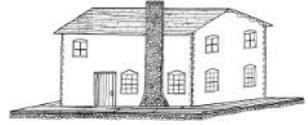
“Sorry,” Aspen replied, sounding not the least bit apologetic. “I’m under strict orders on that subject.”

Gideon had not expected to get anywhere, but you never knew— the world was full of people who couldn’t track a bed-wagon through a bog hole. He spread a couple of blankets out on the floor and bided his time.



CHAPTER 2

Big Dreams



A BIG, FANCY house on a spread of land so large no one could mistake it. That's what Lynch wanted. You could get indignant about trespassers on a nice, big place because they had no plausible excuse to be on your land. It's hard to casually dismiss crossing a thousand acres to plant your feet in the middle of someone else's property. Now, a little place, who could tell? The offender could claim he had simply been passing by, minding his own business, when he tripped over your paltry border. He could brush himself off and, with a sly tip of his hat, be gone. Begging your pardon, no harm done.

Lynch was not a big man. In fact, he was born with 'Little Man' carved onto the cornerstone of his character. In the ranks of hard walking, order giving, land owning hard cases, Lynch had been left out. Secretly wishing he had not been so unjustly shorted, Lynch fell asleep and dreamt big man dreams.



Jane MacGregor seeks out the far and away places. She particularly enjoys going walkabout in the remote corners of her own imagination.

Now if only the dang magpies would quit eating the bread crumbs.

She has lived in so many interesting places that it has become impossible to hang up a 'Home Sweet Home' shingle anywhere.

Fortunately, the Rivers have let her write their story, compelling her to spend a considerable amount of time in Caswell Crossing. She has found it best to pack in her own ink, since the judge ran out after recording Gideon's offenses.

I hope you have enjoyed this sample of
Between the Rivers.
To continue your adventure, please purchase
Gideon's complete story at:

smashwords.com for ebooks
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You may contact the author at:

therivers@duck.com

(Put 'Zebadiah Rivers' in the subject line to help
prevent your fan mail from being auto-routed