

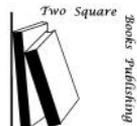
Gideon's Way

An Introduction to the Rivers



Jane MacGregor

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Long May She Wave

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FIRST EDITION

CASWELL CROSSING

Established: Due west of lost

Population:

2 Lawmen — by birth
1 Circuit Judge
1 Convict — by adoption
5 Rowdy Brothers — by adoption
1 Frilly Girl — lost
2 hard cases — unsuspecting
innocent —
lost —

Elevation: Don't look down



**Lost & Found
Miscreants & Lawmen**

“MISS?”

The girl clutched her skinny legs against her chest. The resulting ball of lace would have done a pill bug proud.

“Miss?”

Without actually budging, she unrolled herself enough to peek upwards. All she could see above the wall of neglected crates that sheltered her was a mass of wild auburn hair that frightened her, and blue eyes that did not. Both belonged to a boy much older than her six years. Although she wasn't old enough to perceive such things, life had made him even older on the inside than the outside suggested.

The child swallowed a sob and informed this intruder into her solitude that she was not allowed to talk to strangers.

“That's alright.” The boy pointed a thumb at his own chest. “I'm not a stranger. I'm a Gideon.”

This required some deep thinking. The girl chewed on her lower lip for a half minute or so until curiosity outweighed whatever dire consequences had been set against speaking to un-introduced menfolk.

“What's a Gideon?” she finally asked.

Trouble, usually.

Gideon smiled at the thought. He was right, but that was no way to answer this poor wit-scattered child.

“A Gideon,” he said, building the truth he needed with the

ease of a practiced fabricator, “is someone what helps when folks get in a bind.”

Big brown eyes squinted at Gideon. The whites were red from tears. She sniffled, but it was a snuffle that had already been relegated to the fringes of the matter.

“What’s a bind?” she explored.

“Trouble,” Gideon answered.

The girl looked at her uncommonly disheveled self, complete with a skinned up knee.

“I have that,” she decided.

Gideon chuckled kindly. “I’d say so, miss.”

“How do I not have it?”

Like you’d know.

Gideon tucked the self-teasing thought away and pulled out a handkerchief. It was new. Indeed, having something new was new. Hitherto, he had never owned anything that hadn’t been handed down long after it should have been torn up and thrown out. Then he met the Rivers—the washingest, civilest clan of folks in creation. There was flat out no shaking them.

You oughta know.

Shutup.

But Gideon did know. The town’s circuit judge had slapped him with a three-year sentence—and then he gave the Rivers direct orders to do as much good in Gideon’s life as humanly possible. Gideon had been trying to pull his freight ever since.

An’ yet y’all’re still here.

Gideon told his back thoughts to hush. They weren’t going anywhere; they could wait. The lost little mite peering up at him could not.

"Well, miss, trouble can be right hard stuff to shake,. But a good start'd be a-seein' to that scratch."

She glanced at her knee and back up. "Will it hurt?"

Gideon smiled and shook his head. "Not a'tall, miss."

"I'm not miss."

"What are ya, then?"

"I'm Becky."

Gideon came around the pile of crates to kneel beside the skittish girl. He moved with an easy confidence that proposed they were already fast friends and not, in any way, the sort of strangers someone had so diligently warned her to eschew.

"There," he said, gently tying his handkerchief around her knee. "Give it a try. C'mon, on your feet."

The child unfolded herself and swatted at the dirt marring the tiny flowers on her yellow dress. She frowned. Her boot had lost a button. Her lower lip began to quiver, by all appearances without its owner's consent.

Ain't women critters funny? They can fight off a cougar with nothin' but an old broomstick, but give 'em a broken button at the wrong moment an' you got you a female what's a-holdin' her last straw.

True for you.

"Mebbe you can help me, Becky."

Gideon tugged loose the work-a-day handkerchief from around his neck and fashioned it in a particular way. He moved slowly so she could watch the paisley fabric become a doll, complete with skirt, arms and all. He held it out.

"Reckon y'all might could give her a good home?"

Becky, her sweet round face aglow, took the doll's hands in

her own and jiggled it lightly, as if it were shifting from foot to foot in a miniature dance.

“What’s her name?” Gideon asked.

Becky’s face lit up “I can name her?”

“Sure. She’s yours.”

Look you there. I do so got me a knack with womenfolk.

Yep. If’n they’re three feet high.

“Well,” the girl considered, “what’s your mamma’s name?”

The innocent question drew Gideon up short.

Tell her.

Why?

What? She’s gonna snitch to a judge?

“I never had no ma,” Gideon answered truthfully.

“No mamma?”

Clearly this was a matter for sympathy and outright awe.

“Nary a one,” said Gideon, talking purely for the comfort it would give the child.

The knee of his trousers was torn, and she reached out to touch the frayed edge.

“You really don’t have a momma,” she decided.

“That’s right,” he agreed.

Gideon took her small hand in his bigger, calloused one and led her out from behind the discarded crates and back towards Caswell Crossing’s main street.

“What do you have?” Becky wanted to know.

“A court a-pointed guard.”

“What’s that?”

“Someone what makes hisself a right nuisance an’ gets in the way a lot.”

"Oh," said Becky wisely, "you mean a brother. I have one of them. He's just a baby, and he's always in my stuff."

"Mine's older, but he's still in my . . . ever'thing really."

"Do you like him?"

This was asked in such a way that Gideon felt sure the answer would be weighed and measured like gold on a scale. Nothing but solid honesty would stand up to the test.

"I s'pose I might could re-frain from shadin' 'im," Gideon equivocated. When Becky looked up blankly he shrugged, and summed it up to, "Mostly."

Becky nodded. "Me too."

Gideon stopped at the end of the alley. The street beyond held only the everyday comings and goings of a small town getting on with a pleasant day summer's day. Across the wide dirt street, unseen but clearly heard, the blacksmith banged rhythmically at a project on the anvil. Farther down, a herd of young boys practically stampeded themselves out of the mercantile, prized candy sacks in hand.

"Why'd ya run away?" Gideon asked, as a wagon chinked and clopped its way past.

"Those men scared me."

"Who'd that be?"

Becky pointed to the far end of town. "The ones out there."

"What'd they look like?"

"One has yellow hair, like mine, and boo-boo right here," Becky touched the side of her chin. "The other talks funny and has a big, ugly mustache. They weren't nice."

"Oh?" Gideon prompted.

"They wanted Papa's money."

Gideon quit scanning the street. Becky was clutching the doll to her chest. He gave her hand a squeeze.

“Wanna know a secret, Becky?”

Big eyes said this would be acceptable.

“If’n ya gotta run, only go far ‘nough to catch your breath.”

“Then what?”

“Fight back,” said Gideon.

He considered on the delicate child beside him. Gossamer hair frazzled out of her petite braids and a silky ribbon had succumbed to the tribulations of the day.

“Or, in your case,” he amended, retying the bow, “find someone big to stand up for ya.”

FOR SOME REASON, no one ever looked here. Gandy never felt inclined to point out this lapse. The stall in which he stood was clean and freshly laid with straw in anticipation of its next guest. The hostler probably hadn’t figured this would be the much esteemed sheriff of Caswell Crossing. The very thought tickled Gandy’s funny bone no end. Still, it wasn’t wise to chuckle and hide at the same time.

A sound, slightly out of place amongst the shuffling and munching of the stabled horses, reached Gandy’s listening ears. He pressed against the barn wall and waited.

A shape ducked between the stall rails and, before it could straighten up, Gandy grabbed a double handful of shirt and pinned his visitor against the wall. Where Gideon Fletcher was concerned, it was best to be mighty careful how you said hello. Black eye thus avoided, Gandy clamped a hand over Gideon’s mouth. Right after hitting, the boy’s favorite solution

to any problem was to cuss it blue until it flat gave up.

“Shhh,” the sheriff cautioned, his voice barely a breath.

Gideon nodded and whispered, “Barker?”

For a remote place like Caswell Crossing to even have a town council in this fine year of 18-ot was remarkable. But have one they did, and Barker served as its very conscientious chairman. The three-piece suit had a pure addiction to ledgers and believed these cornerstones of bookkeeping efficiency were absolutely vital to the proper running of civilization. Sheriff Gandy believed the only proper use for ledgers was as a doorstop. Therein lay the root of their tug-of-war. It was also the reason for the sheriff's current strategical retreat.

Gandy admitted his guilt without shame, and said, “You?”

“Barker don't give two flies 'bout me,” Gideon evaded.

“Come on,” Gandy whispered, “you aren't here for nothing. What did you do this time?”

Gideon's eyes flickered to the hands still holding him. His ears detected the sound of a lawman prepared to go on asking questions until he got all the answers he wanted.

Gideon shrugged, unashamedly denying all guilt.

“Just tell me,” said Gandy, “will I hear from Mrs. Driscoll about it?”

Mrs. Driscoll was the biggest, most self-propelled gossip for fifty miles around. Gideon had become her favorite topic. No matter what he did, or didn't do that she went ahead and thought he had done, that woman let the world know her opinion.

“Prob'ly,” Gideon replied. “She tells ever'body ever'thing.”

Gandy grinned. That was true, and he said so. Then he slid

down to the clean straw and tugged on Gideon's trouser leg. Somewhat to his surprise, the boy accepted the invitation. Miscreant and lawman sat, side by side, wrapped in the half light of the barn and mutual truancy. Hooves shuffled lazily. Out in the corral a horse nickered softly. Gideon plumbed the depths of a pocket and came up with a chunk of elk jerky.

Share.

Why? He's a lawman.

'Member what Aspen said.

As the eldest Rivers brother, Aspen had taken it upon himself to turn Gideon into a gentleman. The jury was still out on this and calling for extra coffee. According to Aspen, a good citizen played nicely with the local representatives of the law. Mostly to shut himself up, Gideon tore the jerky in two and thrust it at the sheriff.

After some contemplative chewing, the sheriff said, "Have you ever done anything I wouldn't have to arrest you for?"

Stiff silence answered him.

"Gideon, we're hiding in a stall because I'm too stubborn to give in and you're. . . you're you. What do you have to lose?"

Gideon cogitated on the question, both halves of his nature pitching in their equal, but opposite, opinions.

There were that one job—

That were bootleg tequila.

Hmm. How about when—

Them cards were marked.

We were only a-cheatin' a cheat.

You itchin' to tell that to no lawman?

Nope.

Me neither.

How 'bout that place down Texas way?

That ain't no business-a his.

No, but it were legal.

"Laundry," said Gideon, giving in to himself.

Gandy blinked. "Pardon?"

"Clothes, soap. An' you can quit your sniggerin'."

Gandy raised his hands in playful surrender, but sniggered anyway. Gideon existed in a permanent state of threadbare, dirt smeared or bloodstained. The idea of him in a laundry. . .

"How 'bout you, Sheriff? You always been arrestin' folks?"

"Me? I was born a lawman," Gandy answered readily, and then added with an imp in his tone, "I was arrested once."

"What?" Gideon nearly choked on this news. "By who?"

"Wilson."

"Your deputy?! Why?"

"You'll have to ask him. He loves to tell the story."

Gideon had a sudden image of himself nestled 'round a fire, sipping coffee and swapping tales with the law.

That day'll come never.

Coffee was foul, but lawmen were worse. Coffee, at least, could be easily tossed out, but shoving lawmen around only doubled up a fellow's trouble.

"Where's Aspen?" Gandy wondered. "Did—"

That was as far as the sheriff got before the oft incarcerated young man sharing his refuge clamped a hand over his mouth. The lawman started to protest, but then he too heard the footsteps. They were not the least surreptitious, but confident as if they owned the space around them.

Deputy Wilson stopped in front of the unlikely pair hunkered in the stall.

“The council has given up hunting your hide.” Wilson informed his boss. Then he tipped his chin at Gideon, and said, “Shall I arrest him?”

“I ain’t done nothin’,” Gideon objected.

“Has he?” Gandy asked. “Today, I mean?”

“There’s a couple of hard cases with a good set of bruises. Looks to me like a match set to his.”

“Those gentlemen we arrested last week for Being Naughtily Drunk In Public?” Gandy clarified.

“Yes, sir.”

“Are they complaining?”

“I got the impression they wouldn’t be sticking around that long. I did get a visit from a young woman though. She had a pretty little girl with her.” Wilson propped a foot on the bottom rail of the stall and pushed a hand through the hair curling slightly on the back of his neck. “Funny thing is, she wanted to thank your deputy for finding the child and looking after her.”

Wilson pointedly did not look at Gideon as he said this, but Gandy certainly did.

“She also said,” Wilson continued mischievously, “that the dolly your deputy made was the sweetest gesture of kindness she has seen since venturing into this forsaken wilderness.”

“Did she now?” Gandy remarked.

Gideon stared at his boots, avoiding their chaffing, but the effort was wasted. His face had flushed a deep red.

The smirk tugging at Wilson’s lips finally escaped. It

wasn't easy to make Gideon Fletcher blush.

"She must have meant this for you," said the deputy.

Gideon caught the crisp, new handkerchief Wilson tossed him and crammed it out of sight under his shirt.

Gideon had found that wrangling an ounce of justice out of life's parsimonious grasp was up to him. When you got right down to it, people had a habit of going out of their way to act like sheep. Poor, mud-dumb sheep. They milled about until someone herded them along, then baa-ed their complaints about how the grass wasn't as green. Heaven forbid they break from the flock and hoof it over to a hill of their very own choosing. After all, what would the neighbors think?

"So, do we arrest him?" Wilson asked, taking one more opportunity to tease Gideon.

"Leave him," Gandy declared. "There's always tomorrow."

"Oh, he won't last that long."

"Why not?"

"His brothers are coming."

"Oh, dear," Gandy said.

Gideon said nothing. He didn't figure to have that kind of spare time on his hands. He leapt, making a desperate bid for freedom.

Gandy reached out, and Wilson jumped the stall rail. With an efficiency derived from years of working together, the two lawmen latched onto their catch and held fast.

"A body can only stand so much propriety," Gideon complained, struggling to get loose.

"That's a new word in your vocabulary," Gandy remarked.

Wilson tightened his grip. "Sure beats the other words he

knows, doesn't it?"

"Now what has he been saying?"

The threesome turned to see Aspen Rivers. The most important thing about him, at the moment, was that he was flanked by four more young men.

"What did I tell you?" Wilson grinned. "All your brothers have come to escort you home."

"They ain't my brothers," Gideon argued

The lawmen handed Gideon over to his court-appointed chaperones. The rowdy clan immediately laid into him with pokes and prods and chafing that made it painfully clear they, too, had heard about the ribbons and lace little girl. Fort, who was very nearly as big as his name implied, looped an arm around Gideon's neck just to make sure that neither he, nor Gideon, missed out on any of the fun.

"The sheriff's arrestin' me!" Gideon pleaded, from somewhere in the mass.

"No need. Your brothers will take good care of you," Gandy replied, with a wink at his deputy as they left the barn.

"They ain't my brothers!"

"You be sure and tell that to the judge next time you see him," Wilson called back.



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*Trust me, around Gideon,
ducking is a mighty good idea.*

R