

CREEDE OF OLD MONTANA

by Stephen Bly

CHAPTER ONE

No one knew how Avery John Creede got the scar on his face. No one except Avery and the one who did it. He never talked about it. Most who knew him figured the other person dead. Not the type of scar that makes you wince and turn your head, and never covered by a beard, it hung high on his cheek bone like a badge of honor. But a person had to stand up to Creede and look him in the eye to see the scar. For the past six weeks on the trail north from Shiprock, no one had been that close.

July hot and August dry, the September heat that reflected off the brick wall left Avery with a stale feel, like a sweat drenched cotton shirt, long dried. He studied the wide river from the tiny, two-step balcony of his second-story room at the Grand Hotel. Although he could not see it now, he knew he was positioned under the arched 1881 stone façade high at the building's peak. Like a pontiff overlooking an empty plaza, he surveyed the near deserted street below.

A lady with a famine-thin waist and a bleached yellow dress spun a parasol over her shoulder as she sauntered past the cottonwoods

toward the riverbank. Like bait skimming across a still mountain lake, Avery figured she trolled for some man to set the hook.

His heavy boot heels nailed the polished oak flooring as he re-entered the cramped room past the brass bed posts to a white porcelain basin on a stand and a worn wooden side chair. He splashed tepid water on his shaved face, then glanced up at the mirror. The leather-tough forced smile and near empty brown eyes looked more like a Venetian mask than a retired cavalry veteran way past forty.

His black, beaver-felt cowboy hat, still damp with sweat from the long ride, wafted the aroma of a wet goat. He shoved it down to his ears. With oft repeated precision, he strapped on his holster. He yanked out the Colt revolver, reset the cylinder on the empty chamber and shoved it back down.

As if giving a lecture on gentlemanly attire, he rolled the sleeves on his dusty white shirt down, one direful fold at a time, then buttoned them. He never took his gaze off the dark brown eyes that stared back at him from the mirror. Shirt now fastened at the neck, he tugged the black silk tie around his collar. Rough calloused fingers completed the four-in-hand knot that he memorized as a child.

Oppressive Montana air crowded the room, like a mountain cabin after six weeks of snow in January. Avery closed the door behind him as he entered the hall, but didn't bother locking it. He wasn't sure if that was out of foolishness or apathy. Yet, years of conflict led him down the empty stairs at a cautious pace, one hand on the slick oak rail, the other on the hard walnut grip of his .44 revolver.

Wednesday died about 1 p.m. in Fort Benton, Montana Territory.

Resurrection wasn't expected for another two hours. The clock above the lifeless stove in the lobby ticked out of habit, but the pendulum winced as if the effort wasn't worth its full effort.

Propped open with river rocks the size of cannon balls, the double front doors of the hotel invited a breeze that hadn't arrived yet. A wide nosed man with an uneven black beard studied the solitaire spread on the clerk's counter. He waved a seven of clubs at Avery.

"You sure you ain't never been to Purgatory?"

"I think I'd remember if I had." Avery didn't look at the man as he ambled toward the door.

"That's in Colorado, you know."

"Yeah, so I've heard." Avery parked in the doorway and surveyed the wide street.

"Maybe it was Butte . . . you ever been to Butte?"

"Many times."

"I bet it was Butte. You shot that crooked Faro dealer at the Copper Slipper, right?"

"Nope."

"He deserved killin', if you ask me."

The late afternoon sun beacons off the big window of the Chouteau County Bank as he stepped out into the empty street. The sound of the bank's heavy door slam precipitated a chorus of barking dogs.

Avery hesitated as if waiting for phantom traffic. He thought he saw shadows flicker in the narrow alley next to the bank.

"Where you goin'?" the man shouted from the hotel.

"Sailing," Avery grumbled.

Like a bit player in a melodrama, the man appeared in the doorway. "Sailin'? There ain't enough water in the old Missouri this time of the year for a big canoe, much less a . . ."

Avery's glare chopped the tail off the man's sentence.

"Eh . . . I was jist askin' cause you said three men would show up lookin' for you and I wanted to know where to tell them to look."

"Tell 'em to wait here."

"But if you don't come back, where shall I tell them you went?"

"Purgatory."

Avery Creede turned south toward the river. The woman in the yellow dress perched on a short wooden bench. She spun the parasol at a slow turn, like an easy target in a shooting gallery. Avery glanced over his shoulder at the buildings behind him. The hotel door was open, as was the door at the Judith Basin Mercantile and the Rotten Gambler Saloon. Only the bank door remained closed, but now, curtains covered the afternoon's glaring light.

He tugged out his pocket watch by the gold chain and tapped on the glass as if to speed it up. Even squinting his creased eyes, he couldn't read the bank hours on the sign by the door, but noticed the window curtains sway from movement inside.

He turned back to the lady who began to saunter east. At the cottonwoods, he was cut off by the chirping protest of a female killdeer. The black stripe hung like a necklace above her white tummy, but it was the olive-brown wing that demanded his attention. Flailed out as if broken, she drummed the dirt like an Arapahoe war chant.

He allowed a smile to crease his tough tanned face as he searched the weeds for the cherished nest.

“That’s a fine acting job, Mamma. But what are you doing with a nest this time of the year?”

Avery plopped down on the newly vacated bench. He massaged his chapped lips as he gazed at the slow moving, muddy water of the Missouri River. His thoughts drifted from three men he hoped to see . . . to one woman he figured he never would. At his right, the killdeer continued her protest.

“Oh, my.” the lady in yellow called out from the trail to the east. “Oh, dear,” she repeated.

Avery sprang to his feet, but paused at the tone. He figured it was not a “help, there’s a snake” urgency, but more like “Henry, take the garbage out and bury it right now.”

Another, “Oh, my” and a loud squawk from the killdeer divided his attention.

He stared at the bird. “Diversion? Both of you are diversions.” He spun back to town and stomped toward the bank.

“Could someone help me, please?” the lady shouted.

His right hand on his holstered revolver, he studied the front of the bank. In the alley shade between it and the mercantile, four long legged, solid colored Montana horses stood saddled and waiting. The bank door banged open and a short man with a tattered campaign hat ran out, worn leather saddlebags draped over his arm. A Winchester 1873 saddle ring carbine waved in front of him. Avery drew his gun and cocked the hammer with one motion. “Throw it down,” he yelled.

“Like Hades, I will!” Jogging toward the alley, the man tried to shoulder the carbine one-handed. Before he had it any higher than the hitching post, 200 grains of lead from Avery’s smoking revolver slammed into the man’s thigh and crumpled the screaming bandit to the dirt. Saddlebags and carbine crashed beside him.

The shot from the second man out the building came so close to Avery’s hat that it sounded like a bumble bee on the chase. His return fire caught the robber in the right shoulder and spun him around. He tumbled face down in the bank doorway.

A bloodied teller stepped over the man and sprinted into the street. “The third one ran out the back door. He’s gettin’ away!” Avery trotted to the narrow alley. His loud shout and a shot fired into the dirt in front of them, caused all four horses to panic. They backed and stumbled their way into the alley. When the dust cleared, a third bandit lay battered in the dirt. He clutched a dangling arm.

Now Wednesday in Fort Benton resurrected. Three dozen people swarmed into the street. The first to greet him was the bank teller. “Mister, I don’t know who you are, but thanks. They cleaned out my till.” He wiped blood from his forehead. “I tried to stop them, but they was mighty convincin’.”

“Get yourself to a doctor.” Avery handed the man his bandana.

The teller glanced back at the wounded men. “I think them three need the doc more than me.”

A thin man with a silver badge on his black vest scooted through the crowd. “What happened?”

“You the sheriff?” Avery asked.

“Deputy.”

“They tried to rob the bank.”

“They did rob the bank,” the teller reported. “What they couldn’t do is get by this man. He shot two of them and run three horses over the third.”

“Four horses,” Avery corrected.

The teller’s eyes narrowed. “Were there four of them?”

Avery pointed back toward the river. “Three bank robbers and a woman with a yellow parasol. She was the lookout.”

The deputy waved for others to assist him with the injured men. “I guess we’ll haul them to jail and have the doc patch them up there.” “You should have seen him,” the teller told the crowd. “He stood up to them without a flinch at their bullets and shot them down. I’ve never seen anythin’ like it.”

Avery drew the toe of his boot across the dirt. “I happened to be the first one they saw when they came out of the bank.”

The teller stared at the deputy. “No other man in this town would have done it.”

The deputy threw back his shoulders. “I’ll need you to explain this to the sheriff when he gets back from Judith Basin. Where you stayin’?”

Avery pointed at the two story brick building. “At the hotel.”

“How long you goin’ to be in town?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“On Dawson, Pete and Tight.”

“Who?”

“I’m waitin’ for some friends to show up.”

Most of the crowd followed the deputy toward the injured outlaws.

The teller winced as he rubbed the bloodied lump on his forehead. "Mister, I'm Harvey Grass. You didn't tell me your name."

"Creede."

"Just like the town in Colorado?"

"Yeah, only we're nothin' alike."

"Eh, yeah . . . well, Mr. Creede, after I get things settled down and close the bank, I'd like to buy you a drink."

"Make mine coffee."

"You a Temperance Man?" the teller pressed.

"Nope. It's just that I get quiet and introverted when I drink. I'm told that I'm not my talkative, friendly self."

The hotel clerk stood out on the front porch of the hotel when he returned. He picked at his beard as if expecting to find something.

"Do you have any idea who you just went up against?"

"No."

"That was part of the Rinkman gang."

"Never heard of them."

"They hide out down on the Missouri Breaks in eastern Montana. They robbed the Northern Pacific at Gold Creek and the bank at Granite on the same day. I heard someone died in that one."

"Well, they didn't rob the bank at Fort Benton, Montana, today." Avery studied the Missouri River from the hotel porch.

"Are you a Federal Marshal?"

"No." He spotted the Killdeer, but not the woman in yellow.

The clerk loosened his tie and unbuttoned his white shirt collar.

“But you have been a lawman, right?”

“Nope.”

“Then why did you do it? It’s not even your money in the bank. You told me you hadn’t been to town in five years and didn’t know anyone. So, why risk your life going up against the likes of them?”

“I was mad.”

“At whom?”

“The lady dressed in yellow thought she could divert me with a ‘help, help.’”

“That made you mad?”

“Yeah, women have a way of doin’ that to me.”