

The Twin Palms Assignment

(Extract from the Diaries of Mel Easton)

Day One

I knew this assignment was going to be a dog, but as SWR's top negotiator it comes with the territory. The journey to Whitefall was long, but it at least afforded me the opportunity to fully digest my briefing material and conduct a little research on the backwater I'd be spending the next few days in.

Whitefall was one of those planets that just sprang up. One moment there is nothing but the odd tumbleweed rolling across a completely virgin and barren landscape. The next, whole towns, primitive and rough and ready in the extreme, but full blown towns nonetheless, mushroomed out of nowhere. And grew and grew. And they grow still, as is in the nature of things whether created by nature or made by the hand of man.

A woman who goes by the name of Patience is said to own most of the planet and pretty much runs things. Her back story doesn't say much for her ethics and style of doing business and it would probably be best if I didn't run into her.

Day Two

I arrived at Ashville early and got an inkling of what lay in store for me in the days ahead. Ashville itself purports to be a town but is in reality a mere staging post and of marginal significance. It suffered an attack by reavers recently and consequently the meagre number of inhabitants are, understandably, jumpy and security conscious. I heard some pretty hair-raising stories, the veracity of which I found highly doubtful.

Passage to the township of Twin Palms, my destination, was arranged. For reasons which escaped me at the time but which became abundantly clear later on, I would be travelling by Stagecoach. Yes, as in horses pulling a conveyance. I had never done this before.

I was the only passenger. Twin Palms was not exactly a hotspot for tourists and business folk, then. Before I was allowed to board the transportation, I had to submit to an inspection by the law enforcement people. They confiscated from me my laptop and a few other electronic trinkets, such as my personal phone. They would be perfectly safe, I was told, and I could have them back upon my return to Ashville.

My vehement protests went unheeded. Twin Palms did not welcome folk who carried modern technology, I was told. If I wanted to turn back and go back the way I came, I could have my possessions back without ado. If I wished to proceed onto Twin Palms, it would be without said possessions.

Of course, as I had urgent business in Twin Palms, turning back was unthinkable. I would have to press on, without many of the tools I needed to actually do my job. I did however, make a note of the names of the law enforcement people who "handled" me (without much consideration for my dignity and, actually, quite roughly, I should say) and assured them that a strongly worded letter of complaint would, upon my return to my office, be dispatched to their superior.

They didn't seem very impressed or unnerved by my assurance. In fact, they seemed frustratingly indifferent!

Finally, sans many of my possessions, I was permitted to board the conveyance. My dismay grew and grew as the poorly sprung and upholstered vehicle passed through miles and miles of barren

desert, populated only by the occasional spiky cactus plant. I rapidly lost count of the number of times the carriage passed over bumps and holes on the rudimentary road system in this part of the world. By the time the carriage lurched to a halt (almost propelling me into the wall on the other side of the carriage), I had some idea what it must be like to be the ingredients of a cocktail shaker.

But my experience hardened my conviction that this part of the world sorely needed a railroad and increased my resolve to ensure that it got one.

Grateful beyond measure to be free at last of the rickety conveyance, I clambered out feeling queasy and unsteady on my feet and stumbled into what lay beyond.

Once I had regained my senses, having been somewhat dazed, what I saw truly astounded and horrified me.

Years ago, when I had been but a boy, I had had a Great Aunt. In fact, I had several Great Aunts. Never was a boy so well provided for when it came to the provision of Great Aunts. But I digress. This particular Great Aunt gave me on the occasion of my tenth birthday a old book written by a man of Old Earth called Mark Twain and it was entitled "A Connecticut Yankee at the Court of King Arthur".

I don't think that particular Great Aunt cared for me that much.

Anyway, as I recall, this Yankee from the nineteenth century (as it would have been on Old Earth) somehow ended up being cast backwards in time into the days of King Arthur, with knights and castles and all of that kind of paraphernalia. Although the time traveller adapted to his new world and circumstances, I had always wondered what he must have felt like when he had first appeared in that utterly alien time.

Well, after stepping from that carriage, I can say with certainty that I knew exactly how the Yankee must have felt when he beheld the "new" world he would have to live in and the people with whom he would henceforth have to interact.

Stepping into Twin Palms was, quite literally, just like stepping back into what would have been known as the "Wild West" era on Old Earth. The few buildings that formed the settlement were made of wood. Yes, wood! Didn't these folk realise the extreme peril they were in should even a small fire break out? This was a conflagration just waiting to happen! Of course, this sort of thing would never have been allowed in any modern city!

The buildings and the signage were all crude in the extreme. There was no sophistication, no regard for aesthetics at all!

There was also, I realised for the first time, no paved roads and that the only "transport" was via horses or horse drawn vehicles. Furthermore, the "transport", although being more eco-friendly than modern vehicles, was not lacking in emissions. There were, to my disgust, a number of steaming piles of horse dung.

Now, I had heard a lot of horse manure in my time, but to actually see it....and smell it....was a real eye-opener. I gradually got used to the stench, but had to cover my nose with my handkerchief for the first couple of hours.

I quickly discovered that there was not very much around in Twin Palms. The main "attraction" (if it can be so called) was a saloon bar called the Silver Dollar. This was where most of the town's inhabitants sat around drinking, talking and gambling their lives away. At least the alcohol there was drinkable.

Other than that, there was the Sheriff's office, which had the only means of modern communication in this godforsaken hole. I was able to use it to obtain copies of the paperwork relating to the proposed railroad. There were also a General Store and a Bank (both closed). And livery stables for transport. And that was all of the facilities available, the rest of the buildings being cheap boarding houses or housing for those who had to live here on a permanent basis.

No medical facilities, no airport, no communications centre, no libraries. Not even chamber of commerce! Dear God, how did the people of Twin Palms transact business in this place?

I found the most upmarket boarding house available (which wasn't saying much) and tried to hire a room for a few days, only to find that the owner didn't take credits. He needed old style notes. It took me a little time to exchange some of my credits for these bits of paper and coins, but it was done and I at least had a room of my own to freshen up and gather my thoughts.

The boarding house and the room I had been allocated were of dire quality. I was used to staying in decent hotels that at least had two stars to their name but this place wouldn't have merited even a single star in a modern city. In fact, in a modern city, such a crudely constructed and maintained building would have been swiftly condemned and torn down.

After unpacking my modest collection of personal effects, I sat down and reviewed my brief and the maps of the locality. SWR needed to put in a long section of track between Whitefall City and Twin Palms. I had already secured most of the land that the track would run along, but the last, and most crucial section of track that would unite the two settlements, would be the most difficult to obtain.

In the first place, the land in question was already owned by a gentleman called Mr Zeke Calhoun. From what little information there was available on the Cortex about Mr Calhoun, it seemed that he had once been a prospector and a successful one. He was now arguably the wealthiest individual in Twin Palms. At least he was a businessman of some repute, so that boded well. Here was a man I could do business with.

In the second place, the land, known as Fat Bull Range, was home to a reservation of Indians. They probably wouldn't be very happy to have a railroad put through their settlement. In fact, they would be hopping mad. Managing the Indians and their hostility to the railroad would be the more tricky part of my assignment. But, I was an experienced negotiator, and dealing with hostile parties, whilst unpleasant and difficult, was well within my capabilities.

After a couple of hours of studying the material, I realised that it was already evening and outside normal business hours, so I could do nothing more until the morrow. I decided to sample the "delights" that Twin Palms had to offer, such as they were.....

I reluctantly left the sanctuary of my room and trudged downstairs, out of the hotel, and into the dimly lit street.

As Twin Palms did not feature the many amenities of modern cities, the default option was the Silver Dollar. I ordered myself a drink and sat in a quiet corner of the saloon. The Silver Dollar, I noted, was busy. People came and went all the time, there were card games going on and the staff did not get much chance to be idle.

On my way to the bar for a second drink, I was invited to join something called a "Blackjack tournament". I was no gambling man and so I politely declined. On the way back, I saw the Town Sheriff and his Deputy enter the saloon. I guess that two men were all a town of this size warranted in terms of law enforcement.

The Sheriff and Deputy barely noticed me, for they were preoccupied with a disturbance at the bar area. One customer, the worse for wear after a long drinking session by the look of him, was making a nuisance of himself. He was gently and expertly removed by the law officers.

I would have liked to have made the acquaintance of the Sheriff, but did not get the chance on this occasion. Besides, I've learned through hard experience that just because a man upholds the law, he does not necessarily follow it himself.

Halfway through my second drink, a grubby old timer insisted on joining me. Like most of the customers, he had had a little too much to drink, and his speech was slurred. Much to my irritation, he insisted on talking to me. He harked back to the "good old days" some 20 years ago when he and the original settlers decided to leave Whitefall City, seeking a simpler life, and to build their own town.

20 years ago, there was no Twin Palms, just a patch of desert and a forest of cactus plants. But to the settlers, it was the perfect spot and, in almost no time at all, they had put up most of the buildings that were still here to this day. For reasons that were beyond me, the founding fathers decided to invoke an (almost) complete interdict on any technology more modern than would have existed on Old Earth back in the late nineteenth century. The one concession being a comms system for contact with the world beyond Twin Palms. The very early days were harmonious enough, but after a while frictions began to manifest themselves.

Most of the settlers were very happy with their new pure "cowboy" existence, unfettered by the benefits and shortcomings of technology. But a smaller number were still discontented. Their new way of life didn't go far enough. They wanted an even simpler life, closer to nature. They wanted to hunt, skin and cook their own food. In short, they wanted to become the equivalent of native Indians of the same era.

Eventually, the frictions became exacerbated, and ultimately reached a flashpoint. A solution was hammered out: the would-be Indians would leave Twin Palms and establish their own settlement. Fat Bull Range, which lay nearby, fitted the bill perfectly. The Indians quickly set up their own reservation and went about their new way of life.

As an unexpected bonus, the Indians found an existing burial mound. Quite how it had got there was a mystery to all. But the Indians nevertheless attached great spiritual significance to the site and became very protective towards it.

Over time, relations between Twin Palms and the Reservation became friendlier than before the schism. Indeed, each considered the other the perfect complement as a representation of the Old West. Thankfully, the old timer shuffled off towards the gaming tables, leaving me in peace.

As I finished my second drink and returned to the bar for a refill, it occurred to me that the staff would know Mr Calhoun and perhaps be able to give me directions to his residence so that I could arrange an appointment on the morrow. In fact, the barkeep I spoke to could do better than that. He pointed out Mr Calhoun, who was sat at one of the gaming tables. I tipped the barkeep a dime and earned from him a broad smile.

Mr Calhoun looked as I had expected. A middle-aged gentleman, well-dressed and with an air of prosperity about him. He had had a little to drink, but was perfectly coherent and aware of his surroundings. I was able to introduce myself without undue difficulty and presented my card, and in due course Mr Calhoun consented to meet with me in this very place at midday tomorrow.

This was an excellent start to a less than promising day.

Day Three

I had not slept well. This was due to the fact that in spite of being a high class boarding house, my mattress was infested with bugs!

After a hearty breakfast, which I had to admit was quite good, I hired the services of a local hick to take me out in his horse and trap to the environs of the Fat Bull Range so that I could get an idea of the place.

Although I was by no means a surveyor or railroad engineer, I could see that Fat Bull Range was prime land for railroad building. With one exception, the land was free of rocks, mountains and fissures that might cause difficulties for the construction of the railroad.

The exception, and it was a big one, was of course the Indian Reservation that dominated the landscape and the burial mound that the old timer had told me about last night. It seemed a shame to put a railroad through this quaint settlement, but nothing could be allowed to stand in the way of progress.

I made sure I made it back in plenty of time to the Silver Dollar for my meeting with Zeke Calhoun. Over a large lunch, I presented SWR's case. Mr Calhoun was most amenable to my persuasion, but he had a concern.

It was the Indian Reservation. He had an affinity with it and he did not want anything to happen to change things there. To be sure, he agreed that the railroad should be built, but it must bypass the Reservation. I was dismayed by this condition, mentally calculating that it would cost SWR a considerable sum of money to alter the course of the railroad.

After further, lengthy negotiations, I agreed that SWR would bypass the Reservation, and in compensation for the higher costs, Mr Calhoun would agree to accept a lower figure for the sale of the land than he had originally wanted. The final figure agreed upon was \$18,000. We shook hands on the deal as gentlemen.

I was elated that the deal had gone so well and had been concluded so quickly. And cheaply. My employers would be very pleased with this outcome!

As I left the Saloon, feeling like I was walking on air, my eye caught sight of an all too familiar profile which instantly soured my good spirits. My rival from MWR, Clem Parham was in town.

My blood literally boiled in my veins with the memories of the many past dealings I had had with this man. Whereas I am an ethical, honest and professional businessman, Parham is the complete opposite. That man would sell his own grandma if it would give him an advantage in life. He is the most devious and slippery snake that I have ever had the misfortune to meet! Good, honest deals that I have made have been scotched due to the trickery and chicanery employed by Parham. That man was my nemesis, the complete antithesis of myself.

Parham had his back to me. He hadn't seen me. I had no doubt that he was here for the exactly the same reason that I was. I permitted myself a smug smile of satisfaction. If he was here to buy Fat Bull Range, then he was too late, the land was already as good as SWR's.

I strode confidently away in the opposite direction to Parham, having no wish to have any contact with the man, pleased that, on this occasion at least, this was a contest that I had already as good as won!

Days Four through Seven

I spent these days cooling my heels at the Silver Dollar whilst awaiting word from Mr Calhoun that he was ready to sign the contract that would grant the land on Fat Bull Range to SWR. There was not much to do here except drink, talk and gamble. During business hours, I make it a point to drink little, I do not gamble, and as I do not know anyone here, opportunities for conversation were limited, at best.

I watched the staff of the saloon putting up bunting for the forthcoming 20th Anniversary of the founding of Twin Palms. I hoped to be gone - with a signed contract - well before the celebrations got underway.

Towards the end of day seven, I went for a long walk around the outskirts of the town, spent too long in the sun and felt exhausted by the time I returned to the saloon. I ordered and drank a soda water to quench my thirst.

I noticed Mr Calhoun at the gaming tables again. There was, I could see, a big game going on. There were large amounts of notes and coins changing hands with every hand it seemed. Mr Calhoun's mind was clearly on the proceedings in front of him and not on our deal and so I decided I would leave it until tomorrow before discussing the matter with him again. This proved to be a mistake.

Day Eight

I woke early, determined to persuade Mr Calhoun to sign the contract right away so that I could depart from this place on the next stagecoach, retrieve my tech gear, and return to civilisation.

I called on him at his residence and was told that he was not home, so I went to the Silver Dollar to see if he was there, or at least, if anyone there knew his current whereabouts.

Mr Calhoun was not in his usual place, or indeed, anywhere else in the saloon. But everybody at the saloon was talking about him, or rather, what he had done. What they were saying dismayed and appalled me!

Some time after I had left the saloon, according to witnesses, the card game that had been going on went badly for Mr Calhoun, and he began losing heavily to a professional card sharp called Doc Farraday. He was also, by all accounts, drinking heavily, which would have clouded his judgement. The game went on into the early hours of the following morning.

Calhoun and Farraday were the only players left at the end. Farraday had won a lot of money from Mr Calhoun and Mr Calhoun was determined to win it back. When he finally ran out of money, he wagered one of his land holdings, namely the Fat Bull Range. Mr Calhoun lost the hand - and Fat Bull Range. Just after that point, the Saloon Manager closed the saloon and put an end to the game.

The talk was all over town by now - Twin Palms' wealthiest resident loses Indian Reservation in poker game!

I was stunned that Mr Calhoun could have been so irresponsible as to have made the wager in the first place. Not just the Indians were affected but the whole future of Twin Palms, which was now in the hands of an avaricious gambler! I shook my head in disbelief and despair as the implications of what had just occurred raced through my brain.

If Farraday was now the legal owner of Fat Bull Range, he would probably want to sell it immediately. He was no businessman. He was in for the quick profit. But what would he ask for it? And what would be his attitude to the Reservation?

I also realised, with a sinking heart that, with this most unwelcome development, the deal that had been virtually assured but a matter of hours ago, was now wide, wide open again. If Parham and MWR could persuade Farraday to sell to them, they would get one over on me. Again! The thought was too hideous to contemplate.

But, all was not lost. Rumours were afoot that the "transaction" was not legal and there were also allegations of cheating. Mr Calhoun may still be the legal owner of Fat Bull Range after all, in which case I could rest easy. The local Judge, Paulson, would be making a ruling on the matter this evening.

I can only hope that the ruling goes in favour of Mr Calhoun. It would make my life a lot easier. But my experience of legal proceedings is that anything can happen, so it is always wise to hope for the best but to expect the worst.

I need to have a contingency plan in case the ruling goes in favour of Doc Farraday, so I will need to contact my employers and ask them for the maximum sum (in local currency) that they would be willing to pay for Fat Bull Range. Once armed with this information, I will be able to open negotiations with Doc Farraday in the event that he is confirmed as the owner of the land.

Unfortunately, the comms system in the Sheriff's office broke down a week ago. A new unit is said to be arriving this evening via the Stagecoach, but this is by no means a certainty. I need to contact my employers as a matter of urgency.

I've seen that slippery snake, Parham, lurking around, like a vulture circling fresh meat. This sort of confused situation is perfect for his way of operating and I dread to think what he has been up to!

I repaired to the Silver Dollar for a much needed drink. The 20th anniversary celebrations were getting underway. I had barely seated myself before one of the barkeeps stood on top of the bar and bellowed in a loud voice for the attention of all present.

Impressively, the loud noise that had prevailed before was reduced to a blissful silence before the barkeep spoke again, announcing the news that Zeke Calhoun had been found. Bound, gagged and, tragically, dead.

There were gasps of shock from those present at this revelation.

The Sheriff, who was also present, declared that the circumstances of Mr Calhoun's death strongly suggested foul play. Murder, in fact. He and his somewhat slack-witted deputy would conduct a full investigation. In the meantime, no-one was allowed to leave town.

I digested this news grimly and took the following actions. I attempted to speak with Zeke Calhoun's daughter, Lucy, but she was understandably upset and being comforted by friends. Doc Farraday, the possible owner of Fat Bull was around and so I spoke with him

Farraday was a short man with dark hair and dressed exactly as one would expect a card sharp to dress. The man was almost certainly a charlatan and a cheat, maybe even a murderer (who else, after all, most stood to gain from Zeke Calhoun's death?). Under normal circumstances, I would not care to be seen in the company of such a rogue, but business was business and Farraday had a claim to the land SWR needed.

My instincts about the Doc's plans for the land proved to be right on the money. He wanted a quick sale. The amount he wanted was initially \$30,000 but I beat him down to \$24,000. In the last resort, SWR needed that land and we would have to pay Farraday's asking price. I told Farraday I would get back to him once I had heard from my employers.

I then went to speak with Lucy Calhoun. Lucy was a tomboyish looking girl, young, fresh-faced and with long blonde hair. When I tried to offer Lucy condolences on her loss, she waved these aside and said she wanted to talk business.

I noticed Clem Parham hovering around, no doubt trying to eavesdrop on our conversation, and told him in no uncertain terms to get lost. Parham backed off.

Lucy was already aware of the deal that I had agreed with her father. She was as committed as her father to protecting the reservation. However, she told me that she had a lot on her mind and could not at present make a decision to honour the agreement Zeke Calhoun and I had made.

I spoke to a couple of other people. I met an "unemployed" stable hand called Slick O'Hare (Shifty would have been a more appropriate label to apply to this man) who told me that he did "odd jobs" for none other than Clem Parham. I instantly became suspicious of this man for any associate of Clem Parham was trouble. Christy Martin, a storekeeper by profession, was interested in opening an emporium in Twin Palms.

Next, I spoke with Judge Paulson. He was a tall distinguished man. I tried to impress him the importance of him finding in favour of Lucy. The future of the railroad, not to mention Twin Palms depended on what he decided. The judge was frustratingly non-committal, saying he needed more concrete evidence to back up the claims of the interested parties.

There was something not quite about the judge. He seemed like a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders, as if someone had a hold over him. I feared that he could have been compromised a way that would make him jump the wrong way when it came to making his judgement. By Clem perhaps?

I went to have a word with Sheriff Blane and discussed my suspicions about the judge and asked him how far he was getting along with his investigations regarding the rigged card game.

Sheriff Blane was, he said, aware of the judge's abnormal behaviour, and he was determined to get to the bottom of it. As to the other matter, he needed more evidence.

Meanwhile, I had to deal with other assorted people and they were very diverse indeed. There was an Indian Shaman wandering about muttering Indian gibberish and waving his spirit stick belligerently at people, especially Doc Farraday and Clem Parham, I noted, although the stick did quiver in my direction for a few worrying moments.

The Shaman was accompanied by an Indian woman who was a healer (on a youth training scheme to become a Shaman perhaps?) although I had little to do with her as she seemed to be preoccupied with some of the other characters in the saloon.

The Shaman's bluster and posturings were all show to conceal his fear and anxiety over what might happen to his settlement. Ultimately, he had no control over the situation. In the last resort, and in the worst case scenario, he might orchestrate an attack by the braves of his tribe but even then he would be taking on the authorities and inviting stern reprisals. The use of violence would not lead to a good outcome for his people, I feared.

There was also Kalamanta Kate, a bar girl, pretty and practical, Elijah Entwhistle, a bearded travelling preacher who was uttering appropriately spiritual counsel, Doctor Forrest, a travelling saleswoman who dealt in medicines and restoratives.

There was also a peculiar young woman wandering about, grabbing people by their shoulders, violently shaking them and asking for "i-pods" (Whatever those were). Those of a less charitable

disposition would have called her bonkers, but I was more inclined to conclude that she was just a little confused.

To all of these people (except the disturbed woman, who seemed oblivious to all but the turmoil going on in her mind), I made it clear that Clem Parham was a rotten egg and that if they had any sense they should never have any dealings with him.

Of greater interest to me was Blaise Sadler, the proprietor of the Silver Dollar. This generously built and gaudily dressed woman was friendly and highly informative. After a few minutes speaking with her, I managed to wrinkle out of her the intelligence that she had known that the card game between Farraday and Calhoun had been rigged.

I went at once to the Sheriff with this news, only to find that he was already cognisant of the situation and had spoken to the judge about it. It looked to me as if we had enough proof to completely undermine Farraday's already dubious claim to Fat Bull Range but as usual the judge, in the way of all legal folk, was putting off what should have been a clear cut case in favour of Lucy.

It was at this point that the Sheriff, who had gone a little pale, called for silence, as he had an important announcement to make. Reavers were on their way. To Twin Palms!

A pall of fear descended upon all present. We were about to be attacked by the meanest, toughest adversaries in this sector. In a modern environment, this would be less of a problem as we could employ technology against them but in this backward environment all we had were a few primitive firearms and our wits.

The sheriff was a man of courage and good sense, calling upon anyone present who had more advanced weaponry to use it for the common good. The sheriff would overlook the illegalities on this occasion.

Those lucky enough to possess any sort of weapon formed a firing line. The rest of us attempted to erect some feeble barricades around the entrances. All that was left to do was to wait in dread.

The resultant attack certainly lived up to expectations. It was a frenzied assault by these unnatural fiends. At one point, they used their ship to rip open the front of the saloon. Almost everyone, myself included, received grievous wounds. The sheriff and his tiny army were doing their best, but it looked like we were done for.

Then, unexpectedly, the desperate battle turned in our favour. This was due in part to the incredible combat skills of the deranged young woman who slew many of our foes. Backed up by supporting fire from the sheriff and his people and even the intervention of the Indians, the reavers withdrew.

We let out a deep sigh of relief. It was a miracle. Not only had we seen off our assailants against impossible odds, but there had been no fatalities. Almost everyone was injured in some way and the saloon had been smashed up, but it could have been far, far worse.

The casualties were patched up thanks to the judicious use of first aid kits plus the healing skills of the Indians, and the worst of the mess was cleared away. Out of the smoke and debris stepped a tall, well built man who looked vaguely familiar. Addressing the young woman as "River", he curtly told her to come with him and the young woman, who possessed almost superhuman fighting prowess, meekly trailed after him and was gone for good. But for her intervention, I very much doubt we would have survived.

In the meantime, the long-expected telegraph had arrived by stagecoach and had been installed just prior to the reaver attack. I had been able to fire off a quick telegram to SWR to ask how much I could offer Doc Farraday for Fat Bull Range. The telegram had not only somehow survived the reaver attack but had received an answer for me from SWR.

I took Doc Farraday aside and told him that the most SWR would offer was \$20,000. I could sense that Farraday wasn't very happy at news but I could also sense that his resolve on the point of price was crumbling. I don't know what was happening in Farraday's world, but it looked like he was desperate for a quick sale. Anyway, he told me that he would think on my offer and get back to me.

With the departure of the reavers, and of River, one might have hoped for a brief period of tranquillity. But it was not to be so. The dust had barely settled after the reaver attack when there was a fresh outbreak of bloodletting.

The Indian Shaman, who had actually shown great bravery during the reaver attack, was not a happy chap and he had been quietly smouldering away for a while. He had uncovered the rigged card game that had allowed Doc Farraday to con Zeke Calhoun of his land and he had found out that Clem Parham and his stooge, Shifty O'Hare, had had a hand in the death of Zeke Calhoun. Clem was on the Shaman's hitlist anyway as he had no compunction around running the railroad slap bang through the Indian reservation. The Shaman regarded Farraday and Parham jointly as public enemy number one.

The Shaman had made all this information known to the big white sheriff. Who, as far as the Shaman was concerned, had not taken the correct action against Farraday and Parham. Driven to frustration by the inactivity of the white man and fearful of what might happen to his reservation if justice was not served, the Shaman took direct action.

In a murderous assault, the Shaman brutally cut down Doc Farraday and Clem Parham. The carnage was quite sickening and the results were far from pretty. By the time the sheriff managed to pull the Shaman off, Doc Farraday was dead and Clem Parham, although barely alive, was in a bad way. He had been well and truly perforated but miraculously none of his vital organs had been damaged or he might well have joined Doc Farraday in the afterlife.

I watched as the body of Doc Farraday was cleared away and Parham's wounds were tended to. The loss of any human life, even that of a rogue like Farraday, was a tragedy. But his death had simplified matters considerably in terms of the judgement on Fat Bull Range. With Farraday dead, there was no longer a rival claim to that of Lucy.

Lucy too was not blind to this inadvertent stroke of fate and we both went at once to see the judge. We put the case to Judge Paulson in concert, but the good judge still seemed to be reluctant to make what should have been a very easy judgement. Finally, as it seemed that the judge would never get around to making a judgement, the sheriff stepped in and told the judge to stop messing about and so the judge found in Lucy's favour. At long last!

Lucy willingly signed over Fat Bull Range to SWR for the sum of \$20,000 and an assurance that the reservation and burial mound would be left alone. Twin Palms would get its railroad and the Indians could keep their reservation. It was the perfect outcome.

I would have left immediately for a more civilised environment but there were apparently several items of unfinished business amongst the townsfolk, Indians and visitors and these needed to be resolved by a local custom called "High Noon". This was essentially a duel between two combatants.

At the end of four duels, a number of people had met their maker and vendettas had been satisfied. The Indian Shaman was the first to die. Despite openly killing one person in cold blood and almost killing another, he had remained at liberty. Well, now he was dead and his trainee Shaman took his place.

Next to die was Clem Parham. He had upset almost the whole town and the reservation, myself included, and so it was no surprise that someone wanted to settle scores with him. I have to admit that it was quite satisfying to know that a bitter rival was dead, especially as I had had no part in his

killing. A small part of me wished that it might have been better had he lived long enough for the knowledge that SWR and not MWR had secured the railroad contract to become known to him.

Last to die, in a duel between two ladies, was Blaise Sadler, the saloon manageress. She had conducted an affair with Lucy's father and Lucy considered it a matter of honour to avenge her mother. My sadness at Blaise's demise was laced with relief, for the lady had been making advances towards me and I was not sure she would have made a good girlfriend or wife. There was that business over the marked cards, for instance, which made her moral code highly questionable.

I might stay long enough to attend the four funerals of Doc Farraday, Clem Parham, Three Feathers the Shaman and Blaise Sadler, out of respect, but whenever I decided to leave, it would be with the knowledge of a job well done in spite of grave difficulties fraught at times with mortal peril. I had my contract for SWR and so the railroad would be built. The Indians would be fine and, best of all, I would never see Clem Parham's face again!

The End