

# AN ENCOUNTER WITH FEAR

Portia Battle

It was a cold day in December, 1825. Just forty miles from Wheeling, West Virginia, there lived a man named Jason Vanderbilt, who was tall, dark featured, and in his early thirties. With him lived his wife Martha, in her early twenties and expecting.

A blizzard was coming in from the north, and Jason, dressed in his heavy overall jacket and his high top snowboots, was gathering wood for the winter. As he entered the house, which was set off in the finest of early American furniture, his wife Martha, came out of the kitchen, dressed in her broad striped dress and crisp white apron.

"Jason, we don't have enough supplies to last us through the winter, what we gonna do?" She said.

"Now, now Martha", Jason replied, with a look of assurance on his face, "I've enough wood to last us through winter, and nearly half of spring. I'll just have to go to town and get enough supplies."

"Is it safe, Jason?" — she asked with a frightened look. I hear them Creeks are on the warpath again."

"Now, Martha, don't worry; them Creeks only take scalps, and the only way they'll get mine is to catch me. Now you just take care of yourself and the baby. You will be alright."

"Okay, now you be careful you hear?" Martha replied. "All right, Martha." With that Jason jumped into the saddle of his horse and set off for Wheeling. The snow was snipping his face and his hands were beginning to feel numb even though he wore a well padded pair of gloves. All of the trees along the trail were bare with the exception of a few old evergreens and these were covered with snow.

About twenty miles from his house, he saw signs of Indians on the trails that led into the woods. This told him that he would have to be careful as he rode through the forest for the next twenty miles. He took the east trail when he noticed an opening in the brush. He knew that this place hadn't been here before. As he came upon the clearing, he noticed how quiet it was.

All of a sudden the quietness was broken and he knew that he was in trouble. From all sides of the clearing came Creek warriors, who had been using the freshly cut tree branches as a camouflage. He started his mount on a full gallop. The Creeks were following close behind him, and arrows were returned for each rifle bullet that he gave them. The chase went on for about an hour.

The sound of horses' hoofs could be heard for about an hour, pounding upon the rough and rocky ground. This could be heard for miles. The Creeks chased Jason through ravines, canyon, and valleys along the trail leading to Wheeling. They finally let up the chase when Jason came to the sign post saying "Wheeling Three Miles North."

He began to settle back in his saddle as he rode down the quiet road. He saw cattlemen driving their cattle to winter pasture. They were big husky men. Some looked too old to saddle a bronc, but there they were, teaching the young inexperienced ones the trade. As they passed out of sight, Jason thought, "A chase that lasted for seventeen miles, what would Martha say if she knew that I went through the heart of Creek country for the fun of it. I guess that it is just the impulse that my grandfather always told me about; 'a Vanderbilt always looks for excitement,' he said to me once."

He smiled silently.

Around the bend he could see the livery stable, crowded with just as many people as horses; "Probably listening to old Ed, the blacksmith, rattle off a few," he muttered.

He felt reassured when he reached civilization again; but as he was about to dismount, he saw freshly built gallows standing in the middle of the street, and they cast shadows of death against the evening sun. He asked one of the youngsters playing in the street, "What's going on here, boy?"

"Where you been, Mister, didn't you hear about Tom Benson?" asked the boy, dressed in a heavy coat and high top boots.

"No, what about him, lad?"

"Well, rumor has it that he's sitting in the death cell wating to be hanged."

"Hanged for what?" questioned Jason.

"Why, they say that he killed Robert McPhearson's daughter-in-law Margaret. They think that his son had something to do with the killing though."

"What! are you sure? Where's the sheriff, lad?"

"Why, he's down Blake Street—turn left third door down." Said the boy.

As Jason left the boy playing in the street, he began to recollect some of the things that had happened between his family and Tom Benson's. He remembered an incident when his cousin Robert McPhearson was sent to prison for cattle rustling because of false evidence offered by Tom Benson.

Yes, Jason was surprised to hear that Benson had been caught in his own trap, but he was sorry that it cost Margaret McPhearson her life. As Jason walked away, he thought: "I always knew you'd get into trouble, Tom Benson. Let me see now, the boy said third door down,—ah, here it is."

The room was very stuffy, and as Jason walked in, he could hardly catch his breath. "Hi ya, sheriff! Say, why this stuffy hole? I thought that I'd find you at the jail. You have got one, haven't you, or has Benson's gang taken over for you? Oh, you may not know me; I'm Jason Vanderbilt."

"Yes, I've heard of you. Are you here to avenge your uncle's son's wife?"

"No, sir, I don't particularly like Benson, but I am remaining neutral in this deal. I would like to talk to Benson if I may."

"No sir ree, you may not! Now get out and get whatever you came for straightened out and leave. I don't want any trouble from you Vanderbilts, Bensons, and McPhearsons now, you hear?"

"But Sheriff!

"No buts, Jason, now good-by."

At that Jason took one look at the sheriff in his weather-beaten vest and at the forty-five on his hip. He also observed the tin star that he wore, and went out of the sheriff's office. He wanted to talk to Benson to see if he knew where his son was, but he went on to the general store and purchased a few things for Martha. Along with these things, he bought her a pretty hat with a big bow sitting in front. She always wanted that hat, so today he bought it for her. As he was coming out of the store, his cousin Robert was waiting for him, he told him: "Jason, befor' Margret died, she gave birth to my son, she told me never to tell him the truth about her death. How can I Jason, how can I let my boy go to school with the sons of the man who killed my wife? Just shot her down in cold blood."

"Listen, Robert, I haven't anything to do with this issue. I must get back to Martha."

"But Jason" —

"See you around Robert." With that statement, he mounted his horse and galloped out at a very rapid pace. Something seemed strange. Everything was so dead, so sullen. He looked up at the sky, and it seemed as though, from out of nowhere, came storm clouds. He had wanted to get back home before night, but if he were to try to ride in the storm, it would mean sure death.

His mount began to sense that there was a storm on hand, and Jason began searching for shelter. He knew that there were no farm houses in the area, but somewhere he would have to find shelter. He had ridden about five miles out of town, when he noticed the old trail leading to Finkeys' Mining Town. He had forgotten about the old abandoned ghost town. Maybe he could find shelter there. As he rode into town, he noticed that it wasn't so deserted after all.

From the hotel, he saw some horses tied to the railing. He also heard singing coming from the adjoining saloon. He thought, "perhaps I won't be alone after all! But as he dismounted, the singing stopped. Jason, becoming curious, took his rifle from his saddle holster and decided to investigate the matter.

He stepped onto the porch leading to the saloon. "Anybody here, anybody here?" No one answered. He turned toward the hotel lobby, and started in, but as he reached the draperies, someone standing behind the curtain clubbing him from behind. The man was a fairly young man. He looked to be in his early twenties, around twenty-two years old. He had a big scar that stretched from the corner of his left eye to the lower part of his chin.

He wore the clothes that normal working men would not wear, he was well dressed and evidently very bossy, for he ordered his companions: "Take this man into the hotel, tie and gag him. No, wait, I must see who this gentleman is whom we have the honor of lodging here tonight. Now, let me see—well, well, we have ourselves a Vanderbilt boy. Isn't he some kin to the McPhearsons?"

"Why, boss, he's the nephew of Mr. Robert McPhearson." "Well, well, that's just too bad, take him on. More music, we must have plenty of music. CATHY ! ! I said music!"

From another room in the saloon came a lean slender blonde. She was very plain, though she looked as if she had done the things and had been a woman of beauty in years gone by. "All right, all right, just remember little boy, you will not get away with this scheme of yours," she said.

"Shut up and sing, or I will get rid of you too."

"Oh yes, like you killed McPhearson's wife." The young man slapped the woman.

"Yea, hit and bruise me, but what are you gonna do about that Vanderbilt you got upstairs?"

"Why, I'm gonna get rid of him and you; but you my pet, you are going first. Harvey!"

"Yea boss?"

"Get rid of her."

"Yes sir."

The girl look at him. "Why, Ed Benson, you think you will get away with this? Why, you don't care about anybody do you?"

"No, beautiful, I don't. Harvey! I said get rid of her." "Sure, boss."

"No, No ! ! !"

A shot rang out from behind the

saloon and in walked Harvey with her body. "What now, boss?"

"Get her body out of here and get rid of it, you fool." Benson walked over to the bar and got him a drink. "Harvey, when you finish, go get Vanderbilt."

Later Harvey walked in with Jason. "Well, well, Mr. Vanderbilt, how does it feel being in the rat tray?"

"Who are you?" Asked Jason.

"Oh, don't tell me that you don't know who I am? Well, I will introduce myself. My name is Ed Benson, Tom Benson's son."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"Well, well, Harvey ! !"

"Yes boss?"

"We've got ourselves a smart one here." Jason got up, but Benson drew a gun on him, pointing to a chair.

"Now just relax, Mr. Vanderbilt, seeing how you ain't going no place no ways, I'm gonna tell you something. You'd have been better off if you had rode on by Finkeys' Mining Town today. You would have come out better facing the storm that's about to come up. For you see Jason, I am a killer. Why, everyone here is a killer except Cathy, bless her soul. She just passed away. You see, my father told me years ago that I would never amount to nothing but a bum, but I showed him. I showed him that I could become something more. You see I once had a high position; and lost it because I dared to look at the wife of a McPhearson. My father threatened to expose me, so I fixed it so he would get it, and I got the Vanderbilts, McPhearsons and Bensons on the warpath."

"Why are you—?"

"Shut up, I ain't finished. Can't you see, I had to kill her. She said we were through. She drained me dry then kicked me into the street. I killed her and my precious dad has to take the blame for it. Now, you want to know why it would have been better for you to have stayed out of here, and why I was telling you this? Why Mr. Vanderbilt, if you had gone on about your business and not stopped here today, I would now be sheriff of Wheeling, West Virginia, but because you came here I had to put off my plans."

"How were you going to become sheriff and how did I change your plans?"

"I would have become sheriff by placing some of my men in town, and then gradually moving in. You upset my plans by coming here and by causing another death."

"Causing another death?" Shouted Jason.

"Yes, if you had ridden on by here, Cathy would be alive. But I am not worried about that."

"But why do you want to become sheriff?" Jason asked, trying to figure out what this man's purpose was. "What would you gain, the pleasure of seeing your father hanged?"

"I would gain the pleasure of seeing my father hanged, for the murder of McPhearson's son's wife."

"Why, you are crazy," snapped Jason.

"Shut up, I'm not crazy, you just don't understand."

"Understand what?" Asked Jason. "Why do you hold me here? I don't know anything about this foolish plan of yours or your reasons."

"But I just told you," replied Ed Benson.

"Why, all you did was mumble out a few words, I don't know a bit more now than I did before. Now will you let me go?"

"No! Harvey!"

"Yea boss?"

"Come in here! Look, this man here wants to insult me. Are you gonna let him do it, you gonna let him get away with it?"

"What you want I should do, boss?"

"Rough him up a little, then bring him back inside."

"What are you trying to do, what do you want with me?" Shouted Jason.

"Listen, don't shout at me, and remember you are a Vanderbilt, and the Vanderbilts and the McPhearsons are relations. This makes you some kin to Margret, and anything that reminds me of Margret, I don't like. Harvey take him out."

Harvey took Jason out behind the saloon, as Ed Benson watched from the back door.

That's enough Harvey, cut him loose."

"Look Benson, you are so full of hate until it has driven you out of your mind. If you want to take over the sheriff's office, why not just ride into town and take over. There's nothing to it, or are you a coward? Another thing, your father knows that you killed Margret. Suppose he tells on you? Suppose you get caught in your own little plot? You know what would happen then, don't you? They would hang themselves a man."

"Shut up, I am not crazy, but you are right, you are right about the hanging; but before they get me, I want you to tell me what it feels like to have a rope around your neck."

"Harvey, get a rope and build a gallows. We are going to hang ourselves a prisoner."

"Sure boss, we gonna hang ourselves a prisoner."

Jason crouched down on the ground. His mouth felt rather dry, and he seemed to feel the burns of rope on his neck. He began to think of his wife and the farm and he wondered how she would live through all the winter, if anything were to happen to him!

"How could she survive on the farm by herself in her condition?"

"Come on, Jason, you've got a hanging to go to." Jason staggered to his feet, as Benson pushed him out on Main Street toward the gallows. Jason looked at Harvey: "You fool, why this man is only using you. Who killed Margret and the singer? Why you! And who beat me? You! YOU, HARVEY! YOU are the one who does all of his dirty work. If you were to leave him, you would be top man, for he's afraid of you, Harvey."

"Shut up! now Harvey, don't listen to him, finish him off, Harvey."

"Harvey! Cried Jason, 'he's using you.'"

"Harvey, now look, listen. You are my deputy, I'm sheriff, now finish him off."

Standing there in the middle of the street they did not see the riders approaching them, from the brush. Shots rang out, and Ed Benson and Harvey lay dead near the gallows. Jason looked up to see Tom Benson, Robert McPhearson and the sheriff. Jason sighed and shouted: "GET ME DOWN FROM HERE!"

"Oh sure, what are you doing here, Jason?" asked the sheriff.

"Well, it looked like a storm was coming up, so I thought I would come here for the night. I didn't know I would run into a maniac. What caused him to do all of those things?"

"I don't know, but that's all over, and the storm has passed over, so you can go now, Jason," said the sheriff, untying Jason's hands.

"Thanks, sheriff."

"Say, Jason?"

"Yes, Robert?"

"Tell Martha hello for me."

"Sure thing, Robert. Thanks, see you around."

Yes, Jason Vanderbilt was shaking in his boots as he rode home.

"Never, never will I tell Martha this; she would collapse if she knew. Boy, I've never been so afraid in all my days! Why, it's just like a book I read once, AN ENCOUNTER WITH FEAR."