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*Showdown Along The Cimarron*

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*Showdown Along The Cimarron*

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**Showdown Along the Cimarron**

**by**

**Randy D. Smith**

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## *Showdown Along The Cimarron*

John McKnight stepped to the top a sandy ridge and gazed upon the valley of the Cimarron River. He paused to catch a breath, placed the butt of his flintlock long rifle on the ground between his feet, tipped his low-crowned black felt hat to the back of his head and enjoyed a gentle south breeze against his matted, sweat-soaked brown hair.

Tom James groaned as he led two packhorses to the crest of the dune. He scanned the broad, lush flood plain and, with a sweeping gesture of his right arm, silently announced a successful crossing.

Jeemy Wilson, the next to top the crest with his packhorses, shouted a war whoop of satisfaction as he stared upon the shallow sluggish waters of the Cimarron. The graybeard had correctly predicted a two-day passage across the plain between the Arkansas and Salt Rivers.

"Look's good, don't it?" McKnight asked in his customarily quiet manner.

James grinned as he heeled his own rifle into the dirt and assumed a twin pose to his partner. "Couldn't look better."

Jeemy Wilson squinted and pointed a gnarled finger toward far white bluffs across the valley. "I'll bet ya them's buff's over there to the northwest."

The rest of the brigade members topped the dune leading their pack animals toward the bottoms. John James was Tom's younger brother. David Kirkee was a bit older, in his thirties, and the smallest of the men. Bill Shearer, Alex Howard, Ben Potter, and John Ivy were men in their twenties. Frederick Howard was older and had a family in Missouri.

John McKnight was the managing partner of a profitable St. Louis trading company known as McKnight & Brady. He had received word a year earlier that his brother, Robert, was alive in a prison near Santa Fe. Ten years earlier, Robert led a trading expedition to Santa Fe, but the party vanished. John intended to find his brother, buy his freedom, and return home. Tom James and Fred Howard were old friends who needed a chance to make up for failed trading ventures along the Mississippi. If all went well, the brigade would reap a fortune from the twelve thousand dollars worth of goods purchased in St. Louis by James and McKnight .

The last man over the ridge was the interpreter, a Spaniard named Francois Maesaw. He was looked upon with suspicion and avoided by all except McKnight and Jeemy Wilson. When he wasn't advising McKnight, Maesaw kept to himself.

Approaching his seventieth year, Jeemy Wilson was of that breed of men known as "borderers." Of Scotch decent and over six feet tall, he chose to live on the frontier as civilization pushed him west. His shoulder-length white hair and chest-length beard surrounded sharp features and crystal blue eyes. A stern glare from Wilson reminded lesser men of the visage of God in his wrath. He laughed and joked with the younger men, advised the older, and treated the Spaniard as an equal. He carried a sawed-off fusel loaded with tear shot rather than a common long rifle favored by the others. A short-handled single bladed ax seemed to live in his right hand. When McKnight's keelboat could advance no further up the shallow Arkansas, Wilson suggested burying the heavy goods and going overland using Osage ponies as pack horses.

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"If them are buffs, we could stand to jerk a little meat," Tom James said. "We should make camp and lay in some supplies before going any farther."

"Ought to have our backs against a wall or at the top of the ridge," Wilson said. "I'd like a place where we can fort up, if need be."

As the trio led the way, the others followed as soon as they had their fill of the brackish river water. The valley was littered with buffalo manure and laced with narrow trails. Salt deposits were so thick that the men could knock off pure chunks with their knives. The herd was skittish and maintained a distance from the brigade.

Wilson reasoned that Indians were hunting the beasts. He advised the men to take a few, jerk the meat, and move on as soon as possible. By nightfall they had skinned two calves, enjoyed fresh roasts, sweetbreads, kidneys and liver, and rested comfortably along the shore of the Cimarron.

Shortly after dawn, Ben Potter shook McKnight awake. Potter's urgency caused Tom James to jump from his own bedroll.

"Comanches are after the horses," Potter whispered hoarsely.

"How many?" James asked as he peered across the horizon toward the pony graze.

"Hell, I bet there's a hundred or more," Wilson said as he joined the others.

In the distance, a large band of riders could be seen hazing the livestock. Most were dressed only in breechcloths and leggings.

James primed the pan of his rifle. "If they get those horses, we're done for."

"They may be willing to talk if we can get their attention," Wilson said.

James considered the suggestion, nodded, and ran for his goods. He drew forth a new artillery sword and buckled the scabbard about his waist. He dug out a United States flag and waved the banner from the barrel of his rifle. The Indians broke off from the ponies and approached at full gallop.

As the braves approached, McKnight spoke calmly. "Put your pieces in order, but keep the muzzles down. We want no fight, if we can avoid it. Tom, you palaver and Maesaw can interpret into Spanish if need be."

The Spaniard stepped to James' side as the warriors approached. The pair advanced to the front of the group, hands held palms forward to signify peace. The Comanche braves encircled the brigade without dismounting.

One of the leaders was of slim build with a ruined left eye. The other, a heavy shouldered man with a broad mouth, carried a newly decorated Mexican smoothbore musketoon. Neither of the men spoke immediately. Each gave the small group of whites a serious visual inspection before any attempt at communication. Finally, with sharp movements, the smaller man gave a set of signs.

James turned toward Maesaw and waited for his translation. The Spaniard watched carefully and nodded a reply.

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"What does he want?" James asked.

"Gifts," Maesaw answered in broken English. "He wants gifts for crossing their hunting lands and taking their buffalo."

"How much?" James asked.

Maesaw smiled grimly. "All he can get."

"How much do you think?" James asked as he turned toward McKnight.

McKnight studied the strength of the force. There were at least a hundred riders armed with Mexican flint fusels, spears, and bows. "I think we should be generous, Tom. I doubt this is a time for bargaining."

"Ask them to step down from their ponies and we'll work something out," James told Maesaw.

"I doubt they will do that. These men live on the backs of their horses. They will not step down from their mounts except for a friend," Maesaw said.

James turned toward Wilson and Howard. "Get into the packs. Give them mirrors, ammunition, knives, and the cheap calico."

As the men gathered the offerings, the one-eyed chief talked angrily with the other. "What's his problem?" McKnight asked.

"He says we are spies for the Osage. He wants to put us under now and take the goods," Maesaw answered grimly.

"Tell him we're not. Tell him we bought the ponies from the Osage," James said.

"I think we should wait, senior. The other chief, the one called Big Star, is telling One-eye that it would not be good to kill us. He is saying that we are willing to pay and they should honor our offerings."

"I like that feller, already," Wilson said quietly.

The chiefs bantered back and forth for several minutes as the men assembled their offerings. The more they debated, the more goods James ordered from the packs.

The men assembled three thousand dollars worth of merchandise; balls, powder, mirrors, knives, hatchets, bolts of cloth, pots and pans. A line of goods was assembled between the chiefs and the traders. Finally, Big Star waved off the other and nodded. One-eye cursed bitterly and led a faction of warriors away. Once One-eye was out of sight, Big Star slipped from his pony and advanced toward James. The big Indian nodded and spoke in a friendly fashion.

"He says that we pay him great honor. He asks us to accompany him to his village and be his guest," Maesaw said.

"What do you think?" James asked McKnight.

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McKnight smiled feebly and nodded. "I don't see that we have much choice. I certainly don't want to insult this character."

Wilson spat. "I wouldn't trust him, Captain. These Comanches are a funny lot."  
"What do you suggest we tell him?" James asked.

"Tell him you've got to go. Tell him you got the pox. Tell him you love him so damned much, you'll give him the whole kit and kaboodle. Hell, tell him anything and let's get the hell out of here," Wilson answered.

"It's a long walk back to Arkansas," Frederick Howard sighed.

"A long walk, or a slow roast," Jeemy said harshly.

"If we tried to leave now, I doubt we would get far," Maesaw said. "Even if this one allows us to pass, I doubt the other would let us go far."

"I ain't going to give it all up now," Tom James said. "Maybe we can do some trading. We've got too much invested to simply walk away."

McKnight nodded. "We ain't got any choice. If I thought we could walk away from this and get out with our hair, I'd do it. It appears to me that our only option is to go with these fellows and try some trading. If we insult him now, we don't stand a chance."

The brigade members nodded and voiced support. All Jeemy Wilson could manage was a disgusted spit into the earth and a soft curse.

## II

The traders and their escort entered the camp amid howls of derision, noisy conversation, barking dogs and bawling children. Throngs of Comanche men, women and children gathered at the edge of a substantial village meandering through the small creek-fed valley northwest of the Cimarron flood plain. Shallow canyon walls and a spring-fed stream provided protection from the elements. A low, flat-topped hill dominated the center of the site

Big Star proudly displayed the artillery sword above his head as he led the parade through the village toward a large tipi, situated near the mound. An elderly chief, wrapped in a white bear skin, stepped from the tipi, mounted a pony, and haughtily waited to accept his guests.

McKnight, James and Maesaw stepped to the front and gazed up at the imposing figure of the chief. He moved slowly and spoke with grand gestures.

After Big Star spoke to the chief, Maesaw translated the introduction. "This is Bear Shield. He is the main chief of the village. Big Star has presented you as honored guests and....." The Spaniard paused soberly.

"And what?" McKnight asked.

The Spaniard faced the partners glumly, reluctant to complete the translation. "And, says that you have brought many gifts to honor him."

"Hell's election," Wilson cursed from a few feet behind.

James cut his eyes toward McKnight. "Before they're through, we'll be lucky to leave with the shirts on our backs."

"It's the hair on my head that worries me," Wilson said.

McKnight smiled in cynical frustration. "I wonder how many chiefs we're going to have to pay off to get out of this mess?"

"Damn, John, they're robbing us blind," James said.

"We were willing to walk away from the whole thing a few miles back. If we don't pay up, we're in a worse mess than we were before," McKnight said.

James shook his head before turning toward Howard. "Bring up your ponies, Frederick. Break out the goods for our honored host."

Howard nodded and led his packhorses to James' position. James unwrapped the lashings roughly and emptied the contents for Bear Shield's examination.

"There goes another thousand dollars' worth," James said as he stepped to McKnight's side.

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Bear Shield examined the trade goods and cheap bolts of cloth. He spoke quietly to Big Star and addressed Maesaw in equally reserved fashion.

Maesaw nodded and turned a tortured expression toward McKnight and James. "Bear Shield says that his people will welcome the gifts warmly. He feels that the chief of the Kamanashe should be entitled to a special gift, as was Big Star."

Tom James' face took on the appearance of a red-hot boiler about to explode. McKnight stepped in front of his partner and turned his back toward the chiefs. James relaxed as McKnight's shadow crossed his form.

"How about the velvet?" McKnight asked.

James grimaced and bit his lip. "Sure, why the hell not?"

"Why don't you go back and get it? I'll try to get Maesaw to reason with them," McKnight said.

Maesaw was uneasy. His attention drifted nervously between the anxious brigade commander and the sullen chief.

"You know, Maesaw, we don't have much left. Can't we try something else?" McKnight asked in as reserved and pleasant a manner as he could muster.

"Senor McKnight, we are at their mercy. I fear that if we refuse them, we will be dead men within the hour."

McKnight listened stoically. He knew Maesaw was no coward and his answer was not the result of cowardly logic. He turned to Jeemy Wilson.

"Well, what do you think, old timer? You've dealt with these Indians before," McKnight asked.

The buckskinner set his eyes toward the ground. "If they was Kiowas or Arapahos, you might try getting tough and bluffing your way through. But, these Comanches are a strange lot. I fear you'll end up giving them the whole shebang and they'll still show fight."

Tom James presented a roll of a hundred and seventy yards of red velvet cloth. Bear Shield felt the bolt reverently with the tips of his fingers. The master politician smiled and swelled with flamboyant generosity. He spoke boldly so the whole of the community could hear.

A warrior rode his pony to the bolt and lifted it from James' arms. He took hold of the cut end of the cloth and tossed the bolt into the air, riding away at a gallop. In seconds the red velvet was being unrolled as the populace eagerly descended upon it.

James watched in horror as his precious trade cloth was ripped and torn into blankets, robes and fragments. "We paid six dollars a yard for that velvet."

McKnight nodded. "Maybe that will satisfy them, Tom."

Bear Shield turned toward Big Star and issued some orders before swinging his pony away from the men toward his tipi. Big Star slipped from his pony and approached

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McKnight and James through the throng of clamoring Indians. He spoke to Maesaw and pointed toward an open area between the mound and cliffs to the west.

"We are to make camp there for the night. Bear Shield is satisfied," Maesaw said.

"They ain't going to let us go?" Jeemy Wilson asked.

"No, we are to remain here," Maesaw answered.

McKnight nodded and motioned his group toward the mound without comment.

The men made camp without interference. They were allowed to come and go to the stream at will and prepare their evening meal in peace. As the men gathered around evening campfire there was little conversation.

Jeemy Wilson watched the sentries on the cliff tops as he sipped some coffee. "We could try slipping out when the camp's asleep but I fear those guards will sound the alert as soon as we stir."

McKnight nodded. "How would we outrun them on foot? They'd overtake us within hours even if we were able to slip away."

"At least we could make a stand on open ground," John James said. "We're trapped like rats against this wall."

"Maesaw, how far is it to a settlement?" Tom James asked.

The Spaniard shook his head. "It is at least a hundred leagues to Nacatoche. It would take three days hard march to get there."

"No ranches or haciendas near abouts?" James asked.

"None that I know of. Nacatoche is the closest settlement. It is in the forest. The Comanche will not go into the trees except to trade and even then, they will only come reluctantly."

"Maybe we could make the trees and they'd back off," Frederick Howard said.

The Spaniard cut his eyes slowly toward Howard and spoke solemnly. "We would not make the trees, Senor Howard."

McKnight watched his men carefully, trying to decide the best strategy. He felt that such a bold move might be necessary but could plainly see that Maesaw feared the tactic. At that moment he trusted the Spaniard's judgment more than the others did. "It might be that we have won them over. I'd hate to think we'd forced a fight that wasn't necessary. I suggest, we wait to see what they do in the morning."

There was a moment of silence. His words seemed logical and reasonable. None of the men were eager for a fight that would end with their massacre.

"If worse comes to worse, I don't want us to go under like a pack of whimpering dogs. I say we make our lives as dear as possible. Make them pay a price," Wilson said.

The men voiced support.

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McKnight nodded. "I agree, Jeemy. But I reiterate, we have other avenues that should be attempted before that."

"Let us firmly resolve and pledge to one another. If the worse comes, we will stand and fight like men, together and to the end," Tom James said.

Agreement spread through the brigade. McKnight did not say more. The pledge was a good idea. Men with such a mindset were easier to lead and persuade. Facing death with defiant resolve, was a much easier dose of medicine to swallow.

McKnight threw the dregs of his coffee into the fire and watched the liquid sizzle and bubble on the burning embers. It seemed a good symbol of their situation.

III

Morning dawned bright, still and hot. Dust surrounded the brigade members as they prepared their packs. Comanche activity was slow developing. McKnight observed morning activities not significantly different from St. Louis; women choring, children playing, and men going about their business.

Big Star and another Indian came to their camp on foot, dressed in formal attire, carrying a smoking pipe. The brigade members joined him at the campfire to pass the pipe. James offered tobacco and the Indian graciously accepted.

"I thank my white brothers. You have been generous and brave in your dealings. I want you to know that I will do all I can to see you safely on your way. I brought you to the camp because One-eye was waiting to rub you out," Big Star explained through his interpreter.

"May we go, then?" Tom James asked.

"No, I fear not. There will be a council to decide your fate. I will speak for you."

"Is there anything we can do?" McKnight asked.

"Perhaps more gifts. Something for Bear Shield. His voice will be the greatest."

McKnight turned to Tom James. "What about a pistol? I've got those duelers in the case."

"Maybe one," Tom James answered. "I'd save the other to put a bullet in the old bastard's heart."

McKnight nodded. Frederick Howard went to a pack and drew out a cherry wood case. He fetched one of the .45 caliber flintlocks from the box and handed the prize to McKnight.

"Give this to Bear Shield. Tell him it is a great prize and was intended as a bribe for the Spaniards in Santa Fe."

Big Star accepted the pistol. "This will do nicely. Bear Shield has no such weapon. None other in the village has anything like it."

The chiefs departed, leaving the brigade members in silence.

"That may just turn the trick," McKnight said.

"I paid a hundred dollars for those pistols in St. Louis," James said.

McKnight nodded. "Load the other and give it to me. I'll save it for later."

One-eye and his braves rode into camp from the north slope of the valley at a full gallop. The war chief guided his pony to the edge of the brigade's campsite and glared down upon the men, especially Tom James.

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James returned the hot glare with a nod. One-eye mumbled a soft curse and kneed the pony towards Bear Shield's tipi.

Wilson stepped to James' side. "I wish that fellow had been a little slower showing up. I doubt he'll speak kindly in our favor."

James' expression went cold and dark. "I'll tell you one thing. I'll see him in hell if he starts a fight."

Wilson rocked his ax in his hand. "You and me both, Johnny."

Within the hour, Big Star and the other chief returned. He seemed disturbed and frustrated. "There is a problem. One-eye wants the sword."

James became indignant. "I gave the sword to you. Tell him I'll give him something else."

"No, he will have the sword or your lives," Big Star reluctantly answered.

"Piss on him. I won't give him another damn thing," James said.

"You have no other sword?" Big Star asked.

"No, that is the only one I had," James answered.

The Indian nodded and handed the blade to James. "Take it and give it to One-eye."

James took the sword. The Indian smiled as Maesaw translated James's words. "I'll make this up to you, Big Star."

"Give the sword to Black Pony to take to One-eye. I cannot give the sword for you. It would not look good."

James nodded and handed the sword to the other chief.

Within the hour several chiefs and elderly men gathered at the top of the mound. Younger men and boys started to climb the hill as well, but the older ones drove them back. Soon it was evident that a major council was being held on the hilltop.

"I don't like the looks of that," Wilson said as the brigade members watched the progress of the meeting.

The younger men and boys were gathering horses and preparing weapons. Most disturbing was that Big Star and Black Pony were not a part of the council.

"I think we should pile our goods and form a barricade around them with saddles and harness," McKnight said.

"Then, it's a fight, is it?" James asked.

"I think we should close ranks and be ready to defend ourselves, if it comes to that," McKnight answered.

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The group worked quietly, piling the goods in the center, surrounded by empty packs, harness and pack saddles. As they were completing the chore, the council broke up. The old men and chiefs ambled down the slope and went to their tipis. Village activity increased as individuals gathered possessions and assembled families.

"It looks to me like they're getting ready for a move," James said.

"Maybe they're just going to leave us here and be on their way?" Wilson said.

"What do you think, Francois?" McKnight asked.

The Spaniard shook his head slowly.

Big Star returned to the barricade and cast his eyes to the ground as he spoke. "I will remember you. I will speak of you with honor."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Frederick Howard asked nervously.

Wilson shook his head and picked up his fusel. "It means we're going on a journey and he wants to bid us farewell."

Howard's expression was fearful as he turned to McKnight.

"They mean to rub us out," McKnight said impassively.

"Perhaps more gifts," Howard suggested half-heartedly.

"What for?" Tom James asked. "They'll get it all, anyhow."

"Maybe we should take these two as hostages?" Wilson suggested.

James waved the chiefs away. "No, they'd only kill them as well. They did their best. Let them go in peace."

As the lodges came down, the Indians began slowly gathering around the brigade. McKnight formed his men, shoulder to shoulder in a tight circle, facing out from the goods in the center, tomahawks and knives in their belts. McKnight stood between Tom James and Wilson. John James stood beside his brother.

The Indians constricted the encirclement, mounted men to the front, women to the back.

Tom James noticed McKnight's pale lips trembling. Maesaw could be heard mumbling a rosary prayer from the other side of the goods.

James turned to his younger brother. "I'm sorry I got you into this, John. I wish I could have given you better service."

John nodded slowly and spoke without looking at his brother. "You've got nothing to apologize for, Tom. You're a good brother and a fine man."

Tom James turned back to face the Indians. He nodded and fought back tears. "Thank you, John."

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The men faced their grim foes stiffly. Only the nervous prancing of ponies broke the silence. Heat and dust enveloped the barricade.

Bear Shield forced his pony through the throng. He was dressed in the white bear robe and carried an elaborately decorated spear. The old chief glared menacingly down at the brigade. In short course, One-eye forced his pony to the chief's side. Bear Shield jammed the point of his spear toward Tom James' breast, as if calculating the distance to his heart. He placed the spear across the front withers of the animal and drew the dueling pistol from his belt. He opened the frizzen and examined the powder. Not liking the appearance, he replaced it with a fresh load. After closing the frizzen, he stopped as James' rifle muzzle slowly swept in his direction.

One-eye watched the event carefully, his eye dancing from side to side.

Finally, McKnight spoke. "I can't stand this much longer, Tom. I know he means to kill you first. I'll revenge you the instant he fires."

"Let's be done with it. I'll cleave a path through them as soon as the word is given," Wilson said.

Tom James blinked and swallowed hard before speaking. "Wait a minute. Let's not rush into this. Those two know they're dead men just as soon as we are. Let them fire the first shot."

McKnight bit his lip and nodded slowly.

Several moments passed as the Indians glared silently at the determined brigade. The smell of sweat, unwashed bodies, and nervous beasts permeated the air.

Suddenly, David Kirkee threw down his weapon, raised his hands and stepped away from the circle.

Ben Potter whispered harshly. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I've had enough, boys. I'm going to walk out of here and let them have the damned stuff," Kirkee said.

"That cuts it," James said. "Get ready, men."

As Kirkee stepped to the encirclement of Comanches, they allowed him to pass.

"Can it be that simple?" Tom James asked.

McKnight's voice was firm. "I doubt that David gets far."

A commotion could be heard toward the outskirts of the village.

"They must have got David," McKnight said.

"The bastards," Wilson said. "Let's get this over with!"

Maesaw's voice rang out, "No. Wait, senors. They are Mexicans."

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The Comanches divided as a handsome Spaniard in expensive dress forced his mount past the chiefs.

"Thank God I am in time," the Spaniard said. "I truly feared that you would be dead."

The Spaniard turned toward One-eye and spoke sternly. The chief accepted the orders without resistance. He swung his pony about and issued orders for the people to withdraw. Old Bear Shield cut his eyes menacingly toward James and without comment, wheeled his horse away.

"These Comanches are our allies," the Spaniard said. "They had been told to kill any Yankees that passed through these lands. They had no way of knowing that the Spanish are no longer in control. A free Mexico welcomes you openly."

"I'm John McKnight. To whom do I have the honor?"

"Don Jose de Philimon, Alcalde of Nacatoche, at your service, senor."

The men gathered around Philimon. Within a few moments, David Kirkee returned and paused apart from the group. Jeemy Wilson roughly slapped him on the back.

"Don't feel so bad there, David," Wilson laughed. "For several moments, I was wishing that I had tried the same thing."

"We should go to Nacatoche immediately. I am not sure how long this truce will last," Philimon said.

"How did you know about us?" James asked.

"Big Star sent word by rider yesterday," Don Jose answered.

"Give me that pistol, John," Tom James said.

McKnight drew the flintlock from his belt and handed it to his partner. James walked alone toward Big Star who was gathering of his wives and possessions.

Big Star turned toward James and smiled with uncertainty.

Tom James looked intently into the warrior's eyes as he spoke. "I know you can't understand a word that I'm saying, but I want you to know that I'll never forget what you did for us."

Big Star accepted the gun without examining it and spoke to one of his wives. The woman retrieved an ornamental smoking pipe.

"Na net shay, he mi toscha," he said softly as he handed it to James.

Big Star mounted his pony and ordered his family to move out. He did not look back as he rode away.

James walked silently back to Maesaw and asked, "What does, Na net shay, he mi toscha, mean?"

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Francois Maesaw paused and thought before shaking his head and answering, “He said, ‘All men travel a common road.’ It is meaningless.”

James turned to look back toward the last vestiges of the village as Wilson stepped near.

"I wonder what he meant?" James asked as he fondled the pipe.

"Does it matter?" Wilson asked.

Tom James smiled. "No, I guess it doesn't."

**End of Story**

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