



The pain in his chest, he realized, was nothing more or less than a prodding rifle

Sheep Dog

By ROBERT W. COCHRAN

Author of "White Lady," "Fugitives Three," etc.

In twenty-nine years Woody Sanderson had never missed a fugitive, had never known fear, and had never felt the touch of Death on his shoulder. Then all that was changed, on one snowy night when the ice was too thin and the hunted man too clever

WOODY SANDERSON had been sheriff of Talbot County for twenty-nine years. That proved two things—or should have: First, that he was probably the only sheriff in the state who had held office that length of time and was therefore a competent officer; and second, that he was too old to start out on

a manhunt with winter only a few hours away.

People were often fooled by Woody Sanderson, particularly strangers. He did not look at all like the sheriffs you see in the movies, and not much like the ones you read about in books and magazines. Perhaps that was another reason why he had held office for so long.

He shaved only twice a week, with the result that about two-thirds of the time his heavy-jowled face was covered by a thick scrub of hair. Once, he had grown a beard but his political opponents had seized upon it as proof that anyone who looked so much like Santa Claus couldn't make a good sheriff, so he had promptly reverted to his old schedule of shaving each Wednesday and Sunday morning.

If things were quiet in the county, and they frequently were, he made it a practice to conduct his two granddaughters to Sunday School. Even his enemies admitted that he was an easy mark for anyone in distress, so that after twenty-nine years of steady employment he had nothing put by for a rainy day, a fact that his plump and usually good-natured wife frequently called to his attention.

He was preparing to shave the Wednesday morning that Dolly Cooper burst through the kitchen door and sobbed out her story. The Coopers lived on a clearing three miles west of town. The sheriff knew the location as well as he knew the inside of his own pocket. For forty of his fifty-eight years he had hunted and fished, and even, in his young, foolish days, prospected through the entire district.

A man had come to the Coopers' home the previous night, a stranger heading on foot for the mining camps to the northwest. November nights were such that no one would have allowed a stray animal to sleep without shelter, so the Coopers had made the stranger welcome and given him a spare bunk in their two-room cabin.

In the morning the man had demanded food, a gun, money, things that the Coopers were ill prepared to part with. Guy Cooper, little and quick and inclined to sudden outbursts of temper, had ordered the stranger off the place. Dolly was all but incoherent from that point on, but the sheriff and his wife gathered that in the quarrel that followed, the stranger had snatched Guy's gun down from the deer antlers and shot Guy once through the head and once through the body.

While the sheriff listened he had been buckling on his holster. He pulled on furlined gloves and a sheepskin coat, and with a word to his wife as to the care to be taken of Dolly Cooper, he shucked a cap down over his tousled hair and went out to crank up the car that had served him since before the depression had hit the country.

The sheriff never carried a watch, but

when the car finally surrendered after a stubborn but futile resistance, he took a quick glance at the mist-shrouded sun and decided if he worked fast he might be back by noon. There was a light snow on the ground, and as he rumbled over the frozen ruts, he began to form a definite plan of campaign.

He sighed regretfully, remembering he had not eaten since the previous night, and by way of solace lit the charred pipe that had been the cause of more than one argument between his wife and himself.

HE CAME to the Cooper homestead. He sat for a moment in the car after he had cut the motor. The sound of his arrival was absorbed by the silence. The Coopers had a few pigs, a few chickens, and not much else. He appraised the unfrightened movements of these in the stump-littered yard and decided that the murderer was probably already five miles away. Once he reached the ore mines to the northwest, the chance of his capture would be slight.

With the deliberation of a man who has decided upon his objective and doesn't mean to be turned from it, the sheriff descended from the car and approached the one door of the cabin. The pigs and chickens scattered before him.

He clicked his tongue when he opened the door and saw the small sprawled figure of the dead man upon the floor. Because he never left anything to chance, he spent valuable minutes feeling for pulse and heartbeat. Then he lifted the already stiffening body, carried it into the only bedroom and placed it on the still unmade bed.

There were cold biscuits on the tables, and he took three of these as he went back through the kitchen. He circled the house three times in widening circles before he found footprints leading off to the northwest.

It had taken him more than an hour. He began to doubt if he would return by noon, and munched the last of the biscuits before he again brought his pipe from his

pocket. This time he did not light it.

He made certain that his thirty-eight was free in its holster, pulled back the flaps of his cap, and followed the tracks in the snow. Since Guy's rifle was not in the cabin, it was fairly certain that the murderer had it—for defense or, more likely, for attack.

The sheriff's advance was slow. Twenty years before, he might have moved faster, but experience and age had taught him to take things easy.

For the most part he kept his eyes ahead of him rather than on the prints. There was little wild life to alarm or warn him. Once a flock of crows cawed upward at his approach, and he was confident that for a time at least he could relax his vigilance.

When he came to open glades he invariably scanned the sky, and was not surprised when flakes of snow floated down. This only made him step a little faster. If he could decide the other man's approximate course he might be able to take a shortcut, knowing the country as he did; but until then he was wholly dependent upon the tracks. These, he saw when he came to the next break in the forest, were fast blotted out by the snow.

He could no longer see even the slightest radiance of the sun when he attempted to pierce the descending blanket. It didn't bother him much; he remembered times when he had gone without food for days on a stretch, and he had always survived.

Two things alone were necessary for life in the winter woods: dry clothing, and a fire. If he wanted luxury, there was his pipe, which, even in the absence of tobacco, could be chewed with relish.

It grew slightly warmer, and then the thing that he had been fearing happened. He came to a wide expanse of unforested snow that sloped down to the smooth surface of a lake, and the dim outline of the prints he had been following disappeared. The snow made a vague tapestry before him that thickened to a blending wall.

He recognized the place. Ten years before he had shot a deer almost where he

was now standing. The animal, wounded, had tried to escape by swimming the long, sausalike lake that stretched for five miles on either side of him.

He walked slowly as he approached the snow-covered ice, not certain that the weather had been sufficiently cold to thicken the ice enough to bear a man's weight. When he felt the smooth glassiness beneath his feet, he moved backward and tried to think what a fugitive would do.

THE falling snow made an icing for his cap and sheepskin coat and clung, until it melted, to the short stubble of his beard. The murderer, he reasoned, had probably been heading deliberately for the lake. The sudden storm that had covered his tracks would give him a sense of security.

If the man had risked the ice holding his weight and crossed the lake, to fail to follow him would give him too great a lead. If, on the other hand, the murderer, feeling himself safe, had circled the lake, the sheriff could, by crossing on the ice, cut the ten-mile lead down to where he might again pick up the tracks; or, he might gain the lead, so that it would only be necessary to watch for the other's approach.

The falling snow would to some extent even the odds of the murderer's rifle against his own thirty-eight.

There was, of course, the possibility that the man, fearing pursuit, would not strike out in a direct line for the mining camps. The sheriff considered this and decided to stake everything on the man's eagerness to reach the camps and conceal his identity among hundreds of other drifters.

Once his decision was made, the sheriff again stepped out upon the ice. The snow made sharp squeaking sounds beneath his heavy shoes, but that was all. The ice gave no indication that it was not strong enough to hold the weight of one man or of a hundred.

The lake here was not two miles wide, and as the ice continued to hold he moved

faster than he had on land. Ahead he could see the gray outline of trees that flanked the shore. Then without warning the ice buckled beneath his feet, and in spite of his desperate forward lunge, with his body spreadeagled to distribute his weight, he found himself floundering in the icy water.

Woody Sanderson had always been proud of his clear-headedness in an emergency. He was clear-headed now. Twenty years earlier it might have been nothing more than a disagreeable experience, for which his good-natured wife would reproach him. But twenty years had added fifty pounds to his weight and subtracted vitality and endurance in like proportion.

The sting of the water cut into him like a thousand sharp-pointed darts. He felt its surge up through his trouser legs and in the sleeves of his sheepskin coat.

The thick clothing that had been, until now, a protection against the winter's cold, became suddenly a menace. His heavy boots, the thick wool socks that had been feather-light, became sheets of down-pulling lead. Even the gun at his side was, abruptly, a threat.

The pipe slipped from between his clenched teeth and disappeared beneath the ice-flecked water.

With as much care as though he had hours instead of seconds to reach his goal, he propelled himself forward until his fingers clutched the rough edge of the broken ice. Without attempting to draw his body upon the snow-covered surface, he sustained himself, allowing his gray eyes to judge the distance to the shore. Without the added weight of his winter's clothing he thought it probable he might break his way shoreward until he could touch bottom with his feet. He discarded the idea; it would mean ten, perhaps fifteen minutes, and his clothing would drag him under long before that.

Placing his weight gradually on his arms as he pushed them across the ice, he tried to crawl upward. His head, his shoulders, his chest, he brought slowly to the ice-surface, moving his hands and arms like

some grotesque seal. Then, with scarcely a sound, the ice upon which his body lay extended split from the rest, and before he could regain balance his head disappeared beneath the surface.

Even now he was not panicky. What had started as an annoying accident became a desperate fight for life. Before he had quite expelled the water from his mouth, he was busy stripping off the heavy coat. It slipped from his shoulders and by its own weight pulled off his arms, carrying his gloves with it. His shoes, laced tight with rawhide, he could not hope to reach, but the thirty-eight, when he had loosened the buckle on the holster, followed the coat to the bottom.

HE REMEMBERED the deer he had shot ten years before and the valiant animal's hopeless effort to escape across the lake. He had been a little ashamed of himself even at the time, when he finally brought the animal to shore in a boat he had walked a mile to secure. He had never considered at the time that some day he too would fight for his life in the same body of water.

His teeth chattered and cut blood from his lips as he prepared to make another try. Lightened now and more careful than before, he caught a piece of floating ice and sliding this before him brought it finally to make a second layer upon the unbroken ice in front of him.

The wish went through his mind that he had been able to put something aside for his wife. He didn't admit, even to himself, that he was not going to win to safety, but he knew to the last detail just how serious his position was, knew even if he escaped from the water that chilled through to his bones he might not survive the freezing cold that would cling to his soaked clothing.

Then, too, there was the man with a rifle, who had killed once. . . .

His forearms resting on the double thickness of ice, he turned at right angles, kicking his body to the surface. The ice sent out little sharp cracking sounds that

he dared not heed. He brought a thigh, a leg, then his entire side upon the ice; it groaned threateningly. He squirmed crabwise. His other leg came up and he took a minute to get his breath.

The snow continued to fall, softly, evenly, endlessly, as though wishing to hide the tragedy.

He realized, even before he moved with a snail's slowness, that the sheltering trees, offering a slender protection from the cold, had kept the ice from forming quite so thickly near the shore.

The snow, as he edged along, made of him a giant white caterpillar. His raw, bleeding hands, cut by the ice and reddened by the water and air, left tiny flecks of blood that were instantly blotted out by the descending flakes.

The skeleton trees, visible through the white curtain, seemed never to come nearer. Once an arm upon which he rested too much weight disappeared beneath the ice. He stopped, not wishing by a single hasty movement to jeopardize his safety. Ten yards, no more, separated him from the shore when again the ice parted and he floundered waist-deep, experiencing, for the first time, before his feet found the solid bottom, the shock of fear.

He crushed through the remaining ice, and turning when he reached the shore looked back triumphantly to what had so nearly proved to be the end of the trail.

Only the heat of his body, he knew, was preventing his clothes from freezing. His first thought was for a fire. Dangerous as it would be—since the man he was hunting might more easily stalk him—if he hoped to survive he must have dry clothes.

The hand that brought the matches from his pocket trembled when he saw the purple pulp that had once been the sulphur heads. Carefully he separated them, hoping that one among the lot might still be serviceable. When the final one had sifted through his fingers to the snow, he sighed.

It was a soft sound from so big a man, a sound of acceptance rather than of

bitterness. His eyes fell upon the silver star that was fastened to the water-darkened vest, and the broad, thick shoulders straightened. With hands already shaking he unclasped the catch and slipped the badge into his pocket.

I WAS still hours from nightfall. He felt unconsciously for his pipe before he remembered that it was in the lake. He quickly surveyed the trees, comparing them to the blanketed shoreline of the lake, and turned into the woods. If he was lucky—he had never had to depend on luck before—he might still find the man he was looking for and get the fire that he so sorely needed.

He walked for an hour, hands in his trousers pockets, head down, shoulders hunched against the snow and the cold. Twice he stopped and examined trees that stood apart from others like landmarks. When he stopped a third time it was where a blaze marked a trail through the woods.

His eyes glinting, he dropped on his knees and sent a careful glance over the white carpet. At first he was disappointed; then he saw it—the outline so dim from the descending flakes it was all but invisible; but it was there, and once discovered, it was easy to trace others forward and back.

An hour ago, perhaps longer, a man had traveled along that trail to the northwest.

A change both subtle and distinct came over him as he advanced. Like a veteran dog that scents game in a barren field, he felt age and weariness drop from his shoulders; and there was almost a spring in his step as he increased his pace. To turn back, with the almost certain prospect before him of a night in the open, in freezing clothes, without fire or shelter, was impossible.

The mining camps were still eighty miles ahead—eighty miles of snow and ice and cold that might well take a week instead of two days. Yet four, five miles ahead of him, perhaps a shorter distance, a man traveled who could furnish food

and fire, and who could also, in one swift, sudden movement, send a messenger of death from the rifle he carried.

For two hours he moved forward with all possible speed. He knew it was late afternoon by the increased cold.

The snow no longer melted in the scrubby beard, but clung and under the heat of his body changed slowly from snow to ice. The long winter dusk was creeping down through the stark, leafless trees, adding a more complete curtain to that already furnished by the descending snow.

The tracks, he could still see by bending until his eyes were nearly level with his knees, were covered now by only a thin fuzz of flakes. Still he dared not slow his pace lest the man leave the trail, trusting to the darkness and the falling snow to confuse anyone trying to follow.

His hands, which he tried to warm by flailing together, were already white instead of red. His nose and ears had ceased to give off the tingling warning that comes before numbness.

His body swayed and his feet no longer moved in a straight line, but he was unaware of it. Like a grotesque mechanical toy he would continue to move forward while he remained erect, and failing this would thresh his feet in a final spasm of energy if he fell to the trail.

His senses had dulled in spite of his resolve. Something hard and painfully sharp pressed into his breast and brought him to a complete stop. "In a hurry, feller?" a man's voice asked from the gray darkness.

HE KNEW without giving conscious thought to it that the pain in his chest was caused by a rifle barrel. He didn't know that he had been breathing hard until he heard the harsh sound of his own breath in his throat.

His teeth rattled together like dice in a box when he opened his mouth to speak. "Fire," he said, "freezing," and tried to whip his sluggish brain to act in spite of the weariness that was creeping over him.

Then he was aware that the rifle barrel no longer pressed into his breast. He swayed forward for lack of its support. The man still stood, a menacing, snow-covered figure; and the sheriff heard a tiny click. A small sound that might have been made by a finger tightening on the worn mechanism of a rifle-trigger, cleared the cobwebs of fatigue from his brain. "Jack," he said, "you get me a fire and I'll give you a handful of nuggets."

The seconds that followed dragged out so long that he had time to think of Dolly Cooper, and her husband lying dead back in the dingy little cabin. He even thought of his wife, probably still keeping his dinner warm in the oven.

The sheriff hadn't seen three decades of bad men come and go without learning something. He knew that he was safe for the time. If the man had been going to shoot, he would have done it in spite of those promised nuggets.

"Watch it, feller," the man said finally, and the sheriff blinked his eyes in the light of the match that flared in the other man's hand. "You look like a sheep dog to me, feller," the man said finally. "I don't like dogs trackin' me."

"Tracking nothing," the sheriff said. "On my way down to the settlement when this snow started. Tried to cut across the lake and near got drowned. Got a drink, Jack?"

"Yeah," the man said, "for myself. Where's your camp, feller? Where you got these nuggets?"

The sheriff laughed, the high-pitched, almost hysterical laugh of a foolish man or a desperate one. "I got to get a fire," he said, "and a drink; then I'll show you."

The man ran quick, deft hands over the sheriff's body and stepped back. "I'm gamblin' one drink on you, but we ain't buildin' no fire." The sheriff groped for the extended bottle and had to hold it between his two hands because his fingers had no life in them.

"All right, feller," the man said when he had replaced the bottle in his pocket, "I ain't got no time to fool."

"It won't be easy to find," the sheriff said. "Had a fire and could wait till daylight." The whisky was pounding life back into his chilled body; with a fire . . . But the man's next words convinced him that there would be no fire.

"To hell with it," the man said, and struck a blow with the barrel of the gun that made the sheriff's cheek sting in spite of its numbness.

"Now, Jack," the sheriff said, "there's nothing to get sore about. Maybe if I keep moving I can make it. Let's go."

He led the way along the almost invisible outline of the trail. With a sixth sense, he seemed to know each turn in the trail. Every little hollow, every rise in the snow-covered ground was a familiar landmark. When he forked from the trail, the man behind him called shortly, "Wait, feller."

The sheriff stood still, judging the nearness of the other, balancing his chances of winning in a rough-and-tumble. The man said, "I ain't goin' to foller an old fogy an' not know where I'm goin'."

"'Bout a mile," the sheriff said, and the falling snow hid the smile that parted the scrubby, ice-filled stubble of hair on his face.

More than once, when he had been deer hunting, he had cursed the disillusioned prospectors who pockmarked the ground with their test shafts and left holes to trap unwary animals. A mile away was was such a hole. He remembered it well, for only two years before he had saved a doe's life that he had found trapped in the pit.

The life he was trying to save this time was his own.

OVERHEAD the trees protested against the ever-increasing weight of snow. Far away a fox gave a series of short, sharp barks. Near at hand, much too near, he could hear the *mush, mush* of the other's footsteps.

He knew that he would have to be very careful. If the other man suspected that he was being led into a trap . . . The

sheriff remembered Cooper's sprawled figure as he had found it on the floor of the cabin. Only *his* body, if he failed, would probably not be found until spring, not until the wolves and coyotes had stripped the last shred of flesh from the bones.

He moved slower, trying to pierce the descending snow, attempting unsuccessfully to test each forward step. He felt almost more than he saw the towering pine that was his landmark. Twenty feet from the trunk, a little to the left, a little more. Then he saw it, the white grayness of its depth staring up at him. *Mush, mush*, the footsteps behind came on. The sheriff moved a little way and stood staring upward at the pine's laden branches.

He knew that if this ruse failed, he had lost everything. He had spurred his protesting muscles beyond actual endurance. Failure now could only mean collapse.

"I can't make it, Jack," the sheriff said and swayed, moving a step backward as he tried to recover himself.

The man beside him said hoarsely, "You damn . . ." and moved to one side, the gun butt starting to his shoulder. It never quite got there, and the rest of the sentence was smothered in a shower of descending snow.

The breath went from the sheriff's big body and he trembled, as much from relief as from cold and exhaustion. The man was shouting things from the shaft, but the sheriff moved until he could lean his back against the pine tree and tried to arrange his thoughts.

"Hey, you blasted fool," the man said, "get me out of here."

"Yes, Jack," the sheriff said, "sure. Throw up the rifle and the bottle; then we'll talk."

"I'll see you in Hell first," the man said, and the sheriff heard him frantically trying to scale the steep sides of his prison. He waited—he could afford to wait now—stamping his feet to keep the blood moving in his legs. He wondered if a man could still be sheriff if he had lost all his fingers and toes.

"Tell you what, Jack," he said finally, "you pitch up the matches and then we'll talk."

"Matches, hell," the man said. "It's warmer here than up there. I ain't standin' around in wet clothes either. You'll be glad to talk soon, if you ain't dead."

The sheriff knew that it was true; not only that, but the other man had probably twenty years' edge on him. A man couldn't do at sixty, what he could at forty.

"Well, Jack," he said after careful deliberation, "I'm not one to stand and freeze if I can help it, so I'll be getting along. You change your mind, you shoot that gun. If I'm not too far I may come back."

He walked a little way and stood listening. He could hear the other's desperate attempts to claw his way upward, his rasping breath, the muttered oaths. He almost felt sorry for the man until he remembered Cooper lying in the little cabin back in the clearing.

If he hadn't been so nearly played out himself, he thought that he might have been able to cut a club and perhaps overcome the other man. The seconds dragged along, each making it more probable that the man wasn't going to give in.

Just when the sheriff was trying to think of some reason he could give for still being there when he was supposed to be two hundred yards away, the man cried, "Hi!" his voice echoing through the stillness of the forest.

The sheriff relaxed against the tree and waited. "Hey, there, wait!" The man was really frightened now. It was what the sheriff had hoped for. A frenzied stream of curses and entreaties came as the sheriff waited, allowing what would have been ample time enough for him to retrace his steps.

"Changed your mind, Jack?" he asked, his usually mild voice husky.

"You old fool," the man said savagely, "you ain't through with me yet. What you want me to do?"

"We'll have the gun first and the matches; oh, yes, and the whisky."

AFTER a long minute the gun was thrown up and sank into the white snow ten feet from where the sheriff stood. His first impulse was to leap for it, but he waited. "The matches," he said, and caught the tiny package before it could sink into the soft snow. "Now the whisky."

"What the blazes," the man said. "How do I know you won't leave me here?"

"You don't," the sheriff said, "but I never left a prisoner to die yet."

There was a long silence, and the sheriff pulled his hands from his trousers pockets and held them beneath his arms for added warmth.

"Who are you, feller?" the man asked finally.

"Just an old sheep dog," the sheriff said. "Twenty miles back there a wolf got in and killed one of my sheep. I've got him now. I've got him in a trap."

"Why, you crazy old fogy," the man said derisively, "you couldn't take me back if I was handcuffed."

The sheriff was busy collecting dead twigs. When he had these aflame he heaped branches on top of the fire. A fire would do two things: it would allow him to thaw out and dry the clothes that were stiff with ice, and it would bring aid if anyone was searching for him. This he doubted, for his tracks had been covered almost as soon as he had made them. He ferreted out the bottle from where it lay concealed and was not surprised that it was empty.

He turned a deaf ear to his prisoner's threats and pleas, and when at last the mounting flames brought stabs of pain into his frosted feet and hands, he started breaking a branch that he could use as a rope.

With steam rising from his clothes in clouds, he caught up the rifle, and making sure the muzzle was not plugged with snow lowered with care a branch until he felt the man's grasp upon it. "Easy now, Jack," he cautioned; "I been through a lot today, and I'm apt to shoot and ask questions after."

"What you trailin' me for?" the man

asked when he stood again on firm ground. "I ain't done nothin'."

"Maybe not," the sheriff said, "but there's a G C on this rifle butt; you can't talk yourself out of that."

He wasn't sure that he could pull the trigger, but he kept the gun pointed at his prisoner. "Turn around and put your hands together," he commanded, and with his free hand pulled a bandanna from his pocket. He thought afterward that he should have been suspicious of the other man's willingness to comply.

"Easy, Jack." He had the loop of the bandanna over the man's hands. The gun was held beneath his arm, the muzzle pressing into his prisoner's back. Suddenly the man whirled and planted a swift, slashing blow on the gray-bearded chin.

The sheriff grunted and brought the rifle butt to his shoulder as he swayed backward. "Go on, shoot." The man laughed and pulled a flaming brand from the fire. The trigger snapped on the empty chamber. "Think I wouldn't have blasted your guts out if I'd had a slug? That nester back there only had two cartridges in the house."

The man laughed again.

The sheriff shook his shaggy head. He had been caught napping. Well, it was the first time in twenty-nine years, and it would likely be the last time, too.

The blazing stick descended in an arc and the sheriff felt it strike his bent shoulders as he made a dive for the man's legs. He grunted with satisfaction as his arms

closed and he hugged the smaller figure to him in a desperate embrace.

A shower of sparks cascaded down upon the long hair on the back of his neck and he shook his head savagely. The man fought like a cat, with arms and feet and teeth, twisting, turning, writhing half buried in snow as he struggled to break the old man's arms that moved always higher along his body.

Only when the sheriff's big, raw, bleeding hands had closed upon his prisoner's throat did the little man cease fighting, and his body lay limp upon the snow before the sheriff turned him upon his face and laced the bandanna tightly back and forth across his wrists.

The snow began to thin as they made their plodding way on a shortcut to the lake shore. Careful to choose a spot where no sheltering trees had protected the ice, the sheriff herded his prisoner across the surface and clucked with satisfaction when he saw the bonfire that searchers had lit at the edge of the woods.

It was broad daylight when he entered his own kitchen, warmed by borrowed clothes and cheered by the thought that he still had a clean record.

Mrs. Sanderson protested, "It's a wonder you wouldn't shave. Some day you'll be taken for a tramp, and get shot."

The sheriff looked at the grayish-white stubble in the mirror, and caressed his cheek with tender fingers. "Sheep dog," he said in a whisper, and winked a blood-shot eye at himself.

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