

The Raggedies

By Tom Sheehan

Sheriff Bill Dobson had an uneasy feeling that something was going on in his town, Ross Corners, on a twist of Colorado's Blue River. The country around was scenic with great views in every direction, the folks were generally nice folks who said the sheriff kept his ear close to the ground, that sooner or later he'd hear everything on the trail. But he did not have the slightest clue about this new undercurrent.

Neither did Caleb Thornwell, Jr., 11-year old son of the livery owner, sitting on a rock in a cave he'd never been in before, the newest member of "The Raggedies," a name they adopted because all of them wore hand-me-downs or "worn to the nub" clothes. He kept shaking his head, amazed at what was going on, amazed at how kids, all of them near his age, had this grasp on things, on the whole town it appeared, and kept it all in "The Book." Caleb was smaller than the others, and probably less interested than his pals, but his father, more than just him realizing it, had a handle on much of everything that went on in town, like the comings and goings of people using his livery, at least for overnight stays. Young Thornwell, without knowing it, was a political pawn, but Billy Talmon, beyond his years, knew his way around and he'd be able to use this new boy who seemed to lack for tight friends.

Thornwell didn't have a hint at what The Book was, though the other kids, these new friends of his, spoke of it with admiration, love, whatever was coming at him that he couldn't figure out. They seemed to be on fire every time they talked about it, The Book.

Suddenly, at the other end of the cave, away from the canyon entrance, a raspy sound was heard. Andy Marston, another kid from town, crawled into the cave at the back entrance, whistled twice, both times lightly, listened for a few seconds, heard someone whistle back, and said, "Is that you in there, Billy? You got The Book with you?"

The cave was in the heart of the Rockies, not far from the town of Ross Corners, sitting on the picturesque high end of the Blue River.

"Yuh, it's me, Andy, me and Benjy," Billy Talmon said, "and we got a new deputy. Caleb Thornwell from the livery. He's here with us. Course he ain't got anything new for us right now, being so new, but we'll be able to count on him down the trail." Feeling like he was buttering the bread with a half-pound of butter and a load of jam, he said, "We'll sure count on Caleb helping us out here. That's one fine new recruit we got with us now. It's plain old good news in itself for The Book."

He paused with command presence, and then continued, "You got anything new, Andy? Anything to report for The Book?" He was able to stand up easily in that section of the cave. It caused him think of an Indian totem, which made him feel slightly exalted, especially for a kid almost a man in some things. The light from the flames threw his shadow on the wall and across the upper arch of the cave. He felt bigger than he actually was.

"Sure have, Billy. Wait'll I get up in there and get myself set."

He crawled almost all the way in until he saw the small fire and the silhouettes of his friends. The comfort zone grasped him; hanging loose with friends was one of his few joys. Much of his time was spent in his father's barn, mucking out, cleaning and maintaining the few possessions needing such work, and not having much time to spend with his new horse. He missed those opportunities and felt lucky with his "membership" in the gang.

Excitement ran all over him and the others could feel it even before he said, "I got something for The Book. I really got something this time." A deep breath seemed to swallow him for a few seconds. "You won't believe this."

"You said that last time, Andy," Talmon said. "You ain't got nothing yet. Wait'll you hear what Benjy saw. It could knock you right out of the saddle. It's great stuff for The Book." He was upbeat and excited, waiting to spill the goods, but knew Andy had to have his chance in the sun in the cave. He almost laughed all the way through that private interchange, but wouldn't say so to the others ... let them find out for themselves, if they could.

"So what'd you see, Andy? It's got to be right up in front of you, seeing it. Knowing who's in the mix of it like he don't ever belong there. We're not interested in who's sneaking into whose bedroom when the old man's away, or who plays around out there under that tree that's off on the trail into town. Lots of folks play there coming or going. That don't count with us. Seems like a lot of folks tend to stuff like that."

"It's Sheriff Dobson," Andy said. "He carries a stick stuck down in the rifle sheath of his saddle and he tugs it onto his own small branding iron he carries in his saddle bag and marks a cow every once in a while and just waits for him, I bet, to show up in a count on someone else's place. When they tell him, he says it wandered off from his small herd and it's kinda come back to him."

"He do it only the once?"

"Nope. Not on your life. I saw him a couple of times do it. Like he looked around and made sure

nobody was seeing him, too. I wanted it to be good for The book.”

“Where was you?”

“In the bushes. He didn’t see me.”

“Where was your horse?”

“I walked out there. I was gonna do a little fishing the first time it happened, and keep my eyes out for something to put in The Book. I was thinking about what you said before, about horses giving us away any time, them and their shoes of iron. That was because I saw him kind of sneaking around, going out of town them few times, and decided to walk out there, like I was really going fishing. What the heck, it didn’t bother me none.”

“Did he start a fire to heat the iron up?”

“Nope, like he did before when I found him,” Andy said. “He found a fire still warm from branding being done before he got there. The Rickets’ crew had left it and he had been watching them. He plain rode in and put on a few sticks and heated his iron and used the stick to handle it and stuck it on a dogie, then skedaddled out of there. The dogie just walked off.”

“Sounds like we got him, but we got to find that branding iron and copy it. That’ll sure go in The Book, Andy. But we gotta find that iron of his. That’s a good piece of information. We’ll nab him when the time comes. You did good. I always thought the sheriff was on the thin side of the law. My pa says it all the time. He don’t trust nobody anyway.”

Andy said, like he was reporting to the commanding officer of a cavalry regiment, “Just doing my duty, Sheriff.” He could have snapped off a salute, his retort was so business-like. “You gonna put that in The Book right now? Right now so’s I can see it?” He was as proud as when his own colt was born and he called him Moondog, a name he had heard from an old Indian.

“Sheriff” Billy Talmon, a little taller than his friends, a bit more age showing in his face and eyes, who had “organized” The Raggedy Sheriff and His Deputies, said, “I sure am, Andy. I sure am.” With a smooth and deliberate move, he slid his hand inside his shirt and slowly pulled out a slim volume measuring about 6 inches wide and 8 inches long. The cover of finished leather showed a dark, roughly drawn title of reading “Our Book of Law Breakers.” The slim volume was crowded with pages, and looked to be at least an inch thick.

They simply called it, reverently at any mention, “The Book.” They held it to be their answer to all local problems, their witness to the wrongs they had seen, and every wrong had a witness and a name

wrapped together by a date. They were meticulous entries, noted and sworn to.

Talmon opened The Book to a page not fully used and wrote a new entry: Sheriff Dobson sneak branded a Rickets' dogie. He carried a small branding iron with no long handle in his saddle bag. He carried a wood handle in his rifle pouch. He was alone. He was seen this day, as signed below here. Witness, Andy Marston, June 11, 1877." The last entry was made by Marston beaming in the face as he did so.

Talmon followed up that activity by saying, "Now I'll read what Benjy saw and what we wrote in The Book."

There followed a momentary silence as Talmon prepared to witness a prior entry. The silence was an announcement in its own right, a most solemn occasion of a lawman's deposition.

"Banker Rauthour has a stash of money outside of town under rocks in Brace Canyon. He buries it at or near dark, making sure he's alone. He collects some rocks to take back with him faking his search for silver or gold. He's done this on 6 different Saturday nights. I watched them all from the first time he snuck there and I was looking for my part in The Book. The money comes out of his pocket, like he brung it from someplace, and he adds it to the stash he keeps in a buried box. Witness, Benjy Smithers, June 8, 1877."

From the cave opening a whistle sounded once, and then a second time, then an answering whistle sifted through the cave like a small echo, or a heartbeat. "It's me, Henry Raymond. I'm comin' in."

A dragging noise was heard as Henry Raymond made his way toward the light. The other members could hear him puffing away, which sounded like more news coming, another page being used to "pin the tail on the donkey," as Talmon had once described their secret testimonies. "We ain't playing games," he had vouched, "but we'll sure pin the tail on the donkey when we unload The Book on the town."

"This is another good un," Henry Raymond said, sputtering about his news item of sorts. "I don't know what it means, but there's sure something going on that starts with Perkins the coffin maker."

He came to the fire, sat on a stone and looked as pleased as he was mysterious.

"Okay, Henry," Talmon said, "Let's have it. What this time?"

"We know Perkins never has a coffin ready when someone dies or gets killed and always has to make it from scratch. You know how he fusses around and makes a great commotion out of a little noise, like being important on the day he thinks is his day and not for the dead person. But when Dickson went down yesterday in that face-off with Caruthers, there was one ready, right in his shop. I saw it right inside the shop when he opened the door and the cut-up stuff and the shavings were still on the floor. And him and Doc Wentworth put Dickson's body right into it after the doc said Dickson was dead as he's ever going

to be.”

“Yuh, okay,” Talmon said. “So what?”

“He’s supposed to get buried today.”

“We all know that. What else?”

“He wasn’t in it this morning. He ain’t in it now.”

“Who isn’t?”

“Dickson ain’t in the coffin. Just a couple of sacks full of dirt in there. I saw it all this morning. I got right inside from the back. It’s easy, like he’s got nothing to protect anyway.”

“Anybody see you pokin’ around?”

“I’m a Raggedy Deputy, Billy. Nobody saw me. I made sure of that. That’s just the stuff we practiced them times you was showing us.”

Talmon was standing as tall as he imagined the totem to be, and his silhouette from the fire had leaped up the wall and onto the arched top of the cave. Then he moved his hands and arms the way he had practiced and saw the looks in their eyes and how it spread on their faces; they were awed and afraid of him and showed great respect for him. He moved his arms again the way he had studied the wings of vultures eyeing a body or carrion in a canyon or out on the grass. He could tell these kids to do anything and they’d do it.

He’d been in the cave an hour before anybody else came, retrieved some fire wood from a secret stash taken care of in advance of its need, started the fire, saw the silhouette, the ominous shadow he cast up and over everything in the cave, quickly read again the power and persuasion in the whole matter, and planned his day and some days that would follow by design.

“He” was The Sheriff of the Raggadies. Nobody disputed that. And his territory was growing. Caleb Thornwell was a continuing sign of that growth. The whole schoolhouse could come under his influence, but, as he had already sifted almost every one of them through his mind, most of the rest might not be able to handle the weight of the law. Mistakes he could not afford or tolerate. Law was the uppermost in all of this: though he heard something in his mind repeating the words all the time, as if an argument might be at work. Caleb’s recruitment showed for the good of the organization, and the others surely’d try to out-do themselves on their contributions just to show off a little, doubly spurred by the son of the liveryman who knew so much. That man knew at sight where horses had been ridden, how hard, what care they received, what their feed was like, what saddle sores had to say. Some folks said he even developed

reasons behind the selection of a horse's name. Few knew, though, that he wished he had thought of Moondog, which young Marston had named his colt. He loved that name for a horse. His own son never thought of names like that.

In the midst of his reverie and planning ideas, Andy Marston, still excited, Billy Talmon's shadow pressing down on him, said, "Billy, when are we going to spring The Book on the town?" His mouth was wide open, his fists formed like new punctuation.

Like the others, he almost bowed as the words slipped out of his mouth. "How will we do it? We can't tell the sheriff or the town council because half of them are already in The Book. How'll we do it, Billy?"

"Oh, gosh, Billy, I can't hardly wait," yelled Benjy Smithers, standing beside Talmon, almost as tall. "How long we gonna wait, Billy. What'll some of those faces look like when they hear what we got locked up in The Book?" He clasped his hands in anticipation.

It happened in Ross Corners' Crazy Colt Saloon, at the far end of the bar but nearest the piano, where Sheriff Bill Dobson, a smiling, outward and generally pleasant fellow who'd been on the job for five years, talked quietly with a couple of townies. The sheriff looked around innocently, set a new expression on his the way most people change subjects, and said, "You gents see anything funny going on in town, like something being hid from us?"

The quizzical look on his face, authentic as could be, said he as the sheriff of the town was officially puzzled by some aspect within Ross Corners' daily business. Most of the men in the saloon would agree that he was a pretty good man on the job, kept doggedly at solving issues, keeping the peace, enforcing most of the laws enacted by the Town Council.

One of the men said, "Bill, it's funny you should ask that. I don't think much goes on in town that ever gets by you. You seem to have a handle on everything and some of it, I'd bet, is even private." He chuckled as if to make the others chuckle with him, and they did so agreeably, for each one of them had a penchant for listening to tales of other folks; it fed their curiosity.

Another of the group, Jake Welton, said, "Are you talkin' about the kids, Bill, how they head out sometimes like they're goin' fishin' and I rarely see them on the stream, even in the best spots? We all know where the best spots are. We've known them for years."

“Where do they go,” Dobson said, “if they don’t go fishing?” he leaned in also and lowered his voice. “That’s what I was asking about. They seem awful damned busy about something. Talmon’s kid, Marston’s kid, Hank Raymond’s kid, a few others too, and I don’t know what they’re up to, but it ain’t fishing, like Jake says.”

Welton said, “Hell, Bill, I ain’t about to follow some kids out there maybe meetin’ a few girls on the sly. Sometimes lookin’ bad is lookin’ pretty good as far as the girls are concerned. These kids ain’t far away from bein’ real cowboys, you know. ‘Member how we fooled around even before we drove a few cows for our own folks?” He made them all laugh when he said, “Damn, but I wish I knowed then what I know now.”

Dobson, with the quick smile, said, “From what I heard, Jake, once you and Ellen got tussled up, it was all over for you. What’s it, close on 30 years now?”

They all laughed again and Dobson walked away as if he had another call to make, an arrest to be made, a law to be enforced. He could be quizzical and businesslike in one and the same manner, and the others accepted his quick departure as immediate business of the badge.

He walked back to his office thinking he had put the bee in their bonnet. He’d let it buzz around a bit. As usual, the buzz would come back to him in some manner, in short order. It always did.

Jake Welton, on the way back to his spread down trail about four miles, dropped in to see Caleb Thornwell when he saw him working on a horse in front of the livery.

“Caleb,” he said, “just sayin’ hello on my way home. How’s the family?” Then, as his usual manner, he jumped right into things that sat on his mind. “Bill Dobson was askin’ us if we knew what the kids is up to, bein’ kind of secret about somethin’ he can’t figure what. You got any ideas. Most of them are your boy’s age, I’d guess.”

“Not a thing I know, Jake, but I’ll sure ask young Caleb. Get him out of the lion’s mouth afore he gets snapped up.”

“It’d be interestin’ we get somethin’ Bill don’t know and drop it in his lap. Wouldn’t that be a twist?” He mounted his horse and departed, saying, “You hear anythin’, Caleb, let me in on it. Sure would enjoy that twist.” He laughed as he rode away.

Later that evening, young Caleb walking back from his most recent “fishing” excursion, no catch evident, and quickly noticed his father sitting in front of the livery, idling away. He was not an idling man and Caleb could tell he had something on his mind, the way he was twisting his pipe in both hands,

knocking it against the hitching rail and nothing falling out because there was nothing there to start with. It was a sure give-away that his father was “mind-set,” a term he had used numerous times.

“Catch anything, son? Don’t appear so to me, less you ate them already. You boys cook out there?”

Caleb was caught up immediately by the apparent change in attitude. His father rarely asked him where he had been, what he done, and he was not prepared for the encounter.

“Not a bite, Pa. Don’t know why you folks say those are the best places, by the second creek and past the big curve in the river. Nothing at all.”

The sun had disappeared behind one mountain peak, the dust had settled in the road behind him and behind the last rider passing by, horses nickered and neighed in the livery, and an ominous silence sat around his father, still tapping his empty pipe against the hitch rail, almost like the telegrapher at the station, someone somewhere knowing what those taps on the key meant.

Here, it was him.

The funny feeling persisted that “this was it.” A lot in his short life was about to be undone. How much could he hold back? His father knew so much; maybe he knew all of it already. The feeling ran through him like a series of quick shivers. The scenes in the cave surrounded him as if he was sitting there on that one stone he always sat on. The smell of dead ashes came into his nostrils as sharp as the lower barn being mucked out. Booming past his ears came Billy Talmon’s strong voice, much more than a mere echo; it could have been a steam engine grinding its slow-downed way into the station. Bang. Bang. Bang. Chug. Chug. Chug. Words. Words. Words.

The faces of Andy and Henry and Benjy and the others, staring at Billy, reared up in a space behind his eyes; they could have been taunting him.

“What have you and the boys been up to, Caleb? And I want no lies and no tomfoolery out of you. You just take a deep breath and break it loose for me. I’m your father and the most important one for you in all of this, whatever it is, and I hope it’s nothing bad you’ve hitched yourself to.”

There it was, out in the open, all the stuff that had been bothering him.

Caleb Thornwell, livery owner, sat in the sheriff’s office with Sheriff Dobson, and three members of the town council. He figured he had made the longest speech he’d ever made in his life, knowing he had

their strict and complete attention from his first words:

“The kids, a bunch of them, have a book with all kinds of stuff in it about some people; I don’t know who. Maybe somebody in this room is in it. They call it ‘The Book’ and I hear it’s loaded with enough stuff to put some folks in jail, or maybe worse. They’ve been collecting information for almost a year. They meet in a cave up in the mountains. They make reports on what they’ve seen happening and enter it right into The Book. I hope to hell I’m not in it. That Talmon kid is the ringleader.” He said it like Billy Talmon was a criminal of the first order. “Makes the others report what they saw, then writes it in The Book and makes them sign it as witnesses, and they put dates on it too. It’s like they’re getting ready for court, only Talmon says, from what I hear, he wants to give it to the Territorial Marshall, and not give it to anybody in Ross Corners. That includes you too, Sheriff, which would make me a little uneasy if I was you.”

Sheriff Dobson shivered a bit in his seat, figuring some folks in the room would hang him in a second if they’d seen what he had done on several occasions. At least, they’d send him off to prison for a good spell. Survival in a way meant keeping his mouth shut or jumping into the middle of the issue.

The badge felt heavy on his chest, a sensitive weight leaning on his heart.

He leaned in on the group. “It’s not right,” he said, “that kids have done this. Hell, they could have made things up to get even with older people, plain made errors all along the way.” He coughed and stammered and stood up and sat down and stood up and sat down again. The sweat ran on his nose like raindrops.

“It’s not their job,” he exclaimed, standing up again, waving his hands. “That’s me and my deputies’ job. That’s what we get paid for. Whatever we do, and without a lot of noise or fuss, we’ve got to get that book. Otherwise, it would only set things up for a whole damned vigilante movement and you know what the hell happened over in Claremont when that gang got going. It killed the town in less than a year. We can’t let that happen here. This town is too pretty to let it go to pieces over some kid sheriffs playing at games.”

The group talked for nearly three hours, hashing things over, developing a plan of sorts, setting a few rules they’d have to follow. None of them knew if they were in The Book or not.

At least, they did not show it outwardly. But all of them wanted to get The Book in their hands, perhaps for one hour.

Pre-dawn, the men at the evening meeting left town and staked out all the places around where the cave might be, knowing there were dozens of caves they had been in and many they had not. Before

the sun jumped at Ross Corners over the rim of a mountain, the men were in various sites, each with a wide view of certain sections of the land.

They were waiting on the boys, The Raggedies. Each one realized that Caleb Thornwell had an inside edge on them.

Dobson wondered if any of them were as worried as he was. He wondered why it had to come to this, “because of a bunch of nosey kids.” Then, for the first time since the issue started to unfold, he smiled and remembered his own dreams and hopes as a kid. He promised himself he’d be as tactful, and as kind, as he could be.

A sun’s ray dipped inside his collar, warmed him. A stone, thrown in a high arc, glanced off a section of cliff and clinked off two other surfaces and banged on the floor of the canyon.

Bill Talmon, walking up off the trail into the mountains, looking behind him every so often, picked up another stone and flung it higher than the one first tossed. This one had the same flight and the same noises attached to it. Dobson remembered quick pieces of his life he had not thought of in years.

Talmon, Dobson noted, carried nothing in his hands. He wondered if The Book was stuffed inside his shirt or if he had not brought it along. That’d mess things up, for sure.

Looking around again, Talmon picked up another stone and flung it higher yet. The stone made louder noises as young Talmon ducked behind a rock, peering out occasionally.

“That’s one damned smart kid,” Dobson said to himself as he watched Talmon scan the entire area for anyone who might have followed him.

Satisfied he was not followed, he scaled a section of wall, slipped into a fissure, appeared again at another break, the way one passes behind a large window, and disappeared for good.

“Ah,” Dobson said, “there’s the cave of The Raggedies.” He puffed with admiration of the boy, though his feelings were all fighting with each other. “I best forget that thought,” he said to himself. “I’ll just wait to see who else shows up.”

From a jumble of rocks he saw a second boy squeezing his way through another fall of rocks that had lain in place for maybe a thousand years. It was Andy Marston, a nice kid, never in trouble, likeable as all hell, with a big mouth, big teeth, and a big grin. His ears matched the other facial parts. He’d never said “Boo” in town.

Marston applied the same security routine Talmon had used, and then disappeared into the cave.

Four more boys came, and Dobson flashed a mirror and two flashes came back. He waited half an

hour and the other stake-out posse members arrived.

Dobson heard their reports, made his report, and then said, "We have to move in fast because there's a backside exit from the cave. I have no idea where it comes out, so we have to get all under control from this end."

It was just after 9 o'clock in the morning when they rushed into the cave, shouting and screaming and scaring the daylight out of the boys milling around in fright and excitement. Dobson had Billy Talmon by the arm, his other hand feeling around his waist for the presence of The Book, which was nowhere in sight.

"Where's The Book?" he demanded.

"It ain't here. I buried it under some rocks. I knew someone was coming." He spoke with clear confidence, past-boy, nearer man than his pals, a deeper tone residing in his voice.

Yet Dobson doubted his words. Thornwell had said The Book was at every meeting; it was what drew the boys, The Book and its immeasurable promise of correction.

Dobson knew he'd have to search the whole cave. Billy Talmon might have had time to chuck it somewhere or might have hidden it when he arrived. The Book had to be here.

"Take them all down to my office," he said as loud as he could.

One of the boys started crying. Talmon stood as tall as the men when he said, "I'm going to show it to the marshal whenever he shows up. We already told him we had something for him."

"How'd you tell him?" Dobson said, still holding him by the arm.

"By telegraph."

"That's okay. We'll check it out," Dobson said, for he had seen the tell-tale flicker cross Billy Talmon's face.

There still was hope, he thought, but we have to find The Book.

"Take them away," he yelled again, "and lock them up."

All the others left the cave, Dobson saying it was up to him to find The Book. If he didn't find it, he'd have to take different measures.

The search was simple. The Book was a cinch to find, on a shelf of rock, but carefully tucked away, in another part of the cave. Dobson, nervous, anxiety almost ready to scream its way free of him, slipped his taught fingers across the leather cover and slowly began to believe he felt some comfort in the touch.

Vaguely, intermittently, he waited for relief to set in.

It came slowly, dragging itself across his chest, the way fire might feed on damp wood.

His name leaped out at him. Then other names, chief citizens of Ross Corners. No women were mentioned, however, and he felt relieved at that revelation.

Two solid hours he spent reading the information, and page by page, after letting the information settle into his mind and then letting it sift away as best he could, fed The Book, by each page he had read, to the fire that Billy Talmon had started for the meeting of The Raggedies.

In the late afternoon, nothing alive in the fire but a few embers, the smell and sight of the burnt leather cover of The Book shifting back and forth in his senses, Sheriff Bill Dobson headed back to Ross Corners in the warmth of the slanting sun. He could not begin to imagine what the rest of the day would bring, but he had a fairly decent idea.

He hoped it was decent.

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