

Praise for *Zeke and Ned*

“Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana have written a novel as unruly and exuberant and headlong as a colt that hasn’t yet learned to reckon with its own legs.”

—Susan Dodd, *The Washington Post Book World*

“[*Zeke and Ned*] captivates the reader as it moves through vivid, dramatic, and violent episodes. Dickensian (will we ultimately say McMurtriesque?) characters fill the novel and provide an abundance of comic, tragic, vicious, pathetic, and colorful accents.”

—Phil Montgomery, *The Dallas Morning News*

“The storytelling is pure McMurtry, fast-paced, witty, and filled with offbeat characters, crisp dialogue, and dramatic reversals of fate.”

—Gene Lyons, *Entertainment Weekly*

“*Zeke and Ned* has the tone of a yarn spun over a campfire with plenty of whiskey on hand and nobody in a rush to get anyplace. . . . An enjoyable, richly entertaining reading experience . . . As the wagon bounces along . . . you simply enjoy the ride.”

—Joyce Maynard, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“Captain Call and Gus McCrae of *Lonesome Dove* must now make room for Zeke Proctor and Ned Christie of the Cherokee Nation. With Diana Ossana, Larry McMurtry has created another cyclorama in words of his own richly colored West.”

—Dee Brown, author of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*

“A grand-scale tragedy . . . recounted with a conversational authenticity and understated humor that is a McMurtry trademark . . . The authors know how to sustain a drama played out over a plate of corn and vinegar cobbler, and they do it well.”

—Joyce Maynard, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“Tender, well-written . . . A colorful and often poignant dramatization of historical events and figures. If this isn’t the way things happened and the people actually were, it’s the way they should have been. . . . Perhaps one of McMurtry’s best novels.”

—Clay Reynolds, *Houston Chronicle*

“The novel’s pleasure is in the details: the fleshy present, the interiority that turns textbook footnote into characters.”

—Laurie Stone, *The Village Voice*

“The women . . . [make] this novel a heartbreaker.”

—Susan Dodd, *The Washington Post Book World*

“McMurtry [is] perhaps a legend himself in the Wild West genre as king of the Lonesome Dove series. . . . This is a gritty, dust-filled . . . entertaining history lesson.”

—Billie Rae Bates, *The Detroit News*

BY LARRY MCMURTRY

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The Last Picture Show

In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas

Leaving Cheyenne

Horseman, Pass By

BY LARRY MCMURTRY AND DIANA OSSANA

Pretty Boy Floyd

Zeke and Ned

ZEKE

**and
NED**

**Larry McMurtry
and
Diana Ossana**

SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS
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SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS
Rockefeller Center
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020
www.SimonandSchuster.com

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Designed by Colin Joh

Map by Anita Karl and James Kemp

Manufactured in the United States of America

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

McMurtry, Larry.

Zeke and Ned : a novel / by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana.

p. cm.

1. Proctor, Ezekiel, 1831-1907—Fiction. 2. Frontier and pioneer life—Ozark Mountains Region—Fiction. 3. Indians of North America—Ozark Mountains Region—Fiction. 4. Christie, Ned, 1852-1892—Fiction. 5. Cherokee Indians—Fiction. I. Ossana, Diana. II. Title.

PS3563A319Z45 1997

813.'54—dc20 96-44906

eISBN-13: 978-1-4391-2816-9

ISBN-13: 978-0-684-81152-9

ISBN-10: 0-684-81152-9

ISBN-13: 978-0-7432-3017-9 (Pbk.)

ISBN-10: 0-7432-3017-5 (Pbk.)

When the Pilgrim fathers reached the shores of America, they fell on their knees.
Then they fell on the Indians.

—Anonymous,
QUOTED BY H. L. MENCKEN

They made us many promises, more than I can remember, but they never kept but one: they promised to take our land, and they took it.

—Red Cloud,
CHIEF, OGLALA SIOUX





BOOK ONE



ZEKE'S FOLLY

If folly were grief, every house would weep.
—George Herbert

**Cherokee Nation,
Going Snake District
Indian Territory**

“ZEKE’S PROBABLY GOT THE ONLY DOG IN THE WORLD THAT CAN WALK sideways,” Ned remarked to Tuxie Miller as they sat astride their horses, watching the cautious Zeke Proctor and his short, fat, black dog Pete, sidestepping along in front of the dry goods store.

Zeke’s preference was to walk sideways, with a wall at his back, when in Tahlequah or any other place where his enemies might gather in strength. Pete, his constant companion, was as mean as a coon, but fatter than all but the fattest coons.

“It’s too muddy here, let’s go on home,” Tuxie said, though he did not expect to get his way, or even to get an answer. Ned Christie liked town life; whenever he got a little ahead on his farming, he was bound for Tahlequah.

“I guess my dog could walk sideways if she practiced,” Tuxie added. He had a blue bitch named Thistle who was, in his view, at least as smart as any dog Zeke Proctor had ever owned.

About the time Zeke and Pete slithered around a corner, Tuxie happened to notice Bill Pigeon’s horse. The horse, a gaunt sorrel, was tied in front of Old Mandy Springston’s house.

“There’s Bill Pigeon’s horse, he don’t like me,” Tuxie said. “That’s another reason for getting on home.”

“I didn’t know Bill Pigeon’s horse didn’t like you,” Ned replied. “I guess that’s news to me.”

Ned knew perfectly well it was Bill Pigeon, not his horse, that did not like Tuxie Miller, but he was amused to befuddle his friend by taking every word his friend uttered literally. It was a useful tactic, particularly if Tuxie was drunk or otherwise out of his head. The slightest criticism of how he put things would cause Tuxie to give up on human language entirely—he had been known to maintain a noble, slightly offended silence for upwards of a week. If addressed persistently, Tuxie might call like a crow, or snuff like an angry armadillo; sometimes, at night, he would frighten the household with a perfect imitation of a rattlesnake’s rattle—but he would not speak a syllable of Cherokee, much less English.

On this occasion, however, he chose to ignore Ned’s remark. It was a drizzly June morning, and the wide main street of Tahlequah had an abandoned wagon sitting in it, bogged to its hubs in the thick, gummy mud.

“If fish could live in mud, we could go fishing right here in the street,” Tuxie remarked.

Tuxie looked up and frowned. Across the street from where Zeke had been slinking along stood three reasons why the man kept his back to the wall.

“There’s the Squirrel brothers, they don’t like me, neither,” Tuxie said. “We could have gone to Dog Town—most people like me in Dog Town. We could even have gone over to Siloam Springs. I’ve never even had a fistfight in Siloam Springs. You would have to bring me to the one town where nobody likes me—and it’s too muddy to get down off my horse, besides.”

Before Tuxie Miller could list any more reasons why they ought to get out of Tahlequah, he spotted Zeke Proctor again. This time, he was sidling along beside the meeting hall, the long building where the Cherokee Senate convened. Though the Cherokee Nation considered themselves separate from the rest of America, their laws, courts, and jury system were modeled after those of the white men. Lawlessness in the Cherokee Districts had been on the upswing ever since the Civil War, when desperadoes from the North and South sought to take advantage of murky law enforcement along the border between Arkansas and Indian Territory. Tuxie himself had an aversion to controversy, and was not a force in tribal government; but Ned Christie was a respected member of the Cherokee Senate and a scrupulous one at that.

“I wonder why Zeke’s so suspicious all the time,” Ned asked. “There ain’t many people . . .”

suspicious as Zeke Proctor.”

“Why wouldn’t he be suspicious?” Tuxie inquired. “The Becks don’t like him, the Squirrels don’t like him, and neither does Bear Grimmet.”

Zeke was short but hefty, and the coal black Pete was fat. The sight of the short, hefty man and his fat dog sidling along the wall of the meetinghouse amused Ned Christie.

“I get tickled every time I look at Zeke Proctor,” he said.

He waved at Zeke, who waved back; Pete barked. Tuxie saw that Ned had a gleam in his eye, the gleam he was apt to get just before he got drunk, or fell in love. Since little Lacy, Ned’s sweet young wife, had died of cholera the year before, Ned had been mighty moody. Tuxie had a feeling that Ned was nearly ready for a new wife.

“If we had a bottle of whiskey, Zeke might invite us home,” Ned said. “He looks like he’s thirsty for some good whiskey, to me.

“Old Mandy sells the best whiskey,” he added—a pointless remark, in Tuxie’s view. Old Mandy sold the *only* whiskey, at least the only whiskey available in Tahlequah. An occasional white whiskeyseller would wander through the District, peddling rotgut. But Zeke and Ned, and even the mild Tuxie, knew better than to purchase bad whiskey from a white man. Bad whiskey was known to make a man blind for days; and sometimes, for life.

“Go see if you can talk her out of a bottle,” Ned said. “I ain’t got no cash on me, but she knows I’d be good for it.”

“I ain’t goin’ in there while Bill Pigeon’s horse is tied outside,” Tuxie protested. “Bill Pigeon has been known to shoot at people for no reason at all, ’specially if he’s drunk.”

Ned trotted off toward the meeting hall without so much as a reply. Ned was casual about dangers, particularly dangers that might only apply to Tuxie. It was partly because Ned was so handsome, partly because Tuxie felt. Ned Christie was the handsomest man in the Cherokee Nation—women just dropped into Ned’s lap, heavy and sweet as dewberries in June.

Also, Ned was a dead shot with rifle or pistol. He would often blow squirrels out of the very top of some elm tree or sycamore, and he would not spoil the meat, either. He would just shoot the limb right beside where the squirrel was resting, and the squirrel would come sailing down. Ned would pick it up while the squirrel was still stunned from the fall, and whack it against a stump a time or two to finish it off.

Tuxie himself would rarely even see the squirrel until it hit the ground. He did not like to be tilting his head up toward the sky, if he could avoid it. His Aunt Keta, who had often taken him squirrel hunting when he was a boy, told him his brains would run out his ears if he tilted his head up too often. Later on, people tried to persuade him that his brains were not really that runny, but his Aunt Keta’s warning had a power over him. He preferred to leave squirrel hunting to people like Ned Christie. Ned had no fear of runny brains, or of anything else that lived on Shady Mountain, where he had made his home.

While Tuxie was wondering what to do about the whiskey he was expected to purchase, Pete took a sudden run at Ned’s big grey horse.

Pete came skipping through the mud, snarling and spitting like a badger. He ran right up behind the big grey, and was able to jump high enough to get a good grip on his tail.

That horse ain’t going to appreciate a thing like that, Tuxie thought; and sure enough, he was right. Ned did not seem to notice the fat, black dog hanging on to his horse’s tail—but the horse noticed. The big grey let Pete hang for a moment, and then kicked him about ten feet into the air. Pete got right up and leaped for the tail again. This time, the grey kicked him sideways, into a bunch of speckled chickens who were pecking around in the mud, hoping for a wet worm. The chickens squawked and flapped their wings, running back toward Old Mandy’s chicken house, feathers flying.

Zeke whistled at Pete, who trotted over to his side, as bold as if he had not been kicked twice by a animal a hundred times his size.

Tuxie dismounted, and followed the speckled chickens. It occurred to him that Old Mandy might be hiding some of her whiskey in the chicken house.

Just about the time Ned caught up with Zeke Proctor, he noticed the Squirrel brothers heading up the street. They were well spread out—Rat Squirrel rode on the west side of the street; Jim Squirrel was on the east side of the street; and Moses Squirrel was right in the middle of the street, where the mud was deepest.

Zeke Proctor did not manifest the slightest interest in the Squirrel brothers.

“You ought to train that horse better,” he said to Ned. “A well-trained mount would know better than to be kicking at Pete.”

“If you had a tail and Pete was hanging from it, I guess you’d kick him, too,” Ned said mildly, as he dismounted.

Zeke had a wispy moustache and goatee, though his shoulder-length hair was thick and black. He wore a big floppy hat, to avoid the necessity of squinting in the powerful June sunlight. He had three pistols and a large knife stuck in his belt, and carried a rifle.

Pete rolled on his back, hoping his master would tickle his belly, but Zeke’s mind was not on tickling dogs.

Ned had a notion there was bad blood between Zeke and the Squirrel brothers, but he could not remember offhand what the bad blood was about. His deceased wife, little Lacy, had been a Squirrel herself—he did not particularly want to be shooting down one of her brothers, if he could avoid it—but here they came, plodding silently through the mud.

Zeke and Ned were both members of the Keetoowah Society, a conservative group whose main purpose was to see that the Cherokee people kept to the old ways. Their leaders believed it was important to try and work at a kind of peaceful, live-and-let-live existence with white men whenever possible, but not at the expense of Cherokee tradition and independence. The forcible removal of over seventeen thousand Cherokees from their native land was too fresh a memory, and the Keetoowahs aimed to see that history did not repeat itself.

Zeke Proctor’s father, a white man by the name of William Proctor, had married Zeke’s full-blood Cherokee mother back in New Echota, Georgia. Zeke himself had come up the Trail of Tears with his mother’s people when he was only seven years old. Watching many of his own people suffer and die on the long journey to Oklahoma wedded Zeke Proctor to the Cherokee way forever.

Ned Christie was a full-blood, born and raised in the Cherokee Nation. The Keetoowah Society strongly supported Cherokee governmental authority and favored their own law enforcement, especially after unscrupulous whites began crowding into the Cherokee Nation after the Civil War.

The Squirrel brothers were not members themselves, and if they were on their way down the street to kill Zeke Proctor, Ned would have to fight along with his Keetoowah brother. He did find it irksome, though, that hostilities seemed to be brewing before he had even been in town long enough to procure a drink of whiskey.

He had not come to Tahlequah to fight; in fact, he had come with courting on his mind, and the object of his affections was Jewel Sixkiller Proctor, Zeke’s own daughter. Young though she was, Jewel stood out as the beauty of the whole valley—tall and long stemmed like a lily flower, with huge almond eyes, blue-black hair cascading to her waist, and a comely figure beyond her years. Ned had made up his mind that he wanted to marry Jewel, and he meant to concentrate his energies on persuading Zeke to let him court her: that was why he promptly sent Tuxie off to get whiskey. Zeke had a mighty thirst, and would undoubtedly be more amenable to marrying off his daughter after he had imbibed a bottle of Old Mandy’s fine whiskey.

So, under the circumstances, the Squirrel brothers were a vexation, at best. Ned felt his temper rising at the mere sight of the bothersome trio.

“Are them Squirrels out of sorts with you?” he asked Zeke after he had dismounted. “They act me like they’re out of sorts.”

Zeke Proctor’s eyes got hard as pebbles when he was challenged, but they were not particularly pebbly at the moment. Pete was still rolling around on his back, hoping to be tickled on the belly. Tuxie Miller was standing in front of Old Mandy’s chicken house, looking useless.

“I’ll handle the Squirrels,” Zeke said. “Why’d you get off your horse?”

There was not much friendliness in Zeke’s tone, and it put Ned off a little. It might mean that Zeke would have preferred him just to keep on riding, and not get into any courting talk about Jewel.

“I prefer to shoot from a standing position, if I’m called upon to shoot,” Ned replied, a little stiff in tone himself.

Meanwhile, the Squirrels had arrived, lining themselves up to the west of the meeting hall. Rat Squirrel was picking at a scab on his chin.

“Zeke, don’t you be going around the mill,” Jim Squirrel said.

“Fair warning, Zeke,” Moses added.

Zeke looked at the Squirrel brothers with half-lidded eyes.

“You boys get along now,” Zeke said mildly. “Can’t you see that Ned and me are working on Senate business?”

“What Senate business?” Rat Squirrel wanted to know.

“You ain’t a senator, Rat, we can’t be talking to you about Senate business,” Zeke said. He spoke in the mildest tones. The mild tones were a characteristic that confused many men about Zeke Proctor. He could be talking along to you in mild tones, and then between one mild tone and the next, he’d be putting bullets in you, faster than a tailor could stitch.

“Stay away from the mill then, Senator,” Jim Squirrel said. “Polly’s our sister, and she’s a married woman. We don’t want you sniffing around her, and she don’t want it, neither.”

“If I need to know what Polly wants, I guess I can ask her myself,” Zeke said.

“You boys get along now,” he said again, looking Moses Squirrel right in the eye. His tone had abruptly stopped being mild, and his eyes were pebbly.

The Squirrel brothers looked at one another, sideways looks that did not require them to completely take their eyes off Zeke.

Ned dropped his hands onto the handles of the two .44s his father had given him when he was twelve. He decided to mainly shoot at Moses, since Jim and Rat were known to be erratic marksmen and Moses could shoot.

Zeke chose that moment to reward his dog, Pete, with a lengthy tickle on the belly. Pete wiggled in delight. Ned supposed it was a ruse; Zeke would come up firing at any moment.

Almost as Ned thought it, firing commenced—but it did not come from Zeke or from the Squirrel brothers. Three men came dashing out of Old Mandy’s house, with Bill Pigeon right behind them. Bill Pigeon stopped, stood flat footed, and emptied two six-shooters at the fleeing men. One man flinched but all three kept on running.

“Bill, he’s testy, ain’t he?” Zeke remarked. He walked over to his horse and climbed on. The Squirrel brothers, distracted by the gunplay, trotted over to Bill Pigeon to inquire what had been the cause of the quarrel.

Tuxie Miller was waving from a bush behind the chicken house. He was excited—he had a whiskey bottle in each hand.

“Zeke, Tuxie’s got whiskey,” Ned pointed out.

“I see that, let’s go drink it,” Zeke said.

WHEN JEWEL SIXKILLER PROCTOR SAW NED CHRISTIE RIDING UP TO the house with her father, her heart began to flutter like a trapped bird.

The sun had just come out, and she was spreading wet laundry on some red haw bushes behind the house. She wanted the laundry to get as much sun as possible. It had been so rainy lately that a few of the clothes smelled a little mouldy from never getting quite dry. The six-year-old triplets—Linnie, Minnie, and Willie—were playing nearby.

It annoyed Jewel that her heart behaved so, just because Ned was coming. It fluttered against her rib cage, like a mockingbird or sparrow that had flown in a window of the house and could not find its way back out. She wanted to stay calm and composed, and just go on spreading the laundry on the red haw bushes.

But she was not calm and composed, for the sight of Ned Christie stirred up something in her that she could not control. Even her fingers seemed to lose their strength when Ned Christie showed up: Jewel promptly dropped two clean shirts on the wet grass, an occurrence that would have annoyed her mother, Becca, had she seen it. Linnie, the most helpful of the triplets, picked up the shirts for her before they got very muddy.

Zeke and Ned and Tuxie Miller splashed across the little creek behind the barn, and came trotting on toward the house. Zeke was carrying Pete in front of him in the saddle. Pete was too short legged to keep up with the horses when the men were riding fast. They must have ridden through a heavy shower, for the sunlight sparkled on droplets of water in Ned Christie's long, black hair. He was the tallest man Jewel had ever seen, but that was not why her heart began to flutter when he came visiting. He hardly spoke to her—no more than a "hello," or maybe a "thank you," if she offered him chicory coffee—but his eyes would not leave her alone. Mostly she cast her own eyes downward when Ned was in the house. She focused on her sewing, or on tending to the triplets. The triplets had come late to Becca's life, and were quite a handful. Jewel was almost full grown and had to help her mother keep an eye on the three feisty children. They were quick as little wildcats, and just keeping them out of the big fireplace where the women did the cooking was a hard job.

At the moment, Jewel was glad for the triplets. It made it easier for her to keep her eyes busy, so Ned Christie could not look in them. Once or twice—just for a moment—Jewel had raised her head, and Ned had looked in her eyes. In those moments, Jewel felt him take power over her; the fluttering stopped, and she felt still and helpless, like a bird that could no longer fly.

This time, it happened while she had a wet shirt in her hand, about to spread it on a bush. Ned looked at her just before he swung off his horse, and Jewel froze under his glance, motionless by the bush like a quail might be, just before it flushed. She *wanted* to flush—wanted to run in the house and get busy stirring mush, or patrolling the triplets—but she could not move. Tall Ned Christie had taken power over her again, and she could not do anything but stand by the red haw bush, until the men walked off toward the back pasture to look at a new black horse Zeke had recently acquired. They were passing a whiskey bottle back and forth. Looking at the bottle released Jewel, even though Ned did glance her way a few times while they were inspecting the horse. He glanced her way, but he was too far off for his eyes to take power over her. She finished spreading the laundry, then took the empty basket back to the house.

Zeke had slaughtered a white shoat a few days before, and her mother was frying pork chops, while Eliza, Jewel's little sister, snapped green beans.

"I thought I heard the menfolk," Becca said. "I expect they're hungry."

Rebecca Sixkiller Mitchell married Zeke Proctor seventeen years earlier, after Zeke had courted

her for a mere three days. Becca's uncle, Money Talker Mitchell, was known throughout the territory for his fine racehorses. Zeke had traveled all the way to Missouri—where Becca's family settled on their way west after Becca's baby sister, Margaret, died of the measles during the Trail of Tears—to bargain with Uncle Money Talker for a colt from his prize stallion. When Zeke laid eyes on the live Becca, he asked her father, a Baptist preacher, to marry them right away. So, Zeke returned home to the Going Snake with a spirited colt *and* a spirited wife. Becca's father, like many Cherokees, was drawn to the river baptism and fasting practiced by Baptists. Many Cherokees welcomed rituals from the Baptist religion, since they resembled a lot of their own sacred ways. Becca herself liked to visit the little Baptist church just outside of Tahlequah whenever she had occasion to travel to town.

Becca stood a good six inches taller than her husband, Zeke. Though Becca had never fully recovered her strength after the triplets' birth, it was clear where Jewel had gotten her fine features and her willowy stature. Becca's long hair was pulled back from her face in a braid thick as a horse tail, accenting her high cheekbones.

"They had a whiskey bottle, Mama," Jewel said.

"Men will always be having their whiskey, Jewel," Becca replied, wiping sweat from her forehead with her dress sleeve. "That don't mean they won't be hungry. Help your sister snap them beans."

NED WANTED TO GO RIGHT IN ZEKE'S BIG HOUSE AND START sobering up with a few cups of strong chicory coffee. That way, he could be looking at Jewel Sixkiller Proctor while he was getting over the whiskey.

Zeke, though, was still in a drinking mood, and he preferred to drink in the little smokehouse with the freshly butchered remains of the white shoat hanging above them. Once Tuxie Miller showed Zeke the place under the henhouse where Old Mandy Springston kept her extra whiskey, there had been no restraining him. He promptly crammed four bottles into his big saddlebags, an action which alarmed Tuxie Miller. Zeke showed no sign of meaning to pay for the whiskey, either.

"Old Mandy's mean," Tuxie reminded Zeke. "She'll be wanting to get somebody to kill you, if you steal that much whiskey. Bill Pigeon's her old boyfriend . . . she might get Bill to do it."

"You just saw Bill Pigeon miss three men at point-blank range," Zeke told him. "Why would you worry about Bill Pigeon?"

"I think he might have winged one of those men," Tuxie said, but his remark went unnoticed, as the three of them galloped out of Tahlequah. Tuxie considered putting his two bottles back in the hiding place, to make the theft a little less noticeable, but he knew such a consideration would be treated with scorn by his companions. He quickly drank the two bottles instead.

Ned Christie had no head for whiskey. He got thoroughly drunk on half a bottle. Zeke, however, drank two bottles and was still sober enough to open the black horse's mouth and count its teeth. The only way to tell Zeke Proctor had been drinking was to look at his eyeballs: they got red as a vulture's comb after the third or fourth bottle.

While they were sitting in the smokehouse talking about pork chops, the bright sunlight vanished and a heavy shower rumbled over Going Snake Mountain. Jewel had to dash out of the house and snatch the clothes off the red haw bushes. To her dismay, they were nowhere near dry.

Tuxie Miller had to go outside and puke, to the great annoyance of Zeke.

"Go in the house and gobble for the triplets," he ordered Tuxie, after he wobbled back inside the smokehouse. "They ain't heard you gobble lately."

Tuxie was unrivaled in the Going Snake District for his ability to call up wild turkeys. He could also call up coyotes and bobcats, but the ability to call up bobcats was a mixed blessing, as Tuxie discovered one day when a large male bobcat jumped over a bush right on him, under the impression that he was jumping on a female bobcat.

Tuxie felt too sick to gobble, but he obediently traipsed off toward the house, leaving Zeke and Ned with two full bottles of whiskey and the remains of the shoat.

Ned was wanting to ask Zeke if he could take Jewel home with him to be his wife, but Zeke's eyeballs were almost as red as the red haws. Besides, Zeke's mind was on killing—not on marrying.

"I don't dislike the Squirrel boys, particularly," he said. "The family I hate is the Becks. There's only one good Beck on the face of this earth, and that's Polly, and she lives over at the mill with the white man, T Spade."

"I think she's married to him, Zeke," Ned pointed out. "I believe they're hitched."

"They're hitched," Zeke said, gloomily. He had been taken with Polly Beck for over a year now, and the fact that she was already married had been a big obstacle to his happiness. It was not unusual in the Old Place for a Cherokee man to have more than one wife; Zeke himself knew men in the Keetoowah Society who had taken a second, common-law wife.

"I ain't taken a new wife for seventeen years now," he remarked.

Ned made no comment. At least Zeke was talking about marrying; it might lead around to the point

where he could ask for Jewel.

“Seventeen years is a good long stretch of time to go without a new wife,” he said. “My first two wives died, and Becca’s too poorly now to have many more babies. I bet Polly Beck could have some fine babies, if she had the right encouragement.”

“I bet Jewel could have some fine babies, too,” Ned said, seizing his moment.

The minute Ned said it, Zeke got a distant look in his eye—it was such a distant look that his eyeballs even stopped being red.

“Which one of the Squirrel brothers would you have shot, if they’d showed fight?” he asked.

“Moses,” Ned said, annoyed. Zeke knew perfectly well he had not ridden all the way home with him to Going Snake Mountain just to talk about the Squirrel brothers.

“I would have shot Rat,” Zeke said. “How can you like knowing somebody with a name like Rat?”

“Well, but you can like knowing somebody with a name like Jewel,” Ned countered. “I would be pleased to marry Jewel, if there’s no objection.”

“The objection is, Becca needs Jewel—she’s the only one who can keep the triplets out of the fireplace,” Zeke said. “I can’t afford to have my triplets getting scorched.”

Ned thought that was a ridiculous objection. Still, Zeke was his host; he had to at least pretend to take the objection seriously.

“Let ’em get scorched once or twice,” he suggested. “It’ll teach ’em to avoid fireplaces.”

Although fairly drunk, Ned managed to summon his most reasonable-sounding voice. It was the voice he used in the Cherokee Senate when debating whether to put a new roof on the Women’s Seminary, or some other tribal matter of serious weight. He thought he might manage to sound reasonable enough to persuade Zeke Proctor that he’d be the perfect husband for his beautiful daughter Jewel.

Zeke Proctor, though, had a teasing devil in him, even when he was drunk enough to be red in both eyeballs.

“No, that fireplace gets too hot,” he said. “The women pile wood in it till you could scorch an ox. My triplets ain’t as big as an ox—one of ’em could get scorched to death, if I don’t keep Jewel watch ’em.”

Despite his desire to remain senatorial in his tone and his bearing, Ned began to feel like doing a little scorching himself. What right had Zeke Proctor to sit there, drunk as a goose, and think up reasons why he could not let Jewel leave home and marry? It was that kind of behaviour which caused most of the residents of the Going Snake District to get so riled at Zeke. Several men had taken potshots at him, for being so cranky. Ned was beginning to think that maybe the Squirrel brothers had a point.

“Zeke, I got to have Jewel!” Ned blurted out, suddenly. The thought of having to ride all the way back to Shady Mountain without Jewel filled him with gloom. He felt he’d almost rather jump his horse off a cliff, or drown himself in a creek. It was true that Tuxie Miller and his family lived nearby; he was always welcome at Tuxie’s house, but he did not want to always be going to Tuxie’s house. He wanted to be at his own house; he just did not want to be there alone. Two or three times since Lacy died, he had got so lonesome he’d even let the hounds crawl up in his bed. Once, he had pulled out his pistols and shot at his own wall, just to hear some racket. Sitting at home listening to the owls howl was not satisfactory. He thought he had been a pretty good husband to Lacy, but Lacy had died. Now he had set his heart on Jewel—Zeke did not need to tease him by yapping on about the triplets getting scorched.

“I got to have her, Zeke,” Ned said, again. “I’m getting too lonesome up there on the hill. It’s been a year since my Lacy passed away, and it’s time for me to marry again.”

Zeke turned a kinder eye to Ned after his passionate outburst. He himself had buried two wives, and

his Becca had never quite recovered from the birth of the triplets—Jewel and Liza did most of the housework now. Zeke knew how it was to slop around all by himself, with no wife to do for him and keep him company. After his first wife, Jane, died in the cholera epidemic that had raged through the Cherokee Nation nearly twenty years ago, Zeke had grown so tired of cooking for himself that he had begun to eat his meat raw. Mostly it was venison, with a little beef now and then; he would just sprinkle a little salt on a slice, and bolt it down. He had gambled too much during his time mourning, and lain with lewd women whom he ought not to have lain with.

“Jewel’s young, Ned,” Zeke remarked, but in a more encouraging tone.

“How young?” Ned asked—he had no clear notion of Jewel’s age. When he looked at her, all he could think about was taking her home with him, to lay with him on his corn-shuck mattress. He could imagine how it would feel to wake up with her arms around him, and her sweet breath on his face—it would sure beat hell out of sleeping with the hounds!

“She’s little more than sixteen,” Zeke said. The fact was, Jewel *had* arrived at marrying age; and though Ned was quite a bit younger than Zeke, the older man had always been impressed by Ned’s solid ways and kind nature. He knew Ned would not mistreat Jewel, and that he would make her a fine husband—a far better one than Rat Squirrel, at least. Rat had been sulking around lately, at times when he knew Zeke was not at home. Besides, Ned Christie was a suitor he had to respect as a man. Ned was, without question, the best shot with pistol or rifle in the whole Cherokee Nation—by the time he was ten, he could out-shoot any man around, including Watt Christie, his own father.

Zeke considered that it was fair enough to tease Ned a little. He was not going to hand over his beauty like his Jewel, without making the lucky suitor sweat a bit. He knew, though, that it would be downright foolish to push Ned Christie too far. He was not dumb, like the Squirrel brothers, who had yet to realize that their own sister, Polly Beck, was so eager to leave her husband for Zeke that she had hired a witch woman to witch her husband to the point where he might lose his senses and drown in the creek.

But Zeke knew that it would be foolish to carry his teasing too far. If Ned were to get riled enough to take a potshot, there was very little likelihood he would miss.

“My Lacy wasn’t but sixteen when we married,” Ned pointed out. “She wasn’t much older than Jewel, and she was a lot smaller built.”

Zeke decided that there was no point in debating the matter any longer. Ned had his mind made up on top of which they were running out of whiskey.

“You got my permission to ask her,” Zeke said, standing up.

“Couldn’t you ask her for me?” Ned said. “I’ve not spoken to her much. I might choke on my tongue, if I tried to come out with a question like that.”

“Nope,” Zeke said flatly. “If you ain’t man enough to ask her, then I doubt you’ll be man enough to make her a decent husband.”

Ned stood up, feeling shaky. He was six foot four, and Zeke’s smokehouse was not much taller than that. When he rose, he smacked right into a hindquarter of the white shoat Zeke had butchered. It hurt from a hook just above him. In his eagerness to have Zeke Proctor accept his suit, he had forgotten they were in the smokehouse.

The sight of Ned smacking himself in the eye with a slab of shoat struck Zeke as hilarious, and he howled with laughter. Zeke’s funny bone was easily tickled, even in the worst of times, and when he had downed a quart or two of whiskey, he found plenty to laugh about in the wild ways that prevailed in the Going Snake District.

“Dern—now I guess I got blood in my hair,” Ned said, galled with himself. His old Grandmother Christie had taught him to take care of his hair. She told him there was power in it—he ought to not let women cut it—and also to avoid barbers generally, as being of low worth.

“Don’t be letting anybody barber you like a white man,” his old Granny Christie told him, and Ned had taken the advice to heart: no barber had ever touched his hair. Now he was worried that Jewel would not want him, if he showed up to propose with blood in his hair.

“No, but you’re a little salty,” Zeke informed him. “We salted this pig down pretty good. Let’s get this courtin’ over with, then we can eat.”

“Not if Jewel says no,” Ned said. “If she turns me down, I won’t have an appetite for weeks.”

As they walked to the house, Ned kept trying to brush the salt out of his hair, a sight which amused Zeke. He himself had always been bold with women. He preferred to walk up and grab them, a tactic that had so far won him three feisty wives and the favors of Polly Beck—a woman who was feisty, she was anything.

Ned, though, was clearly not up to the bold approach. He was walking unsteadily, not from the whiskey but from the thought of having to propose to Jewel.

“Why, Ned—I believe you’re shy,” Zeke said, a wide smile on his face.

Ned heard a wild gobbling sound. It was as if a flock of wild turkeys had suddenly run inside Zeke’s big house. It startled him, but when he heard the wild giggling of the triplets, he remembered that Tuxie had been sent inside to gobble for them.

“Listen to that,” Zeke said. “Old Tuxie missed his calling. He’d have done better as a turkey!”

NED CHRISTIE SAT THROUGH A MEAL OF PORK CHOPS AND GREEN beans without saying a word.

Once or twice, he raised his eyes to Jewel, but he immediately lowered them again. He felt he had no small words in him—just the big words he had to say to Jewel, and he had to protect the big words until the time was right. He did not even compliment Becca on the cooking, so anxious was he to hold on to the big words.

Jewel knew Ned wanted to take power over her. She felt a fluttering deep inside at the thought, but not so strongly as it had felt when she saw him riding up with Zeke and Tuxie Miller. She thought she was ready to accept it, if Ned really wanted her. Her sister Liza did not even notice. She had always been the wordy sister, and she yapped all through the meal.

Becca *did* notice. When Jewel looked at her mother for reassurance, Becca turned her eyes away, and went to the pots to dish up more food. She would not look at the daughter she was about to lose. Becca knew the ways of men and women; knew that Jewel was of an age to marry; and had known for some time that a man would soon be coming for her daughter. Now that man was here at her table. He was a handsome man, too, and from what she had seen and heard, well able to provide for a wife. Still, it made her lonely to think that her girl would be going away. She herself was not well, and Jewel's quiet good spirit had been a help to her on days when she had the megrims so badly that she could hardly do her work. Jewel was a worker, unlike Liza, who was mostly talk. Liza fussed and frittered, talking a blue streak all the time.

Becca rarely cried, especially not in sight of Zeke. He could not tolerate a weepy woman. At the first sign of tears, he would jump on his horse and leave, often for a week or more. He expected his womenfolk to be smiling when he returned, too. Becca looked at Jewel, and looked at Ned; she knew the time had come when her daughter would be going. Twice she had to leave the table to hide behind the big chimney, to wipe her eyes with her apron so as not to disturb her husband, who was eating with a good appetite—though not so good an appetite as Tuxie Miller's. Tuxie was renowned throughout the Going Snake District for his prodigious appetite. On this occasion, he ate ten fried eggs, twelve pork chops, and most of the bucket of green beans Liza and Jewel had snapped.

Zeke, who liked Tuxie, was nonetheless a little sobered by the man's intake.

"I don't think he's gonna leave us a thing," he remarked, more in awe than in anger. "He's et most of that pig, and the whole bean patch."

"Throwing up makes you empty," Tuxie remarked, without apology. He was hoping Becca Proctor would send one of the girls out to the henhouse for a few more eggs. He seldom got such a good feed at his own house. Dale, his wife, had borne him nine babies, and she was a lot more interested in making more babies than she was in cooking up vittles. The last time Tuxie had pork chops in such quantity was when he killed a wild pig, but that stroke of luck was a good three years back.

"I can't figure out where he's putting that food," Zeke said, to Ned. "He's skinny as a fence rail. It must be slidin' down into his legs."

Zeke spoke mainly to take his mind off Ned Christie and his dilemma. Ned had a powerful presence, and at the moment, a troublesome presence—he was staring at his plate so hard that Zeke feared the plate might crack. He wanted to help Ned come out with his question, if only to lighten the atmosphere a little, but he could not figure out how. Ned was so gloomy, he was making everybody else at the table miserable, everybody except Tuxie, who was still forking green beans into his mouth at a rapid rate.

Jewel kept her eyes downcast, waiting. Even the chatty Liza had fallen quiet. Becca kept getting up and running behind the chimney. Outside, it got dark; a rain squall came in with a little hail, peppering

the shingles above them like buckshot—but still, Ned Christie was silent. Zeke got annoyed, finally he hated gloomy meals. It was plain to him from the way Jewel sat there, still as a doe in hiding, that she was not going to turn Ned down. Why wouldn't the man speak?

Ned was thinking maybe everybody would leave the table soon and get on with their chores. But everybody seemed numbed. Even Tuxie, now that he had eaten everything there was to eat, had a vacant look in his eye. The hail had stopped; when Ned looked out the window, he could see the white pebbles speckling the muddy lots where Zeke penned his heifers.

Jewel sat right across from him, waiting. Ned had never felt so awkward in his whole life. Proposing to Lacy had not been near such a chore. Lacy had been a friend of his sister's, and had mostly done her growing up in their house. Jewel, though, lived far from Shady Mountain, and he had only seen her five times. For all he knew, she already had a beau. For all he knew, she might turn him down flat.

He could feel everybody at the table waiting. It was as if all activity had braked to a screeching halt, while he and Jewel were resolving their future. But he could not help it. His tongue would not come out with the big words.

Then he risked a glance, and met Jewel's eye. They both risked a glance at the same time, and their glances smacked together. Both hastily looked down, then up again; their glances smacked together a second time.

Jewel wanted to smile at the tall man, but she was too afraid.

Ned felt emboldened by the two glances. Jewel did not seem to mind looking at him, at least.

"With all this rain, the creeks will be high," he said. This time, he did not drop his eyes when Jewel returned his gaze.

"If you'd like to get your things and come with me, we ought to be getting on home," Ned continued. "It's a long ride."

Jewel felt a rush of happiness—yet, he had put the matter differently from what she had expected. She looked at her mother, to see if her mother felt matters had been stated correctly.

Becca did not feel they had, but she knew men were awkward about such matters, and she did not want to blight her daughter's chances just because Ned Christie was tongue-tied.

"But Ned, what do you intend?" Becca asked.

Ned suddenly felt deeply embarrassed. He realized he had forgotten to mention marriage. In his mind, he had said the word fifty times, but it had not found its way out of his mouth. Becca was frowning, and who could blame her?

"Why, I was hoping Jewel would marry me," he said. "The preacher will be on the Mountain this weekend . . . he could marry us then. I don't think we need to wait."

"No, you don't need to wait," Becca agreed.

"Zeke, does that suit you?" Ned asked. He worried that he had annoyed Zeke by his omission. Zeke just sat there, with a mild look on his face.

It was Becca who suddenly turned on him, fierce.

"It don't matter what Zeke thinks—I'm her ma!" she pronounced. "It's what Jewel thinks, and what I think, that you need to worry about. I won't be sending my daughter off, unless she'll be married proper."

"Why, she will be—proper as a preacher can do it," Ned said. "I didn't ride all this way to ask Jewel to be no concubine. I want her to be my wife, if she'll agree."

Becca looked at Jewel again. Though Jewel was a quiet girl, there was an eager happiness in her face.

It was a hard thing: Becca knew she had to let her daughter go.

While the men went back outside to the smokehouse, to whittle and gossip, Becca took Jewel

upstairs, and she and Liza helped her pack her few things. Liza chattered like a magpie, but Jewel was mostly quiet. Becca Proctor had the feeling that she herself would not be living long, but she choked down her sorrow and saw to it that Jewel did not forget anything she might need.

When it came time to leave, Jewel kissed Liza, and then she turned to her mother.

“Oh, Jewel,” was all Becca could say, when she hugged her daughter good-bye.

It was still drizzling when Jewel climbed up behind Ned on his big horse. Soon they were across the creek, and out of sight in the misty valley.

Tuxie Miller was a little disappointed. He had been hoping matters might drag on until suppertime. One more hearty meal before he left the Proctors would have suited him just fine.

SULLY EAGLE WAS SLOW BUT SURE.

Sully, one of the oldest men in the Cherokee Nation, was known throughout the Going Snake District for this meandering pace—he moved slower than cold molasses poured. He had worked for Zeke off and on for years, and though Zeke might fault his speed, he did not fault his trustworthiness. Sully could be trusted with anything: grain, cattle, even money. He would invariably deliver whatever was put in his care, whether to a bank, to a mill, or to a pasture. Becca in particular despaired whenever Zeke sent Sully into Tahlequah or Siloam Springs for supplies, because she knew she might have to wait weeks for the supplies to arrive, even though neither town was far away. Sully was prone to side trips; he would often ramble all over the Going Snake, collecting oddments of gossip before he showed up with Becca's supplies. Zeke tried to persuade Becca that there were benefits to Sully's tendency to ramble. Sometimes he would arrive with a nice string of fish, or a couple of fat possums skinned and ready for the pot. But Becca was not mollified. The fact that Sully was old, lame, blind in one eye, and practically stone deaf did not interest her, or soften her much toward Sully. Becca wanted her supplies, and she did not countenance waiting a month for them.

So when Zeke looked up from mending a harness and saw Sully Eagle driving the wagon full toward the lots, he knew something was wrong—perhaps something seriously wrong.

Sully had been sent off to the mill just three days before with a wagon full of corn to grind. Zeke had not really expected him back for a couple of weeks, and yet here he was, hitting the creek at a fast clip. Zeke did not know what to make of it. He rushed out of the work shed so fast, he stubbed his toe on the anvil in his eagerness to get the news.

His fear was that something might have happened to Polly Beck, wife of T. Spade Beck, the man who owned the mill. Maybe the witch who was supposed to be witching T. Spade had got mixed up and witched Polly instead. It was an awful thought. Zeke was counting on Polly Beck being a second wife to him, and in the near future, too, as soon as her cranky old husband, T. Spade, could be persuaded to get drunk and drown in the creek.

“Take a look at this corn, Zeke,” Sully said, in his old croak of a voice. Sully had gossiped so much over the years that he had nearly worn out his voice. The team of brown mules was lathered, from the pace Sully had set.

“What's wrong with it?” Zeke asked, relieved it was only the grain Sully was in a fret about. Maybe the grind had been too coarse; if that was all, it only meant that Becca would have to cook it longer. He could grind more corn, but he would not be likely to find a woman in the Going Snake District as winsome as the lovely Polly Beck. Polly was short, buxom, and feisty. Polly's father, Joseph Squirrel, was a full-blood Cherokee; her mother was Irish, with flaming red hair. Polly's own hair, red like her mother's, hung to her waist in a wild, bewitching tangle. Becca had lost her enthusiasm for her embraces since the birth of the triplets, which made Zeke gloomy. He had not broached the subject of a second wife with Becca, though he surmised that she might welcome an extra pair of hands around the house to help out with the triplets. Since Jewel's departure, the triplets had been running them ragged.

“T Spade weeviled up this corn,” Sully said in his froggy old voice.

“What?” Zeke asked. The ground corn was neatly sacked and stacked in the wagon, like ground corn ought to be. Sully had such bad eyes that it was doubtful he could see a weevil if one was crawling on his eyeball.

“T Spade's got a room in that mill where he breeds up weevils,” Sully insisted.

“T Spade's a miller,” Zeke said—he had never heard anything so foolish. “Why would a miller breed

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