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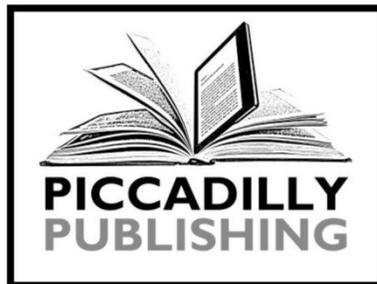
The Home of Great Western Fiction!

Clay Nash and his neighbor Cash Matthews were never going to be friends. Matthews was a big, powerful rancher who always wanted more. Clay was just a homesteader, content with his lot. But when Matthews went after Clay's land—and fenced off the water Clay's cattle needed in order to survive—Clay had no choice but to declare war.

It was a foolish gesture that could only end one way, and it did—with Matthews sentencing Clay to a long, lingering death on the high desert. But somehow Clay survived, and when he came back for revenge, he was a new man, a harder man, a man who showed no mercy to his enemies. Clay Nash was Wells Fargo's secret weapon ... an undercover gun.

BRETT WARING

**CLAY NASH 1:
UNDERCOVER GUN**



2017

One – Range Baron

BARBED WIRE!

Clay Nash could hardly believe his eyes. The wire hadn't been strung up two days ago. Now it was there, a fence to keep his beeves from the river water. Cash Matthews must have had his men working at night, for the drift fence stretched for miles along the riverbank. The steers were backing off, not understanding what had happened; they pushed forward towards their normal water source and something gouged and ripped into their flesh, cutting out hunks of hide with the hair still attached.

The steers behind pushed forward and those in front began to bellow.

Nash rode his chestnut into the milling cattle, using his rope and yelling wildly to scatter them, to take the pressure off those beasts up against the fence. The long horns raked at his mount and the horse reared, whickering, giving him something else to worry about. He yanked hard on the reins: if the animal came down on a set of those horns ...

The beeves bawled and milled and crushed and rode each other's backs. The fence posts leaned but the animals in the lead were already torn to bloody shreds and bellowing in pain and fury, lashing out with sharp horns into those pressing behind. If he didn't get the crush cleared pronto, he was going to have a pile of bloody cattle on his hands that would be good for nothing but slaughtering on the spot. He drew his six-gun and loosed off two shots into the air: likely the explosions would bring Matthews' men, if they weren't already watching from the timber over on the cattle baron's land, laughing their heads off at his predicament.

Nash was angry: not only at the cattle which seemed to be more stubborn than he'd ever known them, but at Matthews for stooping to this dirty trick. Hell, they'd had their differences, sure enough. Nash could even understand Matthews not liking him homesteading a hundred-sixty acres of what had been free range, and used by Matthews and his father before him for thirty years. He could understand Matthews not liking to have to employ more outriders to keep his cattle from what was Nash's section, but he was damned if he could savvy a man with the thousands of acres that Matthews possessed, grudging another man less than two-hundred to start

his own small spread. It wasn't as if Nash was going to suddenly explode into a massive beef holding that would cut into Matthews' market. He wouldn't even be ready to sell his first matured beeves for another season. No, it was just plain greed on Cash Matthews' part, greed and stubbornness.

The Matthews family had been a force to reckon with in this neck of the woods for thirty-odd years and when Cash had come back from the Civil War sixteen years back and found his father dead and his cattle running wild over thousands of acres of range, he'd figured he had the chance to expand the already large Matthews empire and grabbed every ranny he could lay hands on who could fork a horse and handle a rope ... including Clay Nash. He'd had the biggest round-up ever seen in Texas, and the branding of the mavericks with the Matthews' mark, M-Bar-M, had taken weeks. A tough man in all ways, Matthews had ridden roughshod over those small ranchers and sodbusters who remained, had taken over rundown spreads whose owners likely wouldn't be returning from the war, and practically doubled the amount of range his father had had before that. He'd become a power in the land and when the free range had been thrown open for homesteading, with the settlers having twelve months to prove-up, he'd pulled every political string he could to get the law changed. He'd failed and then started hiring the hard case crew he ran now, men with more knowledge of how to beat a man to a pulp, or get a gun out of leather like greased lightning, than how to handle rope or branding iron. He had a good ranch crew as well, but one third of all the hundred-odd riders on M-Bar-M were there solely for the purpose of making life hell for the homesteaders on the free range.

And that included Clay Nash. He'd left M-Bar-M years ago and drifted around the country and, after a trail drive and the chance of a free train trip down into Texas, he'd found himself back in his home territory. It was just at the time that the range had been thrown open for homesteading. With his trail pay still intact, Nash figured he'd never have a better chance of getting that little ranch of his own he'd always wanted. After living rough for so long in the wilderness, including a year with Indians, it had seemed attractive. Six months he'd been here now and he'd thrown up a log cabin and some crude outbuildings and corrals.

He'd gone up into the unmarked country of the high ranges and sought out hidden canyons where he'd found bands of mustangs. He'd rigged corral traps and captured a remuda, twenty horses in all. He'd busted every single one himself and had suffered nosebleeds for days and a jarring ache in every bone in his body. He'd sold off ten mustangs and kept the others. With the

money from the horses, he'd purchased his first small herd and had been nursing it along, fattening the beeves for next season, aiming to start an early fall drive to the railhead while they had good condition on them and get top prices for prime beeves.

He'd had run-ins with Matthews' men from time to time but Nash wasn't a man to push around and he'd beaten up several of Matthews' hard cases when they'd tried to jump him in town. He'd shot one man in the forearm in a gunfight and when some of his beeves had been run off a cliff, he'd simply ridden onto M-Bar-M land and cut out twice as many mavericks and burned his own brand on their hides, the Flying N. The last couple of days, he'd kept his herd on a higher pasture where he could keep a better eye on them from the cabin, but today he'd figured they needed the lush grasses of the river pastures and had driven them down only to find the grass and water cut off from him by Matthews' barbed wire fence.

The gunshots did the trick. They spooked the cattle into plunging away in many directions and those up against the wire had a chance to back off and lick their wounds. Nash rode amongst them as he reloaded, keeping one eye on M-Bar-M land as he looked to see if any eyes had been gouged or mouths badly cut. The cattle had numerous rips in their sides and flanks, and one had a long gash in its neck, but, luckily, there didn't seem to be any with wounds that would require them to be shot. Well, it had been a long, dusty drive down from the high pasture and now the steadying beeves were turning and lowing mournfully as they looked at that sweet, slow-flowing water beyond the barbed wire.

They still needed to drink. Nash rode up to a post, dropped a lariat loop over it and hitched a noose around his saddlehorn, backing the chestnut off. The post creaked, bent, pulled free of the earth. He flipped the rope free and tossed it over another post, yanking that one out, too. The third one left a whole section of wire sagging clear to the ground. Nash used his saddle tools and cut the wire, looping it carefully back. He then rode around his herd and hazed the steers over this section. They rushed the water, plunging clear out into the middle of the shallow stream, bellowing as they lowered parched muzzles into the cool liquid.

Nash let his chestnut gelding drink and then rode along the bank, rifle in hand, certain that M-Bar-M riders must appear soon. Matthews wouldn't string this drift fence without patrolling it. There would be hard cases somewhere close by and they must have heard his gunshots. He couldn't savvy why they didn't come hell raising in. But, fact was, he couldn't see any movement over there, though a stand of timber blocked his view of what might be going on

beyond it on M-Bar-M land. He wasn't about to cross the river and deliberately trespass on Matthews' property; that would give the cattle baron too easy an excuse for stringing him up on a trumped-up rustling charge, or shooting him on sight and figuring out a reason later.

The river had always been Matthews' water and Cash resented anyone else using it. Nash was the closest one to the big spread who used it but other homesteaders had felt his wrath up and down the length of the watercourse. For all Nash knew, Matthews could have strung his drift fence clear along the river. He had enough men to do it and enough hard cases to effectively patrol it afterwards. That's what bothered Nash now: there should have been some sign of M-Bar-M men by now. He couldn't figure what their game might be if they *were* hidden in that stand of trees, letting him water his herd. They could pick him off from cover without trouble but there was no use him hunting protection yet, not until his beeves were ready to leave the water. Was that what they were waiting for? Until his back was turned, hazing the steers back onto his land? Not likely. They were tough men and killing came easy to some, especially the brutal Vern Dekker, who bore the title of Matthews' ramrod but who was really the top hand trouble-shooter and leader of the hard cases. Nash wouldn't be surprised if the man was wanted somewhere a long ways from the Texas Southwest ...

Dekker hated Nash's guts since they'd fought with fists in the nearby town last winter and Nash had walked away the winner. Dekker wasn't the type who'd get squeamish about putting a bullet into Nash from ambush. And, likely, he'd order his men to do the same at the first opportunity.

Then Nash suddenly knew why they weren't appearing across there on M-Bar-M land: it was because they *weren't* over there. They were behind him, on his own land, between him and his distant cabin. He whirled in the saddle as soon as the thought formed in his head and he knew he was right. There they were, three of them waiting on their horses with naked guns in their hands and crooked grins on their ugly faces, just outside of a clump of cottonwoods. He cursed: they'd been there all along, waiting for him to come, letting him wreck the fence, giving them all the excuse they needed to get tough.

And he'd ridden in blind, his attention taken by that fence and nothing else. Okay, he'd made this deal for himself and there was no one to help him get out of it, so *that* was up to him, too.

He didn't know any of the M-Bar-M riders by name, but he knew their faces: some of Dekker's hard boys were about to enjoy themselves, they figured. Right off, he knew it was

going to be kill or be killed. They didn't try to make him run with a few close shots: they aimed right at him, trying to knock him out of leather. They rode in in a bunch but scattered swiftly, giving him three targets to worry about.

In they came, guns blazing, and Nash was already moving, lying low over the chestnut's neck, ramming home his heels, jumping the startled mount for the river, getting in amongst the nervous cattle. Water sprayed and the steers bawled and lunged about, making him a harder target for the killers. He rode along the river shallows, keeping the low bank between himself and the three gunmen where possible. They charged down recklessly now, angry that their first fusillade hadn't blasted him out of the saddle.

Two rode the bank while the third man plunged his mount into the river, figuring on getting a clearer shot at Nash from there. He was the first to die. He rode into the shallows, but by this time the cattle were turning and plunging towards the home bank and he had to haul rein and fight his horse through the bawling steers. Nash hipped in the saddle, still lying low, and brought the rifle around, triggering, levering, triggering again.

The man's horse reared as a steer's horn ripped along its flank and the rider catapulted out of the saddle. He surged to his feet and clambered up the bank. Nash's third shot took him through the side of the head and he spun, arms and legs flailing, off the bank and back into the river. The cattle surged over his body.

The other two riders were shooting down at Nash and one bullet burned across the shoulder of the chestnut. The horse plunged and Nash held on one-handed, firing the rifle with his other hand. The bullet smashed into the head of the first rider's mount and the horse went down in its tracks as if it had hit a concealed tripwire. The rider hit hard and rolled towards the bank, dropping his rifle but yanking his pistol free and blasting a shot down at Nash. The cowboy brought up the rifle, fired wild and heard the man yell and saw him spin back on the grass, gun dropping, clawing frantically at his upper right arm, blood spurting through his fingers.

The third rider snarled, whirled his mount and plunged it off the bank in a wild leap, aiming to land on top of Nash and his chestnut. Nash yanked rein hard and the chestnut pulled aside, swinging its whole body in one wild-eyed, frantic lunge. It went over onto its side and, momentarily, Nash was out of the saddle but hung onto the reins one-handed and, when the horse righted itself, he slipped back into leather without effort. The M-Bar-M man had missed with his plunge and was fighting to get his own wildly pawing mount onto an even footing, for the

moment forgetting about Nash. He had enough worries just staying in the saddle. By the time he had managed to get the horse righted and turned to blaze a wild shot in Nash's general direction, the cowboy was seated firmly on the still, though panting, chestnut, rifle to shoulder, laying the sights squarely on the enemy. The hard case's eyes widened and he thumbed back his gun hammer for another shot but it was too late.

Nash squeezed trigger and the man hurtled backwards over his mount's rump as the animal plunged away. He threshed briefly in the shallows, lying face down in the water. Nash swung his rifle towards the man he'd shot in the arm. The man was running in a staggering line along the bank, clutching his bleeding arm, lunging out to grab the reins of the horse that had been gored by a steer. Nash could have finished him then, but merely put a shot over his head. The man clambered frantically aboard the skittish horse, his shirtsleeve red with blood.

Nash sent another bullet past his ear. The wounded man lay over the horse's neck, plunged it across the river and up the opposite bank, riding like hell for the stand of timber on Matthews' side of the river.

"Tell Matthews I'll shoot to kill from now on!" Clay Nash called after him, already thumbing fresh cartridges through the side loading-gate in the receiver of the Winchester.

His face was grim as he looked first at his cattle clustering back from the river, then at the two dead men and the dead horse. There wasn't much he could do about shifting the horse alone, but he could move the corpses of the men. He climbed down out of the saddle and dragged the man from the shallows out into midstream and turned him loose in the current. The body floated away downstream. Nash knew it would bring up on the next bend where the current swung in towards Matthews' bank. He did the same with the second man, then waded ashore and stood looking at the wrecked drift fence. There wasn't any more he could do about that and it had likely served Matthews' purpose, anyway. It had started the shooting war.

He'd picked his mark well. The other homesteaders were a motley lot, mainly family men. There were a couple of hotheads amongst them, and at least one man who was more stubborn than Matthews himself, but lacking the power or the back up. But, in general, when Matthews got really tough, they either made a token resistance or packed up and left. Those that remained weren't such thorns in Matthews' side or, if he figured they were becoming a nuisance, he moved in. There was a hardcore nucleus of resistance to M-Bar-M, about five men who would give Matthews' hard cases as good as they handed out.

Thoughtfully, the cowboy began hazing his steers together and driving them back towards his cabin.

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Cash Matthews was a big, arrogant man and it showed in every inch of him as he strode across the ranch yard towards the bunkhouse. There were two bunkhouses on the M-Bar-M; a long wooden one with a shingle-covered dog run connecting it to the cook shack and eating shed for the range hands, the cowboys who worked the vast spread and its wide-scattered herds. The second bunkhouse was an adobe affair, had actually been the original ranch house before Matthews built the massive structure he now used, and this adobe building was used by Vern Dekker and his bunch of hard cases. They remained separate from the cowhands, looking on the workaday men with disdain, treating them almost as roughly as the homesteaders.

Dekker, as big as Matthews but beefier, more brutal-looking, strode easily alongside his boss as they crossed the yard. He was a man who was supremely confident of his own ability to get himself out of any trouble, a fearless man whose loyalty could be bought for cash. He was fast with gun and fists, and had been known to throw a knife with speed and deadly accuracy. He had no compassion, despised weakness in any man and had no conscience about using his brutal talents against man, woman or child, as long as he was paid enough.

“Which one is it with the bullet in him?” Matthews growled as they made for the adobe bunkhouse.

“Rio,” Dekker replied briefly.

“Who got killed?”

“Hondo and Monk McCoy.”

Matthews grunted. “McCoy wasn’t much good anyways. Hondo seemed like a good man, though ... would rather it’d been Rio than him.”

Dekker shrugged. “Can get rid of him any time you say.”

“Not yet. Need him around a spell. He’s our only living witness that Nash killed the others ... should he be needed.”

Dekker nodded and opened the thick bunkhouse door for Matthews, who walked straight in, looked around. He saw Rio sprawled on a bunk with one of the Indian roustabouts tying a crude bandage around the bullet wound in his upper arm. Rio nodded and tried to stand, knowing Matthews liked his underlings to show him some respect. He put out his good hand to steady

himself against the upper bunk and his face went white with the effort. He swayed dizzily and looked in danger of falling. Matthews did not tell him he could sit down and the wounded man gritted his teeth, clung desperately to the upper bunk as he faced the big rancher. Dekker strolled across to stand beside Matthews.

“You never even scratched Nash with a bullet, huh?” the rancher asked.

Rio swallowed and shook his head slowly. “No, sir, Mr. Matthews. He got in amongst his steers in the river and we couldn’t—”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses,” Matthews cut in fast. He gestured to the Indian who was standing by stoically. “Has he finished with your arm?” Rio nodded. “All right, get out,” the rancher told the Indian and the man silently gathered his rags and dish of water and padded out of the hut. Matthews put a cold gaze on Rio. “This has got to be dead right, in case a marshal comes in here. You saw Nash pull down my fence and when you hombres told him to quit, from *my* side of the river, remember, he started shooting ... You got it?”

“Yessir ... Only thing is ...”

“That’s the story!” Matthews snapped. “No ifs and buts. Plain and simple, like I told you.”

Rio swallowed, nodding eagerly. “Yessir, but Hondo’s hoss is dead on Nash’s side of the river.”

“That’s a point, Cash,” Dekker said, smoking easily, refusing to show any man respect, silently enjoying Matthews’ anger at being addressed by his first name by one of his hired men. Dekker knew it galled him: that was why he did it.

Matthews tightened his mouth as he grudgingly nodded. “All right. Hondo’s dead anyway. He rode across to try and fix the fence and Nash shot him down cold: he was the first to be killed, right? ... Not that I figure we’ll have any trouble, but the goddamn marshals are turnin’ up everywhere these days. If it’s not them it’s these new-fangled Texas Rangers. Have to get our stories straight long before they come. You stick around the house for a couple of weeks, Rio. If your arm gives you trouble, ride into town to the sawbones. He can bill me.”

“Might be a good idea if he goes in to a medico, anyways, Cash,” suggested Dekker. “He can tell the story right then, get it planted long before we have to tell it to any lawman who shows up.”

Matthews frowned, not liking one of his henchmen out-thinking him, but he was smart enough to admit the wisdom of the suggestion.

“Right, Rio. That makes sense. Get that Injun roustabout to take you to town in the buckboard.” His voice hardened. “And don’t foul-up on that story.”

“I won’t,” Rio promised and sagged down onto his bunk, groaning as he clutched at his wounded arm. No sympathy showed on either Matthews’ or Dekker’s faces.

“Better not,” the rancher said curtly, then turned to Dekker. “Right, Vern. Get your crew. We’re riding against Clay Nash right now. No quarter, remember. I want the other goddamn sodbusters to sit up and take notice. If I finish Nash, they ought to get the message. If not, after the next one gets wiped out, they will.”

“You comin’ with us?” Dekker asked.

Matthews looked thoughtful for a long ten seconds, then nodded abruptly. “Think I will. It’s a mite more personal with Nash than the others. I’ll enjoy watching him go under.”

Matthews and Dekker left the bunkhouse without glancing again in Rio’s direction. The wounded man reached under his pillow and brought out a near-empty bottle of whisky. He drank deeply, glad he was going to be out of the fighting. He didn’t mind collecting big pay to rough up a few sodbusters, but once he started catching lead, he’d much rather stay right out of things. Like this deal with Nash. He was sure glad he wasn’t going to be in that. Nash wouldn’t go down easy and he’d take some M-Bar-M hands with him. But he couldn’t win.

It would still end up a massacre.