

Last
Bravo®

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This is an original shorty story and has
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Maxfield got off the train with his bag, headed west along the tracks. Maxfield wore a black derby, black coat over a black suit, matching bag black. The morning was fog bound; Montana Mountains invisible behind bone white skies. Bone whiteness piled along the tracks; thousands of buffalo bones piled up to ten feet high-running in both directions until the bones were swallowed by the fog.

In Browning, Montana, the sheriff's office was just past the muddy rail yard. That was Maxfield's first stop.

The sheriff's office had the words 'Police Department' painted on the window above 'Sheriff, C.C. Cowgill.'

"Charlie Cowgill," the Sheriff said inside the office, a lanky cowpuncher type in suspenders. "You're the Argosy man."

"Maxfield."

Maxfield followed Cowgill out across more mud to a hospital building. Inside were nuns, paintings of angels, The Lord, and the smell of The War. They took stairs to the basement. It was cold underground; the bodies kept better there and on a cold day you could stomach the smell. Brick walls, a row of metal tables under white sheets. Cowgill removed the sheets. Maxfield looked at the bodies. A bloodbath during a train robbery. Four men killed, each one shot in the forehead, then their heads, arms and legs chopped off with axes. They looked at the torsos, the severed limbs, men reduced to sections of meat, chopped bone, severed heads sporting handlebar mustaches. One of the men had been the Argosy man sent to bodyguard the whore Virginia Mist.

"Eight nights ago," Cowgill said. "Six armed men stopped the train. Didn't even rob the other cars. Went straight to Jack Browning's private car. It was the Johnny Bloodsaw gang. They wore masks, carried guns and axes. The leader said '*My name is Johnny Bloodsaw. I come straight from Hell. I drink blood and eat human bones.*' They went into Browning's private car. Outside, the passengers heard them chopping the bodies."

"What happened to Virginia Mist?"

"They took her. The telegram said you're on the job."

Maxfield said, "The Argosy Detective Agency of West Argosy, Texas was commissioned by the railroad to protect Jack Browning's private railroad car and to recover any assets therein lost to theft."

"That means you have to find the whore?"

"Yes."

"Just you?"

"Yes."

"You must be a good Argosy man."

Maxfield took down the names of the dead. Then they went back to the Sheriff's office. Cowgill poured them cups of chicory, sat them by the window. Cowgill lit a pipe, Maxfield lit a cigar.

"Tell me about Browning," Maxfield said.

"This is a large cow town," Cowgill said. "Jack Browning's a cattleman. Largest in Montana. This is his town."

"Tell me about Jack Browning."

"He's four hundred pounds. He spent two years in Africa hunting big game. He shot two elephants. Then he went to Egypt. Then India. He came back with a Hindoo doctor who he says has the secret of eternal youth. He started more building in town. He built an opera house. He built what he calls his 'night palace'. He built a miniature toy town for his little girl. It even has its own toy sheriff, an actor he hired from a Wild West show."

"He sounds eccentric," Maxfield said.

"Don't know the word but it's a word that sounds right for him," Cowgill said.

"He collects rare whores. Virginia Mist."

"When do I see Jack Browning?"

"You'll see him tomorrow," Cowgill said. "He lunches at the Metropolitan every day at one sharp."

Cowgill relit his pipe. "I have three deputies. Mr. Browning has instructed us to be of assistance to you. Around here, we do what Mr. Browning says. His town. So while you're here we have to shine your Texas boots. Doesn't bother me much. We have

the Johnny Bloodsaw gang and Wooden Moon's bunch out there. Bloodsaw has been a terror for years. Wooden Moon kills whatever white people Bloodsaw doesn't kill. You'll either leave without finding a rare whore or wind up chopped to pieces like the last Argosy man they sent. That doesn't 't bother me much either."

Maxfield relit his cigar.

"I could use a boot shine," Maxfield said. "But I think I already found her."

Maxfield's next stop was the telegraph office. He sent a telegram to the dead Argosy man's branch office in New York City. Then he wired Stillwell in Kansas City. Stillwell was a gunman so deadly he traveled with his own undertaker. Anywhere Stillwell went, the population dropped. Maxfield went to the Harvey House for a meal, then to the best hotel for two side-to-side rooms. After that he had to find the best whore. Maxfield believed in modern methods of detection and investigation. He also believed in the method of finding the right whores. Most of his cases had been solved by whores. The best whores in a cow town knew everything.

First Maxfield had a shave and a bath, had his suit brushed. Then he slept for two hours. Long enough for the bone white sky to turn gray. He polished his twin Colts. He looked at himself in the dresser mirror, liked what he saw. He had the face and chin of the American Ideal. He was handsome enough to be on the cover of a dime novel, battling redskins using his rifle for a club. He belonged in a wild west show.

Back home in Argosy, he kept a photograph of himself taken at age eleven, blonde bangs framing a girlish face of angelic beauty. His face needed that much beauty for what was to come to it in the years ahead. Almost blown off at Vicksburg. Then a Sioux carving it up with his killing knife before Maxfield took it from him. Yet after the field doctors sewed it back together and the healing was done, the face always came back handsome. A rougher face, but one that wore its damage well.

No, he hadn't exactly already found Virginia Mist, but it was worth saying to watch Cowgill's face as he walked out. But he was close. There was one piece of information about the dead Argosy man that gave him a clue. The telegram from New York City that night confirmed it. The dead Argosy man was under suspicion of using his

position to bilk and blackmail wealthy New Yorkers.

Maybe there was no "rare whore" named Virginia Mist. Maybe Jack Browning had been bilked by the dead Argosy man. Either way Maxfield was there because the credibility of the Argosy Detective Agency was at stake. Next question: why had the Johnny Bloodsaw gang created a bloodbath?

Maxfield left the hotel, sent three telegrams to the home office in West Argosy, Texas. Then he went, in black derby and suit, looking for a suitable whore. It took a night of talking to whores. Looking for something specific. One who had fucked Jack Browning. Or worked for him.

In a dance hall saloon on 5th Street, he found a saloon girl name of Lizzy Cinder. It was a gas-lit olive green cave where cowpunchers and dance hall girls pounded the wood floor with their muddy boots and clodhoppers to the grinding of a pump organ. Maxfield didn't dance with the girl, letting her steer him to the bar directly. Lizzy Cinder was redheaded and pale with a freckled nose, tall with wide hips. She wasn't a whore, she was a saloon girl. But she still liked greenbacks. Maxfield took her and two bottles back to his hotel room.

The Metropolitan at one sharp. Four hundred pound Jack Browning got out of a surrey. He was a bearskin coat with a top hat and a walking stick. Below the top hat, black muttonchops and a cigar. Bearskin flowed across the boardwalk toward the doors, its size curving the space around it, carrying along a smaller darker man in a turban and black coat, his "Hindoo doctor".

Maxfield joined them at their regular table. The waiters kept busy delivering Browning slabs of his own stock and taking away the stripped bones. There was also a ham, venison, whole chickens, a loaf of sliced bread, boiled potatoes. Browning did most of the eating.

"I am a cattleman," Jack Browning told Maxfield. "I am also an African explorer and an opera singer. I built a night palace for the town of night. The realm of dreams. Where Heaven meets Earth."

Browning took a drink of red wine. Licked his lips.

"I collect rare whores. On a trip to new York City, I found Virginia Mist, then shipped her out for the night palace. Little is known about her background except rumors and myths. It is said that she is a direct descendant of Cleopatra VII of Egypt. She is said to have been a spy for both sides in the war between the states. It is said that she once gave a private performance of Mazeppa for Abraham Lincoln. It is said that her mastery of the carnal arts can make a man insensible or suspend him in a deathlike state for days. It is said that she was made of ivory and her womanhood is a clockwork built by German monks."

"How did you find her?"

"It was my Argosy man in New York City, commissioned by me to find rare whores."

Browning lit a cigar. The Hindoo doctor didn't speak, focused on chewing stock and drinking wine, not even watching them.

"The victims," Maxfield began, "in your private car, were coming here to see you for business?"

Browning's large head nodded as he fed it a slice of bread spread with butter. "Associates..." his full mouth mumbled. "The losses are untold. A black day."

The Hindoo doctor spoke. "A bloodbath."

"Virginia must be recovered. Imagine her in the hands of a maniac like Johnny Bloodsaw. Imagine her at the mercy of his cutthroats. The blood runs cold at the thought."

Maxfield wondered if everyone in Browning, Montana was a hair from being locked up in Bedlam.

Booth Browning's miniature town covered eleven acres that duplicated Browning to smaller scale from the railroad yard to the steeple churches at the other side of town. Unlike the real thing, the "buildings" were all painted in candy cane stripes of red and peppermint white. Eleven acres surrounded by a corral of wood fencing painted a rosy

red. Standing at the gate was a five-foot tall buckskinned cowpoke in a tall white hat, toothpick in his mouth, a star pinned to his shirt.

Maxfield spotted a slight teenage girl in dark glasses and dark clothing stooping to enter the buildings as though they were large dollhouses. She moved from building to building and between them like an ant moved through an ant farm.

The buckskinned man said to Maxfield, "You're the Argosy man?"

Maxfield nodded. "You're the Sheriff here?"

"Welcome to Booth town," he said. "I'm the Sheriff of Booth town."

The girl came to the gate, hid behind the fence post.

Maxfield took off his hat. "Miss Browning...my name is Maxfield."

She ran back to the houses, ducked through the doorway of a miniature church.

Maxfield paid Lizzy Cinder enough Argosy greenbacks for her to stay in the next hotel room. He paid the tight collared, monocled hotel clerk to watch Lizzy Cinder. Maxfield checked in with him each time he crossed the tiny hotel lobby, listened to his thick German accent, heard no news of Lizzy stepping out on him while he was out.

Maxfield bought a dun mare and a saddle rig. Telegrams arrived. The Bloodsaw gang hasn't been seen since the train robbery. Wooden Moon was attacking stagecoaches between Browning and Great Falls. Telegram: *The dead men had been business associates of Jack Browning, were heading to Browning for a summit with the cattleman.* Telegram: *Other than Booth, Jack Browning had no relatives.* Telegram: *Stillwell was already in Montana.*

Maxfield went to Lizzy Cinder's room. Lizzy Cinder was an acrobat and the half crooked hotel bed was her trapeze. Thirteen clowns did tumbles chased by a white tiger. Maxfield watched the faces she made. She sucked her thumb. She pulled her thick red hair. She moaned breathlessly, she hit new notes. She wrinkled her nose and winked up at him. Maxfield reminded himself not to solve this case too soon.

Afterward, Maxfield unpacked the tequila and peyote tea, made them Texas cactus juice. Lizzy rolled them cigarettes. They talked about when she had worked for Jack Browning.

"I was a governess for close to a year."

"Did he fire you?"

"I quit."

"How come?"

"Big Jack is hard to work for. He scares me."

"Why does he scare you?"

"Jack Browning is losing his mind," Lizzy said. "Been happening for years. And the daughter is slowly going blind and insane. She stays in her toy town mostly now."

"What happened to her mother?"

"Killed in a stagecoach attack by Wooden Moon."

"Now he buys rare whores."

"Big Jack ships in his own whores from New York City and San Francisco," Lizzy said. "He keeps them in his night palace. The only way to get in is invitation only. And no one's ever been invited."

Maxfield switched to a cigar, paced the room naked, brooding. A cigar helped him think better.

Lizzy said, "How you going to find Johnny Bloodsaw?"

"I'm going to use the latest in modern detective methods. Start by finding his whores."

"Never seen him in Browning."

"Any of his gang?"

Now Lizzy was brooding.

"Heard talk," she said. "Two of his gang been to the Stockyard Saloon for cards and whoring."

Maxfield peeled off two fifties. Lizzy put them to her freckled nose like roses, breathed in.

"Find their whores," he said.

"Booth doesn't see folks." The toothpick shifted. "Hardly never."

Maxfield was standing in front of the Sheriff of Booth town.

"Maybe she'll see me," Maxfield said.

"I'll ask her..."

The toy Sheriff went behind the gate-went looking around at the toy buildings for the girl.

The girl came out to the wood fence, hid behind a post. She was in a black dress, black tights, & black boots. Joan of Arc bangs framed a face behind dark tinted spectacles.

"Hello there, Booth."

She nodded to him.

"How old are you?"

Her voice was the shadow of a moth. "Fourteen."

"Seen your father lately?"

She shook her head.

The Sheriff of Booth town was within eavesdropping distance, tying a lariat and roping a fence post.

Maxfield got closer to Booth. "Are you free to leave here?"

"I seldom want to leave."

"I'm here to help you any way you want, Booth."

"Why?"

"I'm a detective. That's like a lawman. It's my job."

Booth's pale little hands grabbed the fence post-she hugged it, making animal noises. A drop of saliva rolled from a corner of the moth's shadow.

"There is an Indian curse on me," she said, "Wooden Moon's curse."

Maxfield's ears closed in on the fluttering moth.

"My eyes can't see good," she said. "And I'm going blind. And my mind is slipping. And I can't think good anymore. I used to sing songs. I used to know songs. Songs about pretty water rushing and the moon above and ships tossed by the sea. But my

songs are lost now. I can't remember the words. Wooden Moon comes into my dreams; to kill me like he killed my mother. Wooden Moon killed my father."

Buckskin brown appeared in the corner of Maxfield's vision. Maxfield brought his face closer to Booth's.

"How so?" he asked her.

"He killed my father somehow."

"How?"

"That man is not my father. He is a ghost."

"Want to see me do my tricks, Booth?" The Sheriff twirled his lasso before him.

"I do riding tricks. I do sharp shooting, like I did in the wild west show."

Maxfield turned back, found Booth gone.

"Maybe you want to see my sharp shooting, Argosy Man."

The Sheriff dropped the lasso, stood there in his two gun holster, grinning.

"I'm a dead shot," he said. "I can shoot a playing card from two hundred feet.

You don't wear a gun, Argosy Man?"

"When I need a gun, I bring one."

"You a good shot?"

"Not me."

"How can you be an Argosy man and be a bad shot?"

Maxfield walked up to the Sheriff of Booth town until he was seven inches away.

The Sheriff of Booth town stepped back one pace.

"I need to be real close to the cheap hired gun I'm shooting dead," Maxfield said.

"That got me through two wars so I'll stick with it."

Maxfield didn't sleep with Lizzy Cinder that night. Somehow he felt Booth Browning waiting for him in his dreams.

He dreamt of battlefields covered with severed limbs. He couldn't remember whether he was fighting Confederates or the Sioux. A steam driven full moon dipped so close to the Earth it was just above the battlefield. Inside it Booth was trapped. He

could see her silhouette. Jack Browning and his Hindoo doctor rode on elephants, trampling the dead.

A cannonball took off Maxfield's head. His head grew back as a grinning skull. Toward the sky, through the blood, to the moon, Maxfield said, "I will save you."

The train came in. Maxfield watched Stillwell come out followed by a wide, thick necked man in a black bowler, his undertaker. Stillwell only brought his undertaker when he expected to collect multiple bounties. He didn't trust the locals with the bodies he collected and it was too much work to do alone. Stillwell wasn't much to look at, a short thin man who looked and dressed like a preacher, wore the black suit, collar hidden by long wildly grown beard on a sunken face, deep set blue eyes that stared like a fiery sermon. He would have looked natural in a robe and sandals, clutching stone tablets. He nodded at Maxfield, kept walking. Stillwell wasn't a hired gun-he was a door from Hell opening. Stillwell didn't need details. He would watch and wait for the right people to kill. Maxfield had to make sure he didn't become one of them.

Maxfield watched the men load the buffalo bones into freight cars. There were more bones than freight cars.

Lighting a pipe, the hotel clerk cocked his monocle at Maxfield, slid a handwritten note across the counter.

Maxfield read it going up the stairs. At noon, *Lizzie Cinder had left the hotel, went to the Stockyard Saloon. There she met a large bald man she called by the name "Billy". They talked for ten minutes. The man passed her paper money. Lizzie Cinder left, returned to the hotel.*

In his room, Maxfield went over his recent telegrams and his wanted posters. Both confirmed a member of the Johnny Bloodsaw gang named Billy Nettles. The wanted poster: *Age 28, 6'4", 305 lbs., bald as an egg, thick beard, no mustache.*

Maxfield received the reply to the last of his telegrams to the home office. Charlie Cowgill had no prior history to becoming Sheriff of Browning, Montana.

Maxfield again looked through his wanted posters of the Bloodsaw gang. He found a bad drawing of a man's face and the name "Charlie Gill".

Maxfield walked into the Stockyard Saloon with his twin Colts drawn. Men close to the door got out of the place. Billy Nettles was at the faro table, larger and wider than anyone around him. The men around him cleared out. Billy Nettles didn't look at Maxfield.

"Argosy Man. We own this town now. *So go to Hell.*"

A slap of Colt barrel knocked out two of Billy Nettles' front teeth. Billy Nettles' hand went for the gun butt in his holster. The other Colt blew off the tip of Billy Nettles' left boot. Billy Nettles took in the pain with a whiskey soaked grunt. He spat blood, putting his gun on the faro table. Then he gave Maxfield a dirty look.

Even after the train left, the bones were even higher than before, up to twenty feet, as vast as before, stretching both directions into the bone whiteness and fog. Roped behind Maxfield's mare, Billy Nettles had limped a trail of blood halfway across Browning to get there. The blood loss had thinned his already light brain, leaving him panting the same four words: "We own this town."

Maxfield got off the horse, tightened the lasso around Billy Nettles' neck until it was squeezing his throat.

"*Where's Johnny Bloodsaw?*"

"We own this town."

"I figured that, Billy."

"You're a *dead* Argosy man."

It had been thirty minutes since taking Billy Nettles out of the Stockyard Saloon. Maxfield figured there'd been enough time for the interested parties to get the word. They'd be along with their guns and rifles. They had their own deal with Lizzy Cinder and they'd been watching him all along. Once again he was right: finding the right whore will solve your case every time.

Maxfield heard a moth whisper.

He looked up the tracks-seeing Booth Browning on her back. Fifty yards away was the toy sheriff of Booth town with his rope, tying Booth Browning to the tracks.

A large round hole punched through Billy Nettles' forehead, blood and brain sprayed the bones behind him.

The rifle shot came from the fog.

They came through the fog-until they counted eight men. Five of them were the Johnny Bloodsaw gang. Three were red men wearing the war paint of Wooden Moon.

Maxfield started climbing up the mountain of bones, sideways, keeping his Colts leveled down. They got closer, reaching the bones, climbing up them after him. He let them get closer. He put three bullets into the chest of one of the bandits. His next two shots took a red man above the neck. Their bodies slid back down the bones.

Maxfield reached the top of the bones, saw the Sheriff's office in flames.

Stillwell.

Maxfield reloaded, heard bones rattling upward, shot the first man who reached the top. The other four were on their way up the bones, firing at him. They put two bullets into Maxfield. A third bullet scorched his derby.

Stillwell's shotgun *boomed* four times. The four never reached the top of the bones.

Maxfield's boots crunched over bones until he was standing above Booth Browning. The toy sheriff of Booth town was a crack shot! He spun, put a *bullet* into Maxfield's right kneecap-just before Maxfield slid down the bones, emptying his Colts.

Maxfield untied Booth.

Maxfield collapsed. The bones poured over his body. Booth went to him, her small hands *digging* through the bones.

The next morning--eight A.M.....

Jack Browning and his Hindoo doctor were in their private dining car, fifteen minutes from leaving town. Before them were a spread of Browning stock and a pot of coffee. There was also a ham, venison, corn on the cob, stacks of pancakes, bacon, biscuits, boiled eggs, a pitcher of cream, two cherry pies.

They looked up, saw Stillwell aiming a sawed off shotgun at them.

Stillwell turned the shotgun on Jack Browning, said, "You are Johnny Bloodsaw." Stillwell *shot* him in the chest.

To the Hindoo doctor, he said, "You are Wooden Moon."

Wooden Moon was running almost to the next car when Stillwell shot *him* in the back.

Johnny Bloodsaw sat at the table before a lake of blood, the food blood splattered, everyone but Stillwell spilling out of the train. Stillwell waited for his undertaker.

Maxfield had a type writer brought to his hospital bed. The home office wanted its reports promptly.

Johnny Bloodsaw and Wooden Moon had a relationship with Jack Browning. Jack Browning had hired Wooden Moon to kill off the Blackfoot and Crow Indians on his land. When that was accomplished, Browning then hired Johnny Bloodsaw to kill off Wooden Moon. The two outlaws eventually saw their common ground and an easier way to get all of Browning's money. By now they had relationships with people inside Jack Browning's world, most closely with Browning's governess, Lizzy Cinder.

They murdered Jack Browning. They murdered his wife. They murdered his staff. They replaced his staff with confederates, placed a Bloodsaw gang member as Sheriff of Browning. Then they staged Browning's two year long travels (travels that left no records yet found). When Browning "returned" it was Johnny Bloodsaw posing as

Browning, two hundred pounds heavier, his features altered to resemble Jack Browning. He was accompanied by Wooden Moon, posing as his Hindoo doctor. Meanwhile over time their confederates dosed Booth Browning with insidious poisons that created her mental illness and eventual blindness to render her without credibility or claim to the Browning fortune until the time when they would murder her as well. Meanwhile, the Jack Bloodsaw gang and Wooden Moon renegades operated almost as before, keeping their leaders' identities alive in the Wild West.

Concerning the dead former Argosy man: he had turned to graft. Details were found in the dead Argosy man's journal. During a "Jack Browning" visit to New York City, he had determined "Jack Browning" was an impostor and was on his way to Browning, Montana to blackmail him. Bloodsaw arranged for him to be accompanied with several businessmen who also had doubts about the veracity of "Jack Browning". Bloodsaw arranged their slaughter and invented the kidnapping of Virginia Mist.

Maxfield made no mention of Stillwell and his collected bounties that had reduced the population of Browning, Montana and burned a number of buildings to the ground.

It was a snowy night outside the New York City Theater where the play Cosmopolitan Whimsy had just released a crowd of high society out to their coaches. After a year, Maxfield still walked with a cane. It was a black cane matching his black coat and top hat. On his arm was Booth Browning, clinging to him in emerald velvet.

They found their coach and driver, got in out of the snowflakes. Booth's eyes were now like ocean blue crystals. They penetrated Maxfield's gaze. Her voice was no longer a moth's shadow.

"I want to see it again."

"Anything you want," Maxfield said.

Maxfield lit a cigar as the carriage stalled in the traffic of carriages, the snowy street steaming with horse breath and horse dung. Maxfield started to miss the wide-

open spaces out west.

"You look so peaceful at the theater," Booth said. "It's the only time I get to see you sleep."

Booth kissed his cheek. As much as she was in love with him, he was with her. Maxfield was now her legal custodian, controlling the Jack Browning estate and Booth's holdings. Naturally, he had resigned from duty in the Argosy Detective Agency of West Argosy, Texas. Managing Booth's wealth was a full time job. He'd sold off the cattle and the Montana property, was now looking for somewhere to invest the capital. He liked steel.

Booth saw them marrying when she turned eighteen. Three years of her chastity to wait. Maxfield was determined to remain honorable. There weren't many challenges left for an ex-Argosy man these days.

THE END

