

An Odd-Fashioned Western

Prologue: Welcome to Bitterwater!

One brutally cloudless day in July, news of an army regiment settling down nearby burned through the town of Bitterwater. Typically, the most contact the town got was in the form of unwelcome guests from the Sierra Nevada mountains, so this was an occasion they didn't want to waste. The women began sewing furiously, the men went to the local barber to groom their beards, mustaches, and even the hair on their scalps. The gun salesman polished his wares, the sheriff loaded up the jail cells, and the bartenders watered down their drinks. Well, more than they normally did.

The townspeople gathered in the Saloon, the only building large enough to hold more than a dozen people at a time. Sheriff Fred Fling, an aging, balding man of 50, and his daughter, Deputy Sheila Fling, a young, sprightly woman with a penchant for optimism, called for order. The 50-odd townspeople calmed down. The Sheriff cleared his throat, and when he spoke, his voice boomed louder than any cannon. "Folks, I know we're all excited. It's been awhile since we had any official protection, especially since the trains stopped running through town. I think I speak for all of us when I say a solid military presence is what's called for. We can't keep making Connie do all the work, even if it's the only thing she's good at." Nobody laughed at Sheriff Fling's joke, as was tradition.

Connie Dent-Fling, owner of the saloon, rolled her eyes. A small woman of 24, she had little to no sense of humor. In almost any situation, she wore a cold, murderous stare, and because of this, she often bore the brunt of the Sheriff's jokes. She knew the Sheriff's jabs came from a place of love, but she couldn't help being annoyed by her father-in-law. Her mother had

claimed that in-laws would always have that effect on her; Connie hated to admit it, but her mother had been right for once. She motioned at her In-Laws to keep going.

Sheila picked up where her father had left off. “The Saloon will stay open, but we can’t promise it won’t be full of soldiers day and night. Luckily, we have a whole hell of a lot of empty houses since people keep getting killed, so we don’t need to build houses or nothing. What we *are* gonna do is pool together all the guns we got.” The crowd started rabbling, unhappy about the whole arrangement. “Now, now, folks, we ain’t gonna take ‘em away. We just need to know how much we got. As always, anyone who doesn’t pull their weight is gonna spend a night in the stocks.”

Sir Reginald Ring IV, a Gunsmith from England, raised his hand. “My dear, I have some weapons that I’ve not completed. Will you want these to your collection?”

“Reggie, we don’t want your scrap metal.” Connie’s mouth curled in a slight grin when Sheila called the aristocrat ‘Reggie.’ The sisters-in-law knew how much he hated the nickname, and annoying the stuffy scientist was one of the few things Connie enjoyed with all her heart. “But, if any of your experiments are working, bring ‘em down.”

“Well, I’m pleased to see that you all remain respectful of-“

“INCOMING! ONE TRIBESMAN!” The shout made the ground tremble, the deep bass of the voice reverberating into everyone’s bones. Many of the townspeople shook, not just from the yell, but from hearing that one of Them was coming.

Connie spoke calmly and quietly. “How far away, Nort?” Nobody knew how, but no matter how soft someone spoke, their watchman in the mountains could always hear them.

“ONE MINUTE! HE’S QUIET! ALMOST SNUCK PAST ME!”

_____“Thanks, Nort.” She stood up, and stretched an arm out towards Reginald. “Reggie, Winchester.”

Reginald blinked in mild “Of course, ma’am. Will that be with the modified ammunition, or the standard?”

“Normal’s fine.”

“Indeed. It would be an excellent learning experience for the soldiers to see what regular bullets do against them. Excellent thinking, Mrs. Fling.” Reginald carefully tossed one of two Repeating Rifles on the floor next to the table to Connie. She checked to make sure the gun was properly loaded, before nodding in confirmation. She tucked her arm underneath the strap attached to the firearm, and swung it over her shoulder as Reginald moved next to her. “Shall I accompany you? I want to see this firsthand.”

Connie shrugged, made her way through the crowd, and exited the Saloon. Reginald followed the path she made, and prepared his journal.

Connie stood in the middle of the street, holding the rifle. “How far, Nort?”

“**SECONDS! PREPARE TO FIGHT!**” Connie took the advice, and placed her finger on the trigger. The Tribesman cursed in a language foreign to Connie, and stepped out of his hiding place behind the Jailhouse and into the middle of the street.

The Tribesman was eight feet tall, and brandished a bow. He wore the skins of animals Connie had never even heard of. His green skin glistened in the bright sun, and tusks jutted out of his mouth where canines would be on a person. Connie took aim at the beast’s throat. “What’s your name, Tribesman?”

The enemy spat on the ground. “We are no tribe, Squishy! We are the Orcs, and our army will slaughter you-“

Connie pulled the trigger, the sweet sound of exploding gunpowder replacing the monster’s and a bullet struck him just under its chin. If he had been a human, the shot would have been lethal. Unfortunately, Their skin, muscle, and sinew are quite a bit stronger; normal bullets will do next to nothing unless they hit one of their weak spots. The flesh around its gullet, for example, has enough strength to prevent a standard bullet from breaking straight through, but not powerful enough to completely prevent injury. The bullet had lodged itself about a half-inch into her enemy’s throat, mere millimeters away from piercing its esophagus. The creature crouched to the ground, clutching its neck, screaming in pain.

Reginald started jotting down notes. “Forty metres... Non-lethal, but heavily damaged. You there! You called yourself an ‘Orc?’ Can you still fight?” The enemy stood, knocking an arrow. “I believe that is a ‘yes.’ Constance, if you would be so kind?” Connie pulled the lever-action, loading another round into the chamber. She took aim once more, her breathing calm as ever. The next bullet struck the Orc in its left eye. The cornea was crushed, the sclera splattered everywhere, and it shrieked in pain once more, clutching at the socket where lead had taken up residence. Connie prepared her next shot, as Reginald scribbled. “Forty metres... Complete disintegration of the eyeball. Bullet does not travel much farther. Perform thorough autopsy to find the cause...”

The behemoth was breathing quick, shallow breaths. It desperately scrambled to pick up the arrow it had dropped, and stood up, trying once more to fire the arrow. Blood was streaked

across its face, and his voice grew ever more angry and primal. “You... Squishy one... I will wear your skin as a coat.”

Connie never flinched. She aimed carefully, and decided she’d heard enough of its voice for the day. “Reggie, ready when you are.”

“You... YOU *FLIKATH!* YOU WILL NOT IGNORE ME!” He pulled the bowstring back. Taking advantage of his newfound lack of depth perception, Connie feinted left. Her opponent took the bait, and Connie easily dodged to the right.

“You done scribbling?”

“In just a moment. Remind me, what’s the scientific name of the region just behind the eyeball?”

“Why the fuck would I know that?” Connie’s body never stopped tracking the enemy in front of her.

“Forgive me, I assumed you were civilised. Carry on.” Connie would have rolled her eyes, but she was busy.

The Orc pulled a knife from its hide belt. The monster began sprinting toward Connie, its powerful legs propelling it faster than any human would be able to move. The vibrations in the ground from the sheer amounts of power his running put out were almost enough to make Connie lose focus. Almost. Exhaling softly, she fired once more.

The creature fell to the ground at Connie’s feet. The bullet had entered the same wound as her first; the previous damage allowed this shot to sever its brainstem. Blood spilled out from its wounds, the hard earth packed too tightly to absorb much of the moisture. Connie stepped back, and let Reginald take his notes. As much as she enjoyed annoying him, the aristocrat was a

useful ally. If she'd used one of his 'enhanced' bullets - 'Incendiary Rounds,' he called them - she would have killed the beast on the first shot, and she wouldn't have been able to practice as she just had.

Reginald knelt next to it. "Constance, a hand, please?" The two of them flipped the corpse over. "Fascinating... This one has tattoos all over his body. And he claimed that his people - 'Orcs.' Terrible name, just terrible - he claimed that they weren't a tribe. He said army, very distinctly. And if he was almost able to evade Nort, well... This one would have been an advance scout. Perhaps that's what these markings mean. Was he testing the town's defenses?"

Connie pulled three rounds of ammunition from one of her dress pockets, and began reloading the rifle. "It doesn't matter what he was doing. He didn't do it."

"No... No, I suppose he didn't. Still, he did give away *quite* a bit of information. It seems the 'Tribesmen' don't engage in espionage very often. Otherwise, they'd be far more careful about who they send. This has been truly enlightening."

Connie heard a noise behind her, and turned around. In front of her stood several soldiers, all riding horses. To Connie, they all seemed horrified by the sight of the oversized body. She didn't blame them; the first time she saw one, she was equally shocked. Hell, she'd been frozen in place. More than likely, these boys had never even heard of these things; even Reginald hadn't, and to hear him tell it, he was the leading expert in the world on the Tears. Then again, Connie knew better than to take anything Reginald said at face value.

Sheila and Fred walked out of the saloon, and saw the soldiers. Fred put on a weak smile, and walked up to the soldiers. "Welcome to Bitterwater, folks! Sorry about the mess, we were *expecting* company, just not, ah..." He motioned to the green thing Reginald was ogling. "Not

that kind,” his attempt at humor falling flat.. One of the soldiers threw up, and Sheriff Fling sighed. It’s always important to make a good first impression, after all.

Part 1: The Problem

Chapter 1: Introductions

Jenni-Lee Tim was a simple girl. That's not to say she wasn't a complex individual; rather, she was, by any metric the good folks of Bitterwater looked at her, a complete simpleton. She was good at working a farm - her 16 years living with her father had given her useful skills and plenty of scars - but aside from that, she wasn't good for much. The saloon relied on the farm to provide grain for alcohol, the townsfolk depended on the food her house provided, and her father needed her to support his ever-present alcohol habit. Jenni-Lee was all too happy to help.

Jenni-Lee was ten years old when the Tears first brought danger to her town, and her mother was among the first casualties. Jenni-Lee made certain to stay positive after that; after all, of her daddy was going to be so down all the time, somebody had to lighten up the mood. She didn't like that he drank so much, but he didn't like that she was happy so much, so she couldn't really complain. She didn't even mind when he screamed at her to stop smiling. It just meant that she had to smile even wider, be even happier, since eventually, it would rub off on her daddy.

Growing up, Jenni-Lee had a sweetheart, Johnny Mud. He was a smart boy, nothing like Jenni-Lee. She made him promise that after he joined the army, he'd sneak her out of Bitterwater. Once she was gone, she'd send letters to her pa every day, letters about how happy and in love she was, and how wonderful everything would be if they could just get out of Bitterwater. One day, while practicing what Johnny thought might be army drills, Johnny caught an axe in the

back of the head. Johnny always dreamed of buying the farm Jenni-Lee grew up on, but he bought the farm long before he could buy the farm.

After that, Jenni-Lee spent 10 hours a day working at the farm. Her father was generally too drunk, hungover, or both, to do the same. She refused any offer of help from the townsfolk. Every night, Jenni-Lee made her way to the Saloon and tried to find out what her father loved so much about whiskey. Most nights, the Sheriff himself would have to come in and drag out the young girl.

Sheriff Fred Fling was, by all accounts, a thoroughly unfunny man, though not for lack of trying. Nobody ever told him this, of course; as the only official lawman in the area - at least, until the army showed up - everyone held him in high esteem, even if he was a dull man to spend time near. He almost never followed the letter of the law, choosing instead to preach forgiveness and community over what he considered arbitrary punishment. What few serious crimes did occur under his watch, though, were met with quick, decisive justice. To his great pride, he'd only executed one man in his entire career.

Fling's wife, Margaret, was a shy, reserved woman. She was the only one who ever laughed at Fred's jokes, and if the townsfolk are to be believed, she was an excellent mother to her children. She survived childbirth twice, but on her third attempt, sepsis set in when Doctor Kent couldn't make it to the Fling house in time. The entire town mourned that day, back when the town's population was in the hundreds, rather than the dozens.

His children, Sheila and Shane, were his pride and joy. They were two of the friendliest, talented, and generally liked people in town. Shane had been such good friends with the previous owner of the Saloon that he was written into the man's will, and Shane took over shortly after the

man died of tuberculosis. During his time working there, Shane proposed to Connie, and they were married almost immediately. They were wed shortly before the Tear opened. One day, while traveling to the Tim farm, Shane was ambushed, and left near death. The local doctor was able to keep him alive, but by the time the 348th arrived in town, Shane had been asleep for four years.

Sheila, the younger sibling, started working with her father at the age of 12. She would ride with him as he made the rounds, she studied his Law books, and she even shined his badge after the day was over. Sheila was with him the day that Elmer Dent gutted his wife and stabbed his daughter, Constance. Sheriff Fling didn't bother putting Mr. Dent in jail and making a spectacle of his death. Instead, Sheila's father shot the criminal in the head when he came to confess his crime, and watched her father break down and cry. She didn't know why it had happened; she only knew that her father blamed himself for what happened.

After that, Connie came to stay with the Flings. She was 12, the same as Sheila, but she carried herself like a full-grown adult. She never made friends, rarely said a word, and refused to open up to anybody that wasn't a part of the Fling household. Sheila and Connie became best friends, if for no other reason than that they had nobody else to be friends with. Connie would go with Sheila to target practice, where Sheila would teach her everything her father knew. Connie took to the hobby like a tumbleweed to the desert. Nothing had ever felt so natural as pulling a trigger. Connie and Shane also grew close, but everyone knew they were going to marry each other someday. They were never friends, always sweethearts.

Doctor Kent never could diagnose Connie; before her father went insane, she was a sweet thing, a pleasant glow that the entire town appreciated. The Doc initially believed it to be

Melancholia, but Connie never seemed down. Instead, she was almost always angry. After Shane went to sleep, Connie's eyes lost almost all emotion. The Doc considered her untreatable, and focused instead on fixing the physical injuries the townspeople acquired more and more often as the

As for Reginald Ring IV, before he journeyed to Bitterwater, he was apprentice to the Chief Artificer of Anti-Tear Weaponry for Her Majesty Queen Victoria. The Chief Artificer was, by no small coincidence, his father, Reginald Ring III. The position was one held by the most skilled weapons crafters in Britain, and carried a substantial amount of political weight among the aristocracy. After all, the Tears were a national crisis for several centuries.

The Artificers of the Crown were integral in the Defense of the The British Isles. Their bravery and wit in developing key strategies to fight the creatures that poured through earned them positions of power in the highest echelons of British society. It was this pedigree and skill that Reginald had inherited. In 1871, the Crown received word from the United States government that a massive Tear, larger than any before it, had been discovered in the Sierra Nevada mountains. The Monarchy refused to give any official aid to the country, especially so soon after Reconstruction had begun.

Reginald, however, offered to venture forth by himself to study the phenomenon. He believed that the harshness of the American Frontier would be the ideal place to refine his skills as a Gunsmith and tactician. Unlike the other Artificers, Reginald believed that advancements in firearms, rather than improvements upon pure strategy, were the way forward. Reginald's father, Reginald Ring III, offered his consent to let his son make the journey.

Trains had stopped running to Bitterwater by 1873. Too many attacks by strange beasts had crippled the infrastructure of the area, and even the army regiment in Sacramento refused to send the town help. Because of this, he had to make a 20-mile journey from an alternate train station by way of cart and horse. Reginald went slowly, to keep the delicate instruments he'd brought with him in adequate condition. After two days, Reginald heard gunfire from the small town. Eager to witness the beasts firsthand, Reginald advanced, readying a blunderbuss he'd received from his father.

Arriving in town, he found several townspeople dead, and a baker's dozen of the Green Beasts he'd heard of littered around. The citizens all exited the buildings, the 80 men, women, and children all wearing haunted expressions. Reginald hopped off his cart, and bowed for the people.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, fair citizens. My name is Reginald Ring IV, expert Gunsmith. I understand you have something of a problem with the Tear." The town met him with silence. Some seemed confused, some looked disgusted, and a few looked at him in interest. The Sheriff, bleeding on the ground with a massive knife sticking out of him, motioned to a young woman to introduce herself. The Deputy sighed, and walked to the aristocrat.

Sheila walked to Reginald, and stuck his hand out. "Good to meet you, Reggie. I'm Sheila, the Deputy here. Sorry you couldn't arrive under better circumstances."

Reginald's eye twitched at hearing the phrase 'Reggie,' but his excitement was too strong to overshadow his annoyance. "It's 'Reginald,' actually. And nonsense! This is excellent, just excellent... I'm a touch sad I couldn't be here to witness the fight firsthand, but this is an excellent start. So much data to collect! Delightful!" He moved between the bodies, pulling a

notebook and a pencil from his pocket, and began furiously jotting down notes. “We have monsters in England, but nothing like this. No, no, nothing at *all* like this. These creatures are much larger, far more fearsome, and generally more *green*. Wonderful, truly wonderful.” A woman holding a rifle gave him a cold stare, but Reginald didn't notice her, even as she began walking towards him. “These... Things, what do you call them? Their faces all have warpaint, and they seem relatively organized. Are they some sort of collective? Are there more like them? Are there creatures *unlike* them roaming around? Oh, this is awe inspiring! Truly a *wonder* to behold!” The woman was next to him now, and she raised the butt of her gun before Sheila grabbed her.

“EASY, Connie! Down, girl!” Reginald finally noticed Connie next to him, murder in her eyes.

Connie lowered the gun, and pointed at the Briton. “I don't know who you are, but we don't want you. Get out, or I'll throw you out.”

Reginald stood up, and adjusted his suit. “I'll excuse you on account of the circumstances, madame, but I hope you don't expect me to be intimidated by empty threats.”

Connie stepped forward “The only thing empty here is your skull, Reggie.” Reggie's eye twitched again at hearing the name.

Sheila stepped in between the two. “Now, hold on. Maybe we can all take a breath? Let's start over. Reggie-”

“REGINALD, madame. I will thank you to call me by my PROPER name.”

“All right, fine. Reginald, meet Connie- well, Constance. I'll be glad to introduce you to everybody in a moment, but if you're a Gunsmith, this is the girl you'll want to work with. Best marksman in town. So, get along.”

Reginald scoffed. “Skill alone means nothing in a working relationship, Miss...”

“*Deputy* Fling.”

“Yes, Deputy. Well, *Constance*, I hope you have a pleasant day. Lord knows you need one.” Reginald went back to taking notes, and Connie walked away, angry as ever. Sheila sighed, hoping Connie would come around. The way the Brit was ogling the corpses, she didn't expect him to leave anytime soon.

Chapter 2: An Ordinary Hike

Reginald moved into a newly vacant house next to the Saloon, giving him enough space to live and experiment in the same building. A week after he settled down, people stopped coming to him with questions about his name, occupation, and reason for visiting. In fact, most of the townspeople were so disinterested by him that they actively ignored him. Reginald didn't mind being left alone, but he was annoyed at being ignored. How could this town be bored of him? He wondered this for two days as he experimented with bullets.

Two days after the town ceased paying attention to Reginald, he heard someone knocking on his front door. His spirits lifting, Reginald opened the door, only to find that it was Connie. She had a Winchester slung over her shoulder. “Ah. Mrs. Constance Fling, yes? Here to threaten me once more?”

Connie walked inside, and looked around. She saw several contraptions that looked completely pointless and unnecessarily complicated. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, if you must know, I'm attempting to develop a new type of bullet. One that can stop the enemies you've been fighting against far quicker than a typical weapon.”

Connie nodded. Silence filled the air for a moment. “Sheila told me to apologize.” She let the sentence hang in mid-air, the room completely still.

“You know, when one apologize, he or she typically says something along the lines of, ‘please forgive me,’ or, ‘I’m sorry.’”

“I'm going to visit Jenni-Lee. You're coming with me.”

Reginald cocked his head slightly, confused. “Pardon me, could you repeat what you just said?”

“You’re going to walk with me, and that's final. Around here, you don't want to go anywhere alone, even if it's just half a mile. Besides, you haven't met Jenni-Lee yet.”

“That's the farmhand, yes? I've heard about her. She's the reason you're all fed?”

“More or less. It's been years now, but she's never once been attacked, even though she practically lives alone with those cows. Today, I'm gonna figure out why.”

“Have you tried asking her?”

“Yep. Says the Voice of God protects her.”

Reginald chuckled. “I would think that wasn't quite so far-fetched, especially-”

“God ain't been around these parts for a long time. You coming, Reggie?”

Reginald felt his eyelid engage in its usual tick when he heard that hateful nickname, but he resolved to not let it bother him. That was what she wanted, after all. “Very well then, my

dear. Let us away.” He grabbed his journal, some pencils, and a blunderbuss. The two headed out into town.

Sheriff Fling gave the two a nod, which Connie returned, her eyes briefly softening. Fred walked into the Saloon, where Calvin, the bartender, was sweeping the floor. “Howdy, Calvin. Trying to sweep away the bad memories?” The Sheriff grinned widely, awaiting a laugh that never came.

Calvin looked up at the Sheriff, his face wrinkled from experience rather than age. “Um... No. It's just dirt.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, I want to ask... About...”

“Shane’s still sleeping, sir. He’ll eat if you put food in his mouth, but... He won't wake up.”

Fling nodded. “Well, that's okay. At least he's still eating. You know, that boy would always be up earlier than anyone else, but...” Fling stopped himself, and sat in one of the chairs near the entrance. He took off his hat, and lovingly set it down on the table. The light streaming through the windows hit everywhere except the seat he’d chosen. “Three months. Has it been that long?”

Calvin looked down. “Three and a half, Sheriff.”

Fling rubbed the bridge of his nose. “And Connie? How's she taking it?”

“She doesn't say much. She didn't talk a lot before, and she's always had a mean look on her face, but now... She's got a worse energy than she ever did before. She makes me run the day-to-day here in the Saloon, even if all that means is making the alcohol and putting it in bottles. Speaking of, we’re starting to run out of glass. Each time some of it breaks, it's gone

forever. And we need new brewer's tools, and... God damn it, Sheriff, why the hell didn't we all get out when we had the chance?"

Fling's face grew hard. He stood up, and put his hat back on so the light wouldn't get in his eyes. "It don't matter *why* you stayed, Cal. You're here now. If you wanna complain, feel free. If you wanna try to fix the mess we're in, by God, make the effort. If you don't, or you just think you can, then you're the same as the rest of us fools. At least we have the good sense not to whine about our mistakes." The Sheriff made his way to the doors, and walked out. Calvin sighed, and went back to sweeping.

On the road out of town, Connie was wathing for any sign of attackers. Reginald was examining the mountain range in the distance, taking frequent notes.

"Reggie, I can hear you muttering to yourself. Stop it."

Reggie actively kept his face from betraying his frustration. "It's *Reginald*. And I'm simply trying to figure out what that shimmer means."

Constance stopped walking for a moment, and looked toward the mountains. "What shimmer?"

"You've lived here for years, yet you've never noticed that?" Reginald pointed toward a faint glint of light.

Connie lowered her rifle, and stared ahead. "I don't see any... Wait. How in the hell...?"

Reginald gave a soft chuckle. "The powers of being observant, my dear. Don't feel *too* bad, it's rather far off, and most people haven't trained themselves the way I have. I wouldn't be surprised if there were only a handful in the world that could see that flicker-"

"Four of them, on your right," a hushed voice whispered across the land.

Connie raised her rifle, unsure of where exactly the voice had come from. “Can you see that one?”

“I fear not.” Connie grunted in annoyance.

“You’re looking right at me. Are all creatures your size as willfully blind as Miss Tim?” Reginald’s eyebrows perked up. Connie noted a glint of excitement in his eyes, something you never want to see from a person holding a blunderbuss. “Our... Size? Could you tell us how large you are?”

“Ah, a critical thinker. At last. I’m the size of a mountain, though to you, I’m sure I look like one.”

Connie placed her finger on the trigger of her rifle. “The Tribesmen