

FROM: **CLARENCE OR CLAIRE**, CHAPTER TEN PAGES 193-195
AND CHAPTER ELEVEN PAGES 202-206

Hammond's store was open and many men were lounging in front of the hardware area. July the Fourth was not much different from a Saturday. Men were gathered there to tell dirty jokes and cuss and swear and spit.

Hammond encouraged the men to gather on that side of his store. But he wanted the other side to be free for women to come and go without difficulty. Hammond had spittoons set out in front of the hardware, but not in front of dry goods or the post office.

In front of Hammond's Hardware were the men who didn't have money to spend in the bars or the restaurant. Men like Tom Anderson, Delbert Foxx, Sam Albright, and Dan and Jeff Smith. The Smith brothers rode for Royce before they got married and homesteaded on the west bench.

Grump and Chad drove by and waved to this group of men on their way around the corner. The men on the porch of the hardware store saluted back and kept on with their talk.

Grump and Chad headed down River Road and left the buckboard at the stable along with Chad's saddle horse. There didn't seem to be any room for any more horses or rigs on the street.

Fifteen minutes later, Grump and Chad joined the group in front of the hardware store. The talk was the usual thing about the races and weather and cattle prices and hay crops. They would talk awhile about some of the day's events or tease Chad about Gladys, but eventually they got back to their primary concern: making a living.

Chad was looking around as he listened or took some jibes about Gladys; most of those came from her brothers. And he took them as good-naturedly as they meant them.

Chad noticed a group of children across the street in front of the courthouse. And with them was a tall slender young man in an ill-fitting gray suit. Among the children were: a girl with long gold hair flowing down her back, a younger girl with dark hair piled on top of her head, and three boys of various sizes.

Then Chad recognized that one of those boys was Kevin Royce. He grinned when he noticed that Kevin was holding hands with the little girl with dark hair piled on top of her head.

Grump was standing next to him and saw him grin and looked over at him. "What's so funny?" the old man whispered.

Chad whispered back, "Look over there in front of the court house."

The old man broke out in a toothless grin. "That boy works fast. I think that's one of those Andrews kids that moved into the valley. I was in town last Monday and someone pointed Andrews out to me. He was on his way back to the canyon with his new surrey."

"Is that Andrews in that gray suit?" Chad asked.

"Yep. That's the fella." Grump answered. "A might young, if you ask me, to be responsible for that passel of kids. I hear he's got three sisters and two brothers. I wonder where the other one is. Cause we know Kevin isn't one of his."

Just then, a little girl started across the street from the Millinery's and Dress shop on the northeast corner of this main cross road. She was headed where the other children were in front of the courthouse. Evidently they were looking for the little girl, because

they all turned around and one said loud enough to be heard across the street, "There she is!" And they called out to her. "Where've you been, Leah? We've looked all over for you!"

The little girl stopped right in the middle of the street, put her hands on her hips and looked over at the group in front of the courthouse. "Well, where have you been?" came her high-pitched voice, as clear as a bell. "I've been looking everywhere for you!"

The little girl and her gesture caught the attention of a number of men on the porch. They all stopped their talking and looked at her. "Now ain't she a cut little button," said one. "The purtiest little girl I ever seen." said another. "That's 'cause all you's got is boys." came a reply. "Now if you only had girls, like Stell and me, you wouldn't be so quick to say that. Those little girls can be the orneriest things you ever tried to get to mind." "Amen, to that, brother," said someone else.

All these comments came in at once from different parties to different parties. Then they all got back to what they were talking about a moment earlier, but they kept an eye on the little girl in the middle of the road.

Then suddenly, catty-corner across the street in front of the pool hall, an explosion sounded. Someone had thrown a firecracker right under the tails of a team of horses hitched to a farmer's wagon. The team reared and lurched forward, pulling their reins from the hitch rail. They were in a gallop in an instant. The wagon trailed along behind them, tipping and jerking down the street. The team and wagon were headed right for the little girl.

The little girl was still standing in the middle of the street with her hands on her hips.

There was a scream, "Leah!" It was the scream of a woman in terror.

Chad saw the young man in the gray suit pushing the children aside to get into the street after the child. He would never make it in time.

The little girl could have retraced her steps and got out of the way. But at that moment, she looked up and saw the horses thundering toward her. She froze and put up her hands as though to ward off the blow of their hooves.

The little girl screamed in a high-pitched wail, "Mamma!"

Chad was not sure when he began to run. He was standing near the edge of the porch. He lunged and was running to catch up with his falling body. His legs carried him inches ahead of the plunging horses. He felt their breath on the back of his neck. He reached down as he came in front of the horses and pulled the little girl against his chest. And then he leaped and fell across and away, twisting his body so he landed on his back and not on the little girl. Then he rolled over on his stomach, protecting the little girl with his elbows. At the same time, he tried to get his legs out of the way of the slashing hooves. He got hit on the backs of his legs and on his boots. Then he was free and clear. And the wagon wheels missed him by inches.

The little girl was screaming, "Mamma! Mamma! Mamma!"

She was fighting Chad and holding him at the same time. The pain numbed Chad's legs so that he could not move once the momentum of his leap and roll had ended. There were screams and shouts down the street as other people scurried to get out of the way and other men tried to slow the frightened horses.

Tears of anguish were spilling out of Claire's eyes as she fought to get through the children and reach her daughter. She reached the street, knowing it was too late. There was no way she could reach Leah in time. All Claire could do was to watch her child get crushed beneath the hooves and wheels of the runaway team.

Then she saw the figure hurtling across the street. It was abreast the horses. Then it was in front of them and leaping and falling.

Leah was blotted out by the figure. The horses' hooves pounded and slashed as they plunged forward. The body of the man was beneath their bellies.

How in God's name had he avoided those front hooves?

Then he was rolling and Claire could see Leah clutched to his breast. The horses' hooves struck the man several times, and the wheels of the wagon were coming.

No way could he get free of them! Both he and Leah would be crushed!

And then he was free and the wagon wheels spun by with inches to spare. Claire could hear Leah's shrieks, "Mamma! Mamma! Mamma!"

Claire was still moving, running forward. She was the first to reach Leah and this wonderful man. He was lying on his back staring up at the sky. His chest was heaving. Leah was rocking up and down from the movement of his chest.

Claire knelt down and pulled Leah from his grasp. With her left arm she held Leah as she sat down. With her other hand she raised the man's head and set it on her lap. She looked down at this miracle worker and ran her hand through his sandy hair. He had gray eyes, a blue-gray.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you for saving my . . ." Claire swallowed. She had almost said "daughter," and then the next word that came to her was "child." By swallowing, she was able to get out, "baby sister."

Leah was sobbing and clutching to her, saying "Mamma," over and over again. Claire kissed her tear-streaked face and said, "It's all right, Leah. This man saved you, and big brother's got you now." Leah stopped saying "mamma" at that, but continued to cry.

Claire looked back down at the man's face. "Are you hurt?" Claire asked.

He was beginning to move his arms down toward his legs and trying to sit up. Claire used her arm to help him. Chad sat up and began to massage his legs. His face was twisted in pain.

Claire came up to her knees. She held out her hand. "I don't know how to thank you, sir," she said. And she thought. I'd like to kiss you. But I shouldn't do that. She continued, "I'm Claire Andrews. This little girl is my baby sister, Leah. Thank you. Thank you, for saving her life."

Chad took the time from massaging his legs to shake her hand. He hid a grimace of pain as well as he could. "I'm Chad Bennett," he responded.

Claire turned Leah around to face him. Leah had quieted somewhat. "Leah," Claire said, "This man saved your life."

Leah looked into Chad's face with her big blue eyes. Her dress was dirty and her hair was all out of place and dirty as well.

Chad touched her tear-streaked face, reverently. Seeing that child alive was all the thanks he wanted. He had been so sure that he would never get to her in time.

Claire saw tears in his eyes. Then all her children were around them. Men from in front of the store and families from the hotel porch were gathering around them as well. Other people had been passing the time of day in shops and along the walks, now they were all gathering in the street around them.

Claire heard someone say, "I wonder who threw that firecracker."

Another added, "Ralph is already investigating. He's asking everybody near the team if they saw anyone do it."

"Here comes Doc Williams!" several voices were saying at once.

The kids were saying, "Are you all right, Claire? Is Leah okay?"

Claire recognized Kevin's voice. "Chad," the boy was saying, "How did you do that? Did you get runned over?"

Then a short paunchy man pushed through the crowd and knelt beside them. He looked at Chad for a minute, seeing the cowboy flexing his legs and rubbing them. Then Doc looked over at Claire. "I'm Doc Williams," he said, "How's the little girl?"

"I haven't checked, doctor," Claire said, "but she appears to be all right. She's only shaken up and dirty."

"Why don't you bring her over to my office?" Doc turned back to Chad. "Lie back down, Chad." Doc said, "Let me check your legs."

Claire settled back down to support Chad's head on her lap. She could feel the heat of him against her skin through her suit. It got her to thinking about ways she could thank Chad and her hands trembled slightly before she got herself under control again.

Chad closed his eyes and the strain of the pain showed plainly as Doc felt all along his legs. Chad grabbed Claire's hand with both of his and squeezed.

It hurt her. She looked down at his face and their eyes met. She noticed that he was grinding his teeth together. He must be in great pain, she thought.

Then Doc was finished with Chad's legs and Chad relaxed more. Doc came back up to Chad's head and felt around the head, particularly where he had been injured in May.

"Chad," the doctor said, "there are no breaks in your legs that I can tell. And your head is fine. Do you hurt anywhere else?"

Chad answered, "No, Doc. It's only my legs. I felt them kick my legs."

Doc looked up at the ring of faces. He saw Jim Smith. "Jim," he ordered, "Get some men and a stretcher. I want Chad carried to my office."

Except for Jim Smith, people were standing around talking and watching. Chad's head stayed on Claire's lap. Leah was holding onto her mother, looking down at Chad. Chad looked at the sky and at Leah and at Claire.

The other children were quiet as they waited for the stretcher to arrive. Kevin was squeezing Ruth's hand very hard and she was squeezing his hand right back.

Chad noticed that Andrews was genuinely concerned about him. He also saw the tears on Claire's face. It reminded him of his own emotion upon knowing that the little girl was safe. Chad's eyelids were still moist. He blinked to dry them and keep the secret of his tears to himself. Only Claire had seen them and the depth of Chad's feeling. Chad was certain that Andrews would never reveal that knowledge to anyone.

Chad felt somehow closer to this strange young man than he had ever felt to anyone. The outpouring of his compassion for Leah was a common bond between them. Chad could sense it from the gratitude that was so deeply felt and yet so slightly mentioned, as it should be. But that gratitude remained in Claire's eyes for only Chad to see. It was the

first time that Chad had ever felt that honored and respected by anyone for anything that he had ever done. It was an uncomfortable position for him. And yet he was somehow changed and awed by it as well.

The stretcher came. Doc Williams took over the chore of supporting Chad's head. Six other men lifted Chad and placed him on the stretcher. Then he was carried north along River Road toward Doc Williams home and office.

Claire stood as Chad was lifted up.

The doctor motioned to her. "Bring the little girl, Mr. Andrews," Doc said. Doc had overheard the crowd talking and learned Claire's identity in that way. Then Doc followed the stretcher.

Claire walked along behind the doctor as he followed the stretcher. Claire still held Leah in her arms. Virginia was holding onto her elbow. Mark was on the other side of her. Chuck, Ruth and Kevin were running ahead of the men that were carrying Chad. Ruth, with her dress lifted to her knees, was ahead of both boys.