Aaron Talbot and the Indian Agent (March 1868)
By: Bob Fincham

Tucson, Arizona, was not a very friendly place for any Indian, regardless of his tribe. The locals lumped all Indians together into hostile savages and could not tell the difference between the different tribes. When Aaron Talbot and his friend, Red Hawk, a Tonkawa brave from Texas, rode along Tucson’s main street, they were the objects of many unfriendly stares.

They passed The Naked lady Saloon when Red Hawk noticed that Aaron was giving the place a lot of extra attention.

Red Hawk stopped his pony and said, “You go get drink. I take your horse to blacksmith for fix shoe.”

Aaron’s horse had thrown a shoe a half-day out of Tucson. He had tacked it back on, but it needed an expert’s touch. Since Red Hawk stayed away from saloons, he volunteered to take Aaron’s horse while Aaron went inside for a drink.

They had been sent down from Camp Grant to meet with the new Indian Agent coming in with a cavalry escort from California. They were civilian scouts working for the military and under Colonel Prescott’s command at Camp Grant, north of Tucson. The Agent was not due for another day, so they had a little free time.

When Aaron entered the tavern, things got noticeably quiet. He scanned the room and counted seven men sitting at tables and three others at the bar. Nobody showed any sign of friendliness. In fact, several of the seated men slid their chairs back from their tables.

Aaron loosened the flap on his U.S. Army-issue holster and walked up to the bar. Giving the bartender a hard stare, he said, “Y’all don’t appear to be very friendly, hereabouts.”

“You a southerner?” one of the men at the bar asked.

“From Arkansas,” Aaron answered as he pointed at a jug on a shelf behind the bar. “That looks like what I want,” he said, throwing a silver dollar on the bar.

“What are you doin’ with a Yankee holster? Y’all part of the Yankee army?”

“I am now. My friend and I are scouts outta Camp Grant.”

“That why you be ridin’ with an Injun?”

“Y’all have a problem with that? If’n you do, we can take care of that right now,” Aaron replied, stepping away from the bar.

“I ain’t got no problem with it. But some folks around town just might. It don’t matter if your Injun friend is with the army. Let me buy you another drink but from the good stuff. Sam hides it under the bar.”

“I’m good, so no thanks.”

The tension was high, but no one seemed anxious to start anything. Meanwhile, the talkative cowboy kept speaking.

“Why are y’all in the Yankee army? You bein’ a southerner and all.”

“The war is over, and we’re all one country now. I served under that butcher, General Hood, ‘til I was taken prisoner at Nashville. Now I’m helpin’ the army protect ranchers and settlers from hostile Apaches.”

“We appreciate that,” the cowboy said, turning toward the men in the bar and saying, “Y’all just need to pick your friends more careful-like.”
Before Aaron responded, there was a flurry of activity in the street outside of the saloon. Shots were fired, and men were shouting back and forth.

The saloon emptied in a short time. The men ran outside to see what the noise was all about. Aaron was among the men and was just in time to see a cowboy ride past the saloon while dragging a man at the end of a rope. He saw right away that it was Red Hawk. He reached for his revolver but stopped when he felt the barrel of a gun pressed against his back.

The talkative cowboy from the saloon held a cocked revolver aimed at his backbone. He was still talking, “Y’all, just relax and watch the show, or I’ll put a slug through you.”

Aaron felt the pressure against his back slacken slightly as the man strained to watch the action in the street. When they were bumped by someone in the crowd, the pistol slid to the side. Aaron quickly spun about, and, pulling a knife from his belt, he slashed the man’s arm, cutting deeply into his wrist tendons. The gun fell to the boardwalk and discharged, hitting the gunman in the leg. The .44 slug had mushroomed upon hitting his thigh bone and shattered it. The man went down in agony, but hardly anyone noticed.

As the cowboy dragging Red Hawk turned to ride back up the street, everyone was shouting and firing guns into the air. When he came even with the saloon’s front, he flew off his horse with a smashed shoulder. Aaron had pushed his way through the crowd and shot the rider before the men realized what had happened.

Aaron kept his pistol out as he walked over to where Red Hawk lay on the ground. Most of the crowd had divided into two groups to help the two wounded men, and someone started directing them to get the men to the doctor’s office. Other men focused upon Aaron and Red Hawk. Several appeared to have itchy hands and dangled them near their guns.

Before things got more violent and a gunfight erupted, the sheriff appeared. He was carrying a shotgun and had two deputies in tow.

He was walking directly toward Aaron when a coach came into the town’s main street accompanied by a cavalry escort. This new activity distracted the sheriff and the angry crowd, giving Aaron a chance to take care of Red Hawk, who was now sitting up and rubbing the back of his head.

The Tonkawa stood on shaky feet and looked like he would fall back down at any minute. Blood was seeping from several cuts and scrapes, which gave him a frightening appearance along with his angry visage.

“I kill him now,” Red Hawk said, reaching to unloop the lasso from under his arms.

When he noticed his weapons were gone, he held out his hand to Aaron for a knife or pistol.

Pointing to a man being carried away moaning, Aaron said, “No need. He’s been taken care of.”

Stepping back a few paces, he examined Red Hawk from head to toe and said, “You do look the worse for wear but nothing serious.”

“White man must die. He coward who hit me from behind. I wake up tied behind his horse.”

“I think we’ll pay that blacksmith a visit as soon as I take care of the sheriff.”

The sheriff had been talking to someone in the coach while the cavalymen sat quietly on their horses, eyeing the restless crowd that seemed to be growing larger.
Turning away from the coach, the sheriff walked over to Aaron and Red Hawk. He said, “This here Indian Agent says he needs you two to scout for him. Supposedly it’s official government business. I told him I want to lock you two up for attempted murder.”

“I think you got things all mixed up, sheriff.”

“When Apaches come into Tucson, they leave feet first. If I hadn’t been interrupted, the two of you would be leavin’ that way.”

“That’s not very friendly, sheriff.”

“If’n you two ever come back here, you won’t be talkin’ so smart. In fact, you won’t be talkin’ at all.”

Before Aaron could continue the conversation, The Indian Agent stepped out of the coach and called to him. He turned his back on the sheriff and slowly walked away, Red Hawk at his side.

The sheriff shrugged his shoulders, dispersed the crowd, and checked to make certain the two wounded men had made it to the doctor’s office.

The Indian Agent was a short, rotund man wearing a sweat-stained black suit and a straw hat. He had a scraggly, patchy beard and furtive, weasel-like eyes that kept darting back and forth from side to side.

As Aaron approached him, the Agent, a man named Teague, said, “Hurry along, man. We don’t have all day.”

When Aaron and Red Hawk reached his side, Teague continued, “I hope you two are better at avoiding trouble on the trail than you are in Tucson.” Then he held out his hand and said, “Let me see your orders.”

Aaron handed him a folded piece of paper and stood there while Teague unfolded and read it. Red Hawk did not wait. He headed toward the blacksmith’s shop.

“Where is your Indian friend going?”

“Unfinished business with the blacksmith.”

“Well, get it taken care of. I want to be back on the road within the hour.”

Waving Aaron away, Teague called for Lieutenant Masters, the officer in charge of the escort. When he dismounted beside him, Teague said, “Our two scouts appear to be involved in some sort of a disturbance with the local populace. Please see to it that things remain calm until we leave.”

“Yes, sir. How long will that be?”

“I have to meet with some members of a local citizen’s group. I’ll be about an hour or so. Then we can go on to Camp Grant.”

Lieutenant Masters detailed four men to follow Aaron to the blacksmith’s shop. Simultaneously, the rest of the escort, eight troopers, and a sergeant watered their horses. Then they relaxed in the shade of some buildings.

Aaron walked into the smithy just in time to save a life. Red Hawk had his scalping knife against the blacksmith’s throat.

“Hold up, Red Hawk,” Aaron shouted. “If you kill him, who’ll fix my horse’s shoe?”

Red Hawk smiled, but it was a mirthless smile and did nothing to change his eyes’ hatred. As he pulled his knife back from the smith’s throat, he gave it a flick, and the bottom tip of an earlobe fell to the dirt floor.
The smith gave a yelp and grabbed his cut ear. His legs turned to jelly, and he fell to the ground. His leather apron shifted and showed where his fear had caused a lack of control. A wet stain showed on the inside of his trousers. A mixture of fear and hatred contorted his face, but before he could say anything, Aaron said, “If y’all are done pissin’ yourself, go get my horse.”

As the smith shakily got to his feet, the four cavalrymen stood in front of the shop. There was a wide opening across the front for ventilation and easy access to the street. The stable for holding horses was to the rear of the shop.

As the smith went to get Aaron’s horse, Red Hawk sheathed his knife and said, “Him help other men put a rope around me and then laugh when I was dragged away.”

Returning with Aaron’s horse, the smith said, “I had no choice. Mark Peters’ old man owns a big ranch outside of town and owns most of the town. If I don’t do what he says, I’ll be out of business, maybe even dead. When his son slugged your friend here, I had to go along, and now you done shot him.”

Ignoring the smith’s words, Aaron checked to see that the shoe had been repaired. Then he looked the man in the eye and said, “Y’all’s lucky to be alive. Red Hawk here ain’t no Apache. He’s a Tonkawa warrior. They have no love for the Apache and have been known to eat their hearts. He wouldn’t have killed you, just cut you up a little. Besides, your heart would be too weak for him to eat.”

The smith’s eyes got wide, and he backed away, but Red Hawk had already disappeared into the stables. He quickly reappeared, leading his own pony.

As Aaron and Red Hawk led their mounts back to the coach, the four troopers accompanied them. Most of the locals had disappeared into the saloons and stores along the main street.

The sheriff and his deputies waited by the coach. When Aaron came closer, he said, “I’m gonna arrest the two of you for attempted murder. Mr. Peters wants you in jail until the judge comes by next month. That was his son that you shot off the horse.”

“That him standing by the Indian agent?”

Looking where Aaron pointed, the sheriff said, “Yeah, that’s him, and he runs things around here.”

“You point that shotgun away from the ground, and you are a dead man,” Aaron said, resting his hand on the butt of his Colt.

The two deputies backed away from the line of fire with their eyes darting back and forth between Aaron with his pistol and Red Hawk fingering the edge of a tomahawk blade.

The four cavalrymen had rejoined their fellows in the shade, and Lieutenant Masters was not in the immediate area. Teague and Peters spoke to each other, with Teague becoming more animated when three cowboys suddenly came out of an alley next to them. All three of them had their pistols drawn and were coming directly at Aaron and the sheriff.

One of the men shouted, “Let’s get that Injun lover and the redskin that’s with him.”

As they rushed the men, the sheriff raised his shotgun. Before he could fire, Aaron put a .44 slug into his chest. One of the deputies had pulled his gun, only to get doubled over with a thrown tomahawk embedded in his stomach. The other deputy had turned and run when the three cowboys charged from the alley. The three cowboys never reached the coach. They were shot in midstride by the four troopers watching over the scouts.
Peters threw down the cigar he had been smoking and grabbed Teague by the shoulders. Knocking his hands away, Teague said something that calmed him down.

Aaron waved to the four troopers who were holding two wounded cowboys at rifle point. The third one, the apparent leader, lay dead in the street.

Lieutenant Masters reached his men just ahead of Teague. “What the hell is going on here?” he shouted. “Why did you shoot these civilians?”

The men stood at attention and began to answer when Sergeant Bickel joined them.

“They were just following your orders, sir.”

“What orders? I never said anything about shooting civilians, Sergeant.”

“To protect the scouts, sir. Those men were rushing them with their guns out. They were going to kill them, sir.”

Turning to Teague, the Lieutenant said, “Sir, do you know anything about these men and why they were attacking our scouts?”

“Only that they worked for Mr. Peters and were friends of the man who was shot earlier.”

“In that case, Mr. Peters can take care of them.”

Walking over to where the sheriff lay dead, Lieutenant Masters said to Aaron, “You two have been busy today. I saw what happened here. I think you two had better leave town and do what the army pays you for. You can meet us along the road.”

“We’ll meet up a few miles east of town. Cochise is raiding between here and Camp Grant, so we’ll be taking a roundabout route.”

“Very well, Talbot. Meanwhile, Mr. Teague and I will sort this mess out as best we can. Then we will meet you outside of town.”

As the two scouts rode out of town, Teague told Lieutenant Masters that he would settle things with Mr. Peters.

While the three dead men were carried to the undertaker’s, which doubled as a barbershop, the wounded men were taken to join the others in the doctor’s office.

Teague met Peters in his office while the Lieutenant organized his men and prepared to leave town. Peters was agitated about the shootings, but he quieted when Teague told him where they would be meeting the scouts. The two men were working together. They wanted the army to move all the Chiricahua onto a reservation. That way, they could mine gold that had been found near Cochise’s stronghold.

A prospector had come to Tucson last year with a bag full of rich gold ore. He had it assayed at a local office owned by Peters. When he brought the ore into the office, it was his bad luck that Peters was nearby. Two of Peters’ men grabbed the old prospector before he could leave, and they made him take them to the source of the gold. A band of Apaches almost caught them at the site. They escaped from the area without having to fight with the Apaches. They shot the old prospector and buried him along the route back to town. Then Peters killed his two men outside of town to make sure they did not talk to anyone about the gold site.

Peters knew Teague from some questionable cattle sales to the army and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He had contacted Teague, and the two men had met in Chicago several months earlier, where they formulated their plan. Teague arranged for an appointment to Arizona, where he could put their plan into operation.
Peters had started his part of the plan when he returned to Tucson from Chicago. He hired twenty men, mostly outlaws and Comancheros, to act as Apaches. They were raiding small ranches and mining operations throughout southeastern Arizona.

The raiders were camped near a waterhole on Peters’ ranch. He left town in a hurry. He had a small task for the men to accomplish.

After they wiped out the cavalry escort and killed the two scouts, he would rescue the Indian Agent with a small group of cowhands. Then the army would have to get serious about taking the war to the Apaches, especially with the Agent’s backing.

Aaron and Red Hawk set up camp near a spring just over five miles east of Tucson. Then they waited for Teague and his escort.

“Somethin’ don’t feel right about that Teague fella,” Aaron said as he and Red Hawk were filling their canteens from the spring.

“Him very friendly with Peters. I think we must be careful,” Red Hawk replied.

The sun was low in the western sky when the coach, with its cavalry escort, arrived. Lieutenant Masters put the troopers to work setting up the rest of the camp while the coach driver took care of his team.

After a supper of beans and bacon, the men turned in for the night. Everyone except Teague slept under the stars. He was secluded in a tent away from the others.

Two troopers were at their guard posts, watching over the camp and the hobbled horses. Aaron and Red Hawk posted themselves on a small ridge that overlooked the area around the site.

The scouts had just settled in for the night, with Aaron taking the first watch when they heard horses approaching. Whoever it was, they were being quiet, but not silent enough. Aaron poked Red Hawk to awaken him, and they both moved to where two men were dismounting from their horses.

Both men were visible in the moonlight. They were dressed like Apaches and carrying rifles, but they moved like white men. Taking out his Bowie knife and signaling Red Hawk to do the same, they positioned themselves between the men and the camp.

Before they could take any action, they heard many horses moving into positions on either side of where they waited. There was no time for any niceties or stealth. These men were preparing to attack the unsuspecting camp.

The first two men must be scouts. They were moving toward the camp while the others were still dismounting and getting organized. They died without a sound as Aaron and Red Hawk slit their throats and laid them next to some rocks.

The two scouts prepared to run and warn the camp when a small fire was lit where it could not be seen by the soldiers. Peters and several men stood looking at some papers in its light. One of the men was dressed like an Apache, and Peters was showing him something.

A sudden flare of light with a loud roar erupted out of the darkness. The “Apache” was blown backward by the half-inch rifle slug taking out a large section of his backbone and splattering blood and gore onto Peters.

The shock of the killing froze everyone in their tracks for just an instant. It was long enough for Red Hawk to put a slug into Peters’ shoulder from the other dead man’s rifle. As
Peters was spun around and knocked to the ground, Red Hawk commented, “Rifle shoots to the right. It needs adjustment.”

“I guess the one I fired was better sighted,” Aaron said, as he dropped the other dead man’s rifle and put his Henry to his shoulder. The range was a bit long, but he managed to kill one of the other men, who was dragging Peters out of the dimming firelight.

“Let’s skedaddle back to camp. We done stirred up a hornets’ nest,” Aaron shouted as they turned to run.

As they moved silently through the darkness, they heard sounds behind them as the false Apaches swarmed up the sides of their earlier overlook. Somehow two of the attackers had gotten between them and the camp. Both died without a whimper, and then the scouts were beyond any pursuit. Before running into the camp, they had to let the men know who they were, or they might get shot by some trigger-happy trooper.

The soldiers were alerted, but they had not been attacked. The false Apaches were scattered throughout the rocks along the ridge where Aaron and Red Hawk had been posted. They were waiting for their leaders to tell them what to do, but Aaron had killed one, and Red Hawk had wounded the other.

When Aaron and Red Hawk decided to rush into the camp, they were surrounded by Chiricahua Apaches. Aaron recognized one of them in the moonlight and signaled Red Hawk not to take any action. Cochise came out of the darkness. He spoke to Red Hawk before turning and signaling his men to move along.

The Apaches had quickly moved off into the darkness toward the men on the ridge. An occasional scream pierced the false quiet of the night. Scattered shots sounded among the rocks and bushes of the overlook. Finally, all was quiet.

“What did Cochise say to us?” Aaron asked.

“He say, stay here and live,” Red Hawk replied.

Just then, Cochise reappeared with three of his warriors. He spoke to them in good English, “These men are white men dressed as Apache. They kill their own kind and blame Apache. We do our own killing. Now we kill them.”

“Why would they do such a thing?” Aaron asked.

“Ask the one called Peters. Him still have a tongue.”

“I guess Cochise had other business than us tonight,” Aaron said as the Apaches vanished like phantoms into the night.

Aaron and Red Hawk followed the sounds of loud moaning to where Peters lay. He was spread-eagled on his back. Arrows had been shot into his hands and pushed into the ground. Only the feathers showed sticking above his palms. His eyes were gone, and the man was begging for death.

Lieutenant Masters arrived soon after Aaron with three of his troopers. Aaron ignored him as he asked Peters some questions. Peters pleaded for death. Then he talked about the false Apache raids and how they were related to the gold strike. When the Lieutenant heard about Teague’s involvement, Masters slapped his gloves against the side of his leg in anger.

When Peters finished confessing, Aaron stood up and shot him in the head. “I always keep my word, even to a snake,” he said to no one in particular.
Lieutenant Masters turned to head back to camp, saying, “We need to go visit Mr. Teague.”

As the men walked back into the camp, Aaron said, “I didn’t hear any shooting from this direction. I guess the Apaches only went after the raiders.”

“What Apaches?” Masters asked. “I thought you had staked out Peters.”

“That was Cochise. He was angry about the white men masquerading as his people, causing all sorts of trouble. Luckily, he decided to do something about it tonight, or we wouldn’t all be here talking.”

“We will take Mr. Teague into custody and bring him up on charges when we get to Camp Grant. In the morning, my men will search the area and gather any dead raiders for burial. While they do that, I’ll write out a report on tonight’s actions, and you can sign it as a witness.”

The men were told to stand down and rest until morning. The guards were put back on station, and the Lieutenant walked over to Teague’s tent with Aaron and two of his troopers. Red Hawk had returned to the ridge where he began the night.

“I wonder why Teague is still sleeping. He should have been up and about with all the shooting and shouting.” Masters said.

He pulled back the tent flap to see that Teague was still lying on his cot. He had been stabbed, and his scalp was missing.

Aaron looked at him and said, “I am glad Cochise was just after whites pretending to be Apaches. Otherwise, he could have had everyone killed.”

The following morning, they buried Teague, Peters, and nineteen others in a long trench. At least six of the raiders had gotten away. They would probably keep running until they got out of the territory or were run down by Cochise.

As the men resumed their journey to Camp Grant, Aaron and Red Hawk scouted ahead. They were able to take a direct route since the recent raiding was ended. Cochise had finished it, but Aaron knew it was just a temporary respite. The Apache war was far from over, and he would meet Cochise again.