

## —TO JUDGE THE QUICK

*by Hank Schwaeble*

Ezekiel heard them approaching, an angry rataplan of hoof-beats, drumming like summer thunder. The vibration followed the sound, thumping the soles and heels of his boots, telling him before he looked up that it was horses and not cattle. Horses being ridden hard, but horses, no doubt. The tremors of a stampede would have been felt right before anything reached his ears, not afterward. He knew that, just as sure as he knew the busy tattoo was too high pitched to be longhorn, and too discernible as to each hoof to be more than six animals. He conceded the possibility of five, if his hearing had grown duller than he wanted to believe. But six was his best guess.

A twinge of pride passed over him as he straightened to see six riders come into view. Blurry, mere blends of moving color, but he was sure there were six of them. His eyes were strong. Always had been. When asked, he attributed this to not reading by candlelight, but the truth was he only read when necessary. Everyone he had ever known to read for pleasure wore spectacles of some sort. He was thankful to have avoided such a nuisance. Not that he was much for reading, anyway. But he was always quick to show those who questioned him that he could do it. Had learned the alphabet, learned to write several dozen words properly. Probably a hundred, all told. His oldest daughter had taught him. After the war.

The figures sharpened in their relief, and he saw there were not six horsemen, but four. The pride drained out and concern, mixed with mild trepidation, filled its place. A smaller number was no comfort, a lesson absorbed from the harsh instruction of life. He allowed that other lives may have taught differently—lives of men who'd fought on a battlefield, maybe—but in his experience, the larger the number, the smaller the threat. Besides, four horsemen were a bad omen. Everyone knew there were four horsemen of the Apocalypse. And there were usually four horsemen in a patrol toward the end, when the confederacy was in its last days and the only men left to ride were the sadistic outcasts, men living in the scornful wake of those who had bravely gone to war, men with something to prove to themselves, and to everyone with skin darker than theirs. And, at the end, always in fours.

No. He shook away the thought, brought himself back to the present, tried to focus on the here and now, on the world he lived in, not the world that was. He was in Texas, a freedman, no longer a slave in Alabama. Mr. Lincoln had freed him, him and the rest of those like him. He had once attended a gathering where some smarty Negro in a bowler hat and fancy suit coat tried to say that Congress had freed the

slaves, not Mr. Lincoln; but that slicker had clearly never worn shackles, never felt the bite of the whip. Only one man ever did anything for people like him, at least as far as he could remember, and he was not going to let some flannel-mouthed snoot pretend otherwise.

The details of the riders' appearance became more noticeable as they drew closer. He tried to place a finger on what was so menacing about them, whether it was the violent angle of their bodies or the militant way they gripped their reins, or the large white hats atop each of their heads. But he soon saw it was none of those things. It was the fact they had shadows for faces, shadows that seemed darker than anything he had ever seen. Or not seen.

And he allowed that maybe it was the direction from which they rode that was spooking him. His mind resisted that one. Those stories caused tingles to grope him in ways he didn't like.

As they closed the distance further, kicking up whirls of dirt and dust and grass behind them, the texture and shape of the shadows showed them to be not shadows at all, but masks. Black hoods beneath white felt brims. He thought of the patrols again, though he was not certain why. Those men had never worn masks, never had a need to hide who they were. Maybe it was the way he recalled them riding onto the plantation, barging in like angry landlords. Wielding rifles and whips, looking for niggers learning from books, eating in the main house, having visitors, holding church. He remembered being scared numb by how the owner was powerless to stop them, scared long after they had come and gone. Mr. Morgan may not have always been the nicest man in the world, but he was not a cruel man, nor an unfair man. And he was *the* man. The patrols were made up of mostly poor whites, always stealing, peddling stuff off the roadways that they took from freed blacks accused of harboring runaways or violating curfew. Ezekiel Adams knew that if the man of the estate, a white man of breeding who owned two dozen slaves and a thousand acres, if that man was helpless in the face of a patrol, then slavery had created a force of nature that threatened everything in its path with mindless destruction. Like a funnel cloud or a tempest. Forces of nature could not be pleaded with, could not be persuaded. They were unmoved by invocations of Jesus or Satan. And Ezekiel remembered fearing that more than slavery itself. Fearing that more than death, even.

Evil was not in the blood, his mother used to tell him. It was passed through the tongue. It's what came out of a man's mouth that spread to others. White or black, evil was learned, and could be unlearned. She used to say that once it got in the blood, once it didn't need to be learned anymore, that's when mankind would feel God's wrath. At times, Ezekiel wasn't so sure it wasn't already in the blood of some, that maybe Him not doing anything about it was the wrath she meant.

The tingling returned. The direction from which they rode was not good, and he was having a hard time not thinking about it.

He said a small prayer beneath his breath to bless the soul of Mr. Lincoln once more as the horsemen crested the nearest ridge and came within shouting distance. He was determined to maintain some dignity, what his mother used to call a free man's bearing, weighing in his mind that he had every reason to think these men were here to kill him, yet no reason in particular. But something told him he was not going to be killed, a sensation creeping around his gut. It told him the danger wasn't to him.