

THE SILENCE OF THE SAMS

By Bud L. Lester

Sam Cutter couldn't imagine a bigger fool. Living with a fool was worse than living alone. Sam Stanley gave a whole new meaning to the idea of being a fool. In fact, Sam Stanley would be an embarrassment to other fools. They would say he gave them a bad name. Wait, wait, that was not true. Stanley was Cutter's one true, trustworthy friend, the one who came to him in his time of need, but Cutter hated the silence of the last month.

Sam Cutter checked the stag antler-handled walking stick in his hand. He promised Bill Hilpin two weeks ago that this famous Cutter Whitehorn walking stick would be ready for him today. The L-shaped stag antler handle shown a warm white in the afternoon sun, whiter than Cutter's unruly nest of gray hair. No one else knew Cutter's technique. First, he scrubbed the stag antler with Dawn dish washing liquid and a chamois until the deer antler turned its natural pure white, then applied a thin coat of Turtle Wax car polish to protect the color and texture.

These Cutter Whitehorn walking sticks sold well and the raw material was free. The blackthorn wood grew wild along the fencerows and the stag antler littered the Colorado woods each year after the deer discarded their old antlers to begin growing new ones. The natural gray-brown color of stag antler came from dried deerskin and stains from the deer rubbing its antlers on various types of vegetation during rutting season. Cleaning the antler produced the grips for Cutter Whitehorn walking sticks that topped his sales. Cutter inspected this one. The tapered hardwood capped with the stag antler gave support and a pride of possession. Satisfied with its color, weight, and balance, he leaned the stick against the front door frame, ready for Bill.

He should give this walking stick to Bill, free. After all, Bill had brought his Aunt Lillian to meet Cutter. Lillian, a widow for three years, attracted Cutter with her lovely, cherub face and ready smile. She listened to him and touched him gently. She awoke the tender part of Cutter and he felt twenty years old again in her presence, like when he met Laura, his late wife.

Cutter had called on Lillian eight times in the last two weeks. After each visit, Stanley grew sullen. Stanley didn't approve of Lillian. Stanley wouldn't talk to her or show up in her presence. He would stand right beside her, and not let her see him. Stanley meant a great deal to Cutter and he wanted Stanley to share his love for Lillian but Stanley balked.

Six months ago, when Laura died, only three months after his beloved adopted mother died, and loneliness and pain flooded back into Cutter's life and became his constant companions. Why had Laura left him alone? She knew he depended on her and she left him, left him like his birth mother left him, like his beloved grandfather, Sam. Loneliness engulfed Cutter, smothered him, almost crushed him. Then Sam Stanley, an old childhood friend, reappeared, five months ago. Cutter couldn't even remember Sam's last name until he showed up for a visit that excruciatingly lonely night when the release of death beckoned to Cutter to relief his anguish. Stanley saved Cutter's life again. He got to him to talk again. Their conversation went on for hours like so many years earlier after Cutter's grandfather died.

Cutter's grandfather had introduced Cutter to walking sticks. His grandfather's walking stick possessed a balance and feel that Cutter never forgot. The stick supported his grandfather, but more than that, just holding the stick was a pleasure. The balance and feel in Cutter's hand gave him comfort and confidence. His grandfather said it was tragic when anyone of any age couldn't appreciate a good walking stick. Cutter appreciated walking sticks and his grandfather.

His grandfather passed away and left his personal walking stick to Cutter. In his grandfather's absence, Cutter's alcoholic father began to abuse Cutter and his stepmother. She died of diphtheria and left Cutter alone with his father. If Cutter had behaved better, been a better boy, maybe his father would have loved him more, and his stepmother would have lived longer, and not left Cutter alone. Those memories brought pain with them even now.

Stanley's friendship kept Cutter sane during those days. For three years beginning a month after his grandfather died, they were together constantly. Cutter often missed school due to the injuries his father inflicted, a broken arm, a broken rib, and several black eyes. Cutter never understood why his father hated him so much. Stanley kept him company on those painful days with their bone-crunching loneliness.

Finally, a blow from his father put Cutter in the hospital with a broken collarbone. The doctor called the juvenile authorities and they placed Cutter in a foster home with Mrs. Eros. She cared for him, loved him, touched him gently, and soon became his "mom." Once the cherubic Mrs. Eros adopted Cutter, he didn't see Stanley again until five months ago; a desolate month after his wife, Laura, passed away.

Stanley's name being Sam was a good sign. They would be good friends again. Cutter used Stanley brand carving knives just like his grandfather for so many years and Sam's last name was Stanley. Couldn't be a coincidence, both fit together in his life. He invited Sam Stanley to stay with him. Cutter had stopped carving walking sticks when Laura died. Stanley's friendship pulled him back to reality, helped him get his head on straight, motivated him and got him to carving again, back to the work he loved.

When Cutter started back to church a month ago, Stanley grew sullen. Stanley wouldn't go to church and didn't seem to want Cutter to go. That month ago, Stanley began to change.

"No. Samuel. I want to be called Samuel," Stanley had said. Sam was not good enough for him anymore. "Sam is not dignified enough for a grown man."

"Well, no carsarn way am I gonna call you Samuel or anything else for that matter," Cutter said and left for church.

For the last month the house held only silence for the Sams. No kidding, joking or silliness. Stanley's vitality began to drop. He became despondent, like a man just told he was dying.

Life could be great if Stanley and Lillian would get along. Cutter cared about and loved them both. He sat down and took out his carbon steel Stanley knife to carve a new blackthorn walking stick. In November last year, Laura had helped him select and cut this stick and thirty-nine others for the yearlong seasoning process. Laura loved the outdoors, the fresh air, and Cutter. She often stood behind him while he carved and touched him gently. She laughingly claimed the sticks she selected were always his best ones. His eye checked the stick. Straight, the knots were well spaced, and the bark gripped the wood consistently. The weight and balance were ideal. Perhaps Laura was right.

He picked up his carving knife, with the name Stanley written in cursive on the handle. His knife turned wooden curls that fell from the stick to the floor. The blade whittled smoothly. The wood, cured to the right consistency, would be carved into the second in his latest theme series of walking sticks, Birds of the Texas Coast. This one would be the whooping crane, followed by a Mallard duck, a Canadian goose, a sea gull and his favorite, the mourning dove. No, now his favorite was the whooping crane.

He would carve one blackthorn walking stick for each day in the week; seven different sticks to be sold as a set at a fancy price to someone who appreciated walking sticks and could

afford them. The grip of each stick would be an insert of a carved bird's head or full bird body, or a wooden cage Cutter developed to accommodate a detailed carving of the theme bird. Cutter used natural berry, root and herb juices to color the carvings. Each carving required long hours and much loving attention.

The first in this series had been a pleasure to carve, even the way Stanley was acting. Cutter carved and included the Chachalaca bird just for Sam Stanley. The Chachalaca, a relative of the turkey, sported brownish-green feathers and a red neck patch. Its abrasive voice squawked its own name, cha-cha-lac. If ever there lived a loud-mouthed, redneck turkey, Sam Stanley fit the bill. Since a month ago, when the silence began. The silence, deeper than the inside of a locked closet, pushed Cutter out to go to church, to see Lillian, anything but the silence.

"Sam," Sam Stanley said, "My time has come. I have to go away again."

Cutter swiveled his tall chair away from his workbench. He faced Stanley eye to eye. Stanley's hair had lost its luster; his eyes no longer twinkled. He looked drawn, pale and indistinct. Cutter realized clearly for the first time that Stanley was fading. Why hadn't he seen it sooner? The fights, the angry words, the criticism were his attempts to rejuvenate himself, self-defense, to keep a place in Cutter's life. Sam Stanley was fading before his eyes.

"Don't leave me. I need you," Cutter said.

"No, that's not true. You needed me and I was there for you twice. I'd always be there for you, but somehow I think this time is good-bye forever."

"I feel rotten. We haven't spoken in a month and now you're leaving. I've mistreated you. I didn't realize I was doing it. I'm sorry. We can't part this way," Cutter said.

"We haven't spoken because you don't need me anymore and you had to learn that for yourself. You have Lillian and the church group and your carvings are your best work ever. You

don't need a friend like me. No one will abuse you; even loneliness has no power over you now. My time ended the first time with Mrs. Eros and now with Lillian."

"You saved my life," Cutter said.

"I admit I was glad to be back and I resisted leaving you again at first," Stanley rasped. "Then I realized I had to let you go. I hated not talking to you but you had to make your transition to real people again."

"You pushed me out. You knew I might not do it on my own but I am losing you!"

"I care about you and you kept me alive, but you have Lillian and people will believe you're crazy if you tell them about me. You know it's true. I can't allow that. You can't allow that. My time is at an ending."

"You may be right, but I don't want to lose you." Cutter reached out and put his arms around the ashen, ephemeral Stanley.

Sam Stanley said, "I will always be your friend. Release me now, please."

Cutter closed his eyes and pulled Sam Stanley close to him in a tight hug. "Good-bye," Cutter said.

Cutter's arms crossed each other and wrapped back around his own sides until he hugged himself. When he opened his eyes, he saw Stanley had vanished. He sighed. Cutter couldn't imagine a better friend.