

Synopsis: *A Cowboy's Carol*

Act I

In the New Mexico Territory, a group of cowboys sing together on a lonely Christmas Eve. One of them starts the ballad of Judge Ethan Scrawlett, a ruthless cattle baron who ruled the town of Sacksaddle back in 1891.

Scrawlett is visited on Christmas Eve by his nephew, Matt. The Judge's belligerence tries the patience of the friendly, half-Navajo deputy. Things reach a tense standoff when Scrawlett insults Matt's Mexican wife. Matt's visit is followed by the territorial Indian agent, a Quaker seeking donations to feed the Apaches on the nearby reservation. On learning Scrawlett himself supplies the scrawny cattle forced on the Indians, the agent leaves in defeat. As night falls, the Judge angrily gives Christmas day off to Toby, the simple-minded stable hand who sweeps up his office.

At the raucous Three Kings Saloon, the glamorous owner Durango entertains the crowd on stage. We meet Little Sparrow, an Apache orphan rescued from the Comanches and adopted by Durango and her girls. Dangerously ill with TB, the little girl is also cared for by Toby and Doc. Scrawlett enters, clearly unwelcome in the saloon. Durango, who is desperate for money to send the child east for treatment, has asked him there to seek a loan. She offers The Three Kings as security, but Scrawlett tries to use her predicament to force her to sell. Durango and the angry cowboys toss him out.

A powerful norther blows in as the Judge rides the dark trail to his ranch. At the storm's height he is terrified to see the ghost of his old partner, Caleb Filtch, rise from the back of his buckboard. Learning it is his only chance to avoid his partner's awful fate, he reluctantly agrees to visits by three more ghosts. After reaching his ranch and barring the doors and windows, he is startled by The Old Timer. The first of the ghosts—in the form of an ornery old chuck wagon cook—has come to reacquaint Scrawlett with his past.

At a deserted spot in the desert, a young boy and girl are discovered by a grizzled cavalry sergeant. They are young Scrawlett and his sister Lucy—lone survivors of an Apache raid. The boy clutches a locket given to him by his mother. The tenderhearted sergeant dispatches his troop to the Fiddleback, a nearby ranch.

Ten years later we are at a Christmas Eve dance hosted by Solomon Jinglebob, cheerful owner of the Fiddleback. Ethan is now the ranch's top hand, and his sister Lucy is a lovely young woman. Young Ethan meets Concepción, the elegant daughter of a visiting Mexican rancher, and their courtship begins to the strains of a lovely Mexican waltz. Jinglebob names Ethan the new foreman—but only until his own son returns from school back East. Caleb Filtch, a disreputable businessman contracting for the army, introduces himself. Probing Ethan's loyalties, he subtly reminds him he will always stand in the shadow of Jinglebob's real son. As the party goes in to eat, we see that Lucy and John Cloud, a Navajo ranch hand, are secretly sweethearts.

One year later in Filtch's office, Jinglebob is protesting the charge he has cheated the army on beef deliveries. Filtch says that prison and disgrace likely await him. The broken older man leaves, and Ethan accuses Filtch of covering up his own rustling by framing the naive rancher. Filtch calmly advises Ethan to leave Jinglebob to his fate. He punctures Ethan's self-assurance by questioning whether he will be able to provide for the aristocratic Concepción on a cowboy's lowly wages.

A year later the office sign reads, "Scrawlett & Filtch." Dressed for a Christmas ball, Concepción waits as Ethan pores over paperwork. They argue over the plight of the Apaches, who have risen up against the army, and Concepción is horrified at the depth of Ethan's hatred for the Indians. We learn that, because Lucy has run off with the Navajo John Cloud, Ethan has cut all ties with his sister. Finally, we discover that Scrawlett and Filtch are conniving to swindle the old families of the territory—friends of Concepción's father—out of land granted by the King of Spain. When he defends his actions as part of the natural order, Concepción sadly returns his locket and leaves. As the act ends, the Judge is alone again at his ranch and collapses into sleep.

Act II

Scrawlett is awakened by a blast of mariachi trumpets and the astonishing appearance of *El Fantasma Del Navidad Corriente*—an ebullient ghost in the form of a magnificent Mexican *vaquero*. They head for The Three Kings, where Christmas is in full joyous swing. Durango performs, Doc recites a moving passage by Charles Dickens, and Little Sparrow adds an Apache prayer: "May our days be good and long upon the earth." As the child drifts to sleep in her lap, Durango sings her a lullaby and the cowboys tiptoe in with a pine tree and presents.

From the edge of a high mesa, *El Fantasma* shows Scrawlett the Christmas celebrations at the ranches in the valley, the dilapidated miners' shacks, even the far-off Indian pueblos.

Near a simple adobe *hacienda* lit by twinkling *farolitos*, a procession singing carols in Spanish appears. It is the celebration of *Las Posadas*, the traditional reenactment of Mary and Joseph's search for lodging in Bethlehem. Scrawlett's nephew Matt will play the innkeeper, and it is his house where the procession has stopped. Gently coached by his Mexican wife Josefina, Matt sings the traditional Mexican carol with a child dressed as Joseph. Then the *fiesta* begins as a *piñata* is hung and Josefina sings a lively *mariachi* carol. Good-natured Matt remembers his uncle with a toast, with Josefina shaming the guests to join in for her husband's sake.

El Fantasma brings Scrawlett to the desolate Apache reservation, where he sees a desperately poor Apache boy—the face of a people swept aside in the newcomers' greed for land. *El Fantasma* vanishes, and the echo of clinking spurs announces a shadowy, silent gunman in black—The Ghost With No Name.

Mourners gather at a well-tended churchyard as Little Sparrow is laid to rest, a victim of her untreated tuberculosis. As the mourners file out, a distracted Toby lags behind to place the child's rag doll on her grave.

At the local undertaker's, Doc completes a post-mortem on a sheet-covered body. The man was murdered, and the unnamed culprit will likely hang despite the victim's unpopularity. Once Doc leaves, the undertaker gets down to business—appraising and relieving the body of valuables. After Scrawlett and the ghost leave, the undertaker picks up Scrawlett's treasured locket, then disdainfully tosses it aside as worthless.

A troubled Matt keeps a tense shotgun watch at the marshal's office, guarding against the town's anger at the hanging to come. Durango arrives to visit the prisoner, asleep in his cell—we see that it is Toby. Refusing to believe the gentle stable hand capable of killing, Scrawlett challenges the ghost, who only beckons him onward.

The Ghost With No Names takes him to forbidding Boot Hill, and a flash of lightning reveals the inscription on a neglected headstone: "Ethan Scrawlett. Shot down like the dog he was. This world the better for it."

As Josefina sings a morning prayer of thanks to the Virgin, the dawn reveals Scrawlett, asleep in his chair. Toby shakes him awake—he has ridden out to make sure the Judge got through the storm. A dazed and grateful Scrawlett, newly convinced of the value of community, joyously drags the confused stable hand to town. In a heartfelt reconciliation with his nephew, he places his mother's locket around Josefina's neck, welcoming her to the family. His final business is at The Three Kings, where he interrupts Durango's performance to announce he will personally take Little Sparrow to St. Louis for treatment. In a final surprise he asks the astonished Durango to let him help raise the child, implying a life together for the three of them.

The saddle tramp who began the story closes it with the beautiful words of an Apache wedding prayer. Little Sparrow joins him for the final Apache blessing: "May your days be good and long upon the earth."

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