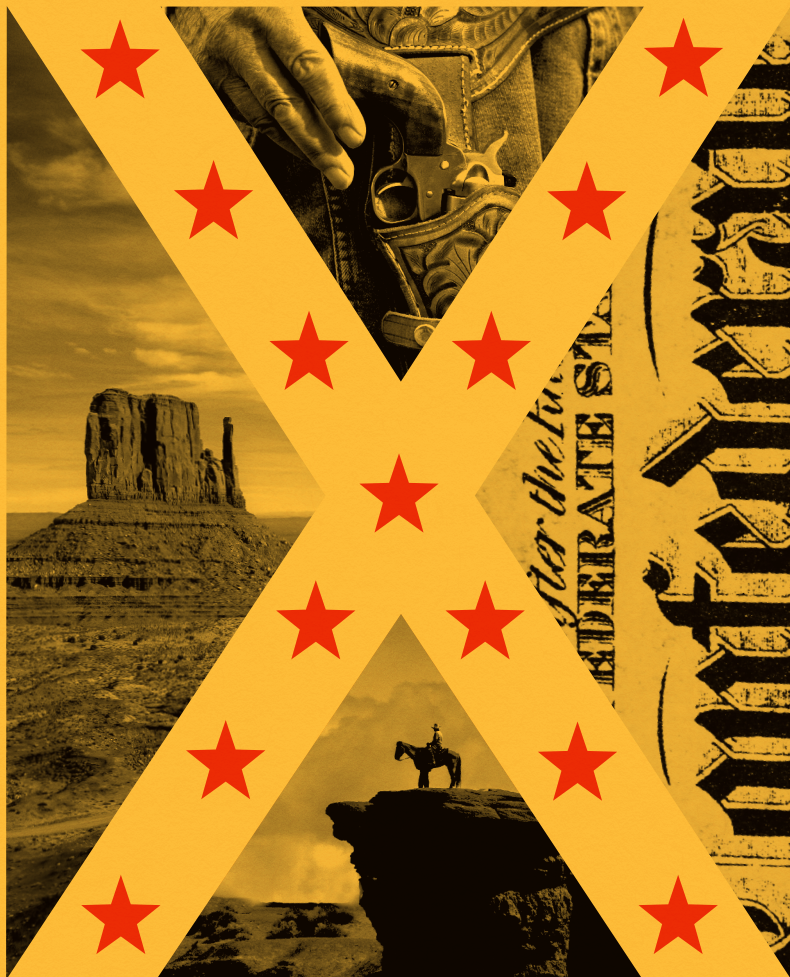


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Last Stand at
Saber River



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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the USA in 1959
by Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc.
First published in Great Britain by Penguin Classics 2025
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Set in 11.25/14pt Dante MT Std
Typeset by Six Red Marbles UK, Thetford, Norfolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-75538-9

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Last Stand at Saber River

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I

Paul Cable sat hunched forward at the edge of the pine shade, his boots crossed and his elbows supported on his knees. He put the field glasses to his eyes again and, four hundred yards down the slope, the two-story adobe was brought suddenly, silently before him.

This was The Store. It was Denaman's. It was a plain, tan-pink southern Arizona adobe with a wooden loading platform, but no *ramada* to hold off the sun. It was the only general supply store from Hidalgo north to Fort Buchanan; and until the outbreak of the war it had been a Hatch & Hodges swing station.

The store was familiar and it was good to see, because it meant Cable and his family were almost home. Martha was next to him, the children were close by; they were anxious to be home after two and a half years away from it. But the sight of a man Cable had never seen before – a man with one arm – had stopped them.

He stood on the loading platform facing the empty sunlight of the yard, staring at the willow trees that screened the river close beyond the adobe, his right hand on his hip, his left sleeve tucked smoothly, tightly into his waist. Above him, the faded, red-lettered DENAMAN'S STORE inscription extended the full width of the adobe's double doors.

Cable studied the man. There was something about him.

Perhaps because he had only one arm. No, Cable thought

then, that made you think of the war, the two and a half years of it, but you felt something before you saw he had only one arm.

Then he realized it was the habit of surviving formed during two and a half years of war. The habit of not trusting any movement he could not immediately identify. The habit of not walking into anything blindly. He had learned to use patience and weigh alternatives and to be sure of a situation before he acted. As sure as he could be in his own mind.

Now Cable's glasses moved over the wind-scarred face of the adobe, following the one-armed man's gaze to the grove of willows and the river hidden beyond the hanging screen of branches.

A girl came out of the trees carrying a bucket and Cable said, 'There's Luz again. Here -' He handed the glasses to his wife who was kneeling, sitting back on her legs, one hand raised to shield her eyes from the sun glare.

Martha Cable raised the glasses. After a moment she said, 'It's Luz Acaso. But still it doesn't seem like Luz.'

'All of a sudden she's a grown-up woman,' Cable said. 'She'd be eighteen now.'

'No,' Martha said. 'It's something else. Her expression. The way she moves.'

Through the glasses, the girl crossed the yard leisurely. Her eyes were lowered and did not rise until she reached the platform and started up the steps. When she looked up her face was solemn and warm brown in the sunlight. Martha remembered Luz's knowing eyes and her lips that were always softly parted, ready to smile or break into laughter. But now she wore an expression of weariness. Her eyes went to the man on the platform, then away from him quickly as he glanced at her and she passed into the store.

She's tired, or ill, Martha thought. Or afraid.

‘She went inside?’ Cable asked.

The glasses lowered briefly and Martha nodded. ‘But he’s still there. Cable, for some reason I think she’s afraid of him.’

‘Maybe.’ He watched Martha concentrating on the man on the platform. ‘But why, if Dena-man’s there?’

‘If he’s there,’ Martha said.

‘Where else would he be?’

‘I was going to ask the same question.’

‘Well, let’s take it for granted he’s inside.’

‘And Manuel?’ She was referring to Luz’s brother.

‘Manuel could be anywhere.’

Martha was still watching the man on the platform, studying him so that an impression of him would be left in her mind. He was a tall man, heavy boned, somewhat thin with dark hair and mustache. He was perhaps in his late thirties. His left arm was off between the shoulder and the elbow.

‘I suppose he was in the war,’ Martha said.

‘Probably.’ Cable nodded thoughtfully. ‘But which side?’ That’s something, Cable said to himself. You don’t trust him. Any man seen from a distance you dislike and distrust. It’s good to be careful, but you could be carrying it too far.

Briefly he thought of John Denaman, the man who had given him his start ten years before and talked him into settling in the Saber River valley. It would be good to see John again. And it would be good to see Luz, to talk to her, and Manuel. His good friend Manuel. Luz and Manuel’s father had worked for Denaman until a sudden illness took his life. After that, John raised both of them as if they were his own children.

‘Now he’s going inside,’ Martha said.

Cable waited. After a moment he turned, pushing himself up, and saw his daughter standing only a few feet away. Clare was six, their oldest child: a quiet little girl with her mother’s dark hair and eyes and showing signs of developing her mother’s

clean-lined, easily remembered features; resembling her mother just as the boys favored their father. She stood uncertainly with her hands clutched to her chest.

‘Sister, you round up the boys.’

‘Are we going now?’

‘In a minute.’

He watched her run back into the trees and in a moment he heard a boy’s shrill voice. That would be Davis, five years old. Sandy, not yet four, would be close behind his brother, following every move Davis made; almost every move.

Cable brought his sorrel gelding out of the trees and stepped into the saddle. ‘He’ll come out again when he hears me,’ Cable said. ‘But wait till you see us talking before you come down. All right?’

Martha nodded. She smiled faintly, saying, ‘He’ll probably turn out to be an old friend of John Denaman’s.’

‘Probably.’

Cable nudged the sorrel with his heels and rode off down the yellow sweep of hillside, sitting erect and tight to the saddle with his right knee touching the stock of a Spencer carbine, his right elbow feeling the Walker Colt on his hip, and keeping his eyes on the adobe now, thinking: This could be a scout. This could be the two and a half years still going on . . .

As soon as he had made up his mind to enlist he had sold his stock, all of his cattle, all two hundred and fifty head, and all but three of his horses. He had put Martha and the children in the wagon and taken them to Sudan, Texas, to the home of Martha’s parents. He did this because he believed deeply in the Confederacy, as he believed in his friends who had gone to fight for it.

Because of a principle he traveled from the Saber River, Arizona Territory, to Chattanooga, Tennessee, taking with him a shotgun, a revolving pistol and two horses; and there on June

21, 1862, he joined J. A. Wharton's 8th Texas Cavalry, part of Nathan Bedford Forrest's command.

Three weeks later Cable saw his first action and received his first wound during Forrest's raid on Murfreesboro. On September 3, Paul Cable was commissioned a captain and appointed to General Forrest's escort. From private to captain in less than three months; those things happened in Forrest's command. Wounded twice again after Murfreesboro; the third and final time on November 28, 1864, at a place called Huey's Mills – shot from his saddle as they crossed the Duck River to push Wilson's Union Cavalry back to Franklin, Tennessee. Cable, with gunshot wounds in his left hip and thigh, was taken to the hospital at Columbia. On December 8 he was told to go home 'the best way you know how.' There were more seriously wounded men who needed his cot; there would be a flood of them soon, with General Hood about to pounce on the Yankees at Nashville. Go home, he was told, and thank God for your gunshot wounds.

So for Cable the war was over, though it was still going on in the east and the feeling of it was still with him. He was not yet thirty, a lean-faced man above average height and appearing older after his service with Nathan Bedford Forrest: after Chickamauga, had come Fort Pillow, Bryce's Crossroads, Thompson's Station, three raids into West Tennessee and a hundred nameless skirmishes. He was a calm-appearing man and the war had not changed that. A clear-thinking kind of man who had taught himself to read and write, taught himself the basic rules and his wife had helped him from there.

Martha Sanford Cable was twenty-seven now. A West Texas girl, though convent-educated in New Orleans. Seven years before she had left Sudan to come to the Saber River as Paul Cable's wife, to help him build a home and provide him with a family . . .

Now they were returning to the home they had built with

the family they had begun. They were before Denaman's Store, only four miles from their own land.

And Cable was entering the yard, still with his eyes on the loading platform and the double doors framed in the pale wall of the adobe, reining in his sorrel and approaching at a walk.

The right-hand door opened and the man with one arm stepped out to the platform. He walked to the edge of it and stood with his thumb in his belt looking down at Cable.

Cable came on. He kept his eyes on the man, but said nothing until he had pulled to a halt less than ten feet away. From the saddle, Cable's eyes were even with the man's knees.

'John Denaman inside?'

The man's expression did not change. 'He's not here anymore.'

'He moved?'

'You could say that.'

'Maybe I should talk to Luz,' Cable said.

The man's sunken cheeks and the full mustache covering the line of his mouth gave his face a hard, bony expression, but it was not tensed. He said, 'You know Luz?'

'Since she was eight years old,' Cable answered. 'Since the day I first set foot in this valley.'

'Well, now –' The hint of a smile altered the man's gaunt expression. 'You wouldn't be Cable, would you?'

Cable nodded.

'Home from the wars.' The man still seemed to be smiling. 'Luz's mentioned you and your family. Her brother too. He tells how you and him fought off Apaches when they raided your stock.'

Cable nodded. 'Where's Manuel now?'

'Off somewhere.' The man paused. 'You been to your place yet?'

'We're on our way.'

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‘You’ve got a surprise coming.’

Cable watched him, showing little curiosity. ‘What does that mean?’

‘You’ll find out.’

‘I think you’re changing the subject,’ Cable said mildly. ‘I asked you what happened to John Denaman.’

For a moment the man said nothing. He turned then and called through the open door, ‘Luz, come out here!’

Cable watched him. He saw the man’s heavy-boned face turn to look down at him again, and almost immediately the Mexican girl appeared in the doorway. Cable’s hand went to the curled brim of his hat.

‘Luz, honey, you’re a welcome sight.’ He said it warmly, and he wanted to jump up on the platform and kiss her but the presence of this man stopped him.

‘Paul –’

He saw the surprise in the expression of her mouth and in her eyes, but it was momentary and she returned his gaze with a smile that was grave and without joy, a smile that vanished the instant the man with one arm spoke.

‘Luz, tell him what happened to Denaman.’

‘You haven’t told him?’ She looked at Cable quickly, then seemed to hesitate. ‘Paul, he’s dead. He died almost a year ago.’

‘Nine months,’ the man with one arm said. ‘I came here the end of August. He died the month before.’

Cable’s eyes were on the man, staring at him, feeling now that he had known Denaman was dead, had sensed it from the way the man had spoken – from the tone of his voice.

‘You could have come right out and told me,’ Cable said.

‘Well, you know now.’

‘Like you were making a game out of it.’

The man stared down at Cable indifferently. ‘Why don’t you just let it go?’

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'Paul,' Luz said, 'it came unexpectedly. He wasn't sick.'

'His heart?'

Luz nodded. 'He collapsed shortly after noon and by that evening he was dead.'

'And you happened to come a month later,' Cable said, looking at the man again.

'Why don't you ask what I'm doing here?' The man looked up at the sound of the double team wagon on the grade, his eyes half closed in the sunlight, his gaze holding on the far slope now. 'That your family?'

'Wife and three youngsters,' Cable said.

The man's gaze came down. 'You made a long trip for nothing.' He seemed about to smile, though he was not smiling now.

'All right,' Cable said. 'Why?'

'Some men are living in your house.'

'If there are, they're about to move.'

The smile never came, but the man stared down at Cable intently. 'Come inside and I'll tell you about it.' Then he turned abruptly, though he glanced again at the approaching wagon before going into the store.

Cable could hear the jingling, creaking sound of the wagon closer now, but he kept his eyes on Luz until she looked at him.

'Luz, who is he?'

'His name is Edward Janroe.'

'The man acts like he owns the place.'

Her eyes rose briefly. 'He does. Half of it.'

'But why -'

'Are you coming?' Janroe was in the doorway. He was looking at Cable and with a nod of his head indicated Luz. 'You got to drag things out of her. I've found it's more trouble than it's worth.' He waited until Cable stirred in the saddle and began to dismount. 'I'll be inside,' he said, and stepped away from the door.

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Cable dropped his reins, letting them trail. He swung down and mounted the steps to the platform. For a moment he watched Luz Acaso in silence.

‘Are you married to him?’

‘No.’

‘But he’s been living here eight months and has a half interest in the store.’

‘You think what you like.’

‘I’m not thinking anything. I want to know what’s going on.’

‘He’ll tell you whatever you want to know.’

‘Luz, do you think I’m being nosy? I want to help you.’

‘I don’t need help.’ She was looking beyond him, watching the wagon entering the yard.

All right, he thought, don’t push her. It occurred to him then that Martha was the one to handle Luz. Why keep harping at her and get her nervous. Martha could soothe the details out of her in a matter of minutes.

Cable patted her shoulder and stepped past her into the abrupt dimness of the store.

He moved down the counter that lined the front wall, his hand gliding down the worn, shiny edge of it and his eyes roaming over the almost bare shelves. There were scattered rows of canned goods, bolts of material, work clothes, boxes that told nothing of their contents. Above, Rochester lamps hanging from a wooden beam, buckets and bridles and coils of rope. Most of the goods on the shelves had the appearance of age, as if they had been here a long time.

Cable’s eyes lowered and he almost stopped, unexpectedly seeing Janroe beyond the end of the counter in the doorway to the next room. Janroe was watching him closely.

‘You walk all right,’ Janroe said mildly. ‘Not a mark on you that shows; but they wouldn’t have let you go without a wound.’

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'It shows if I walk far enough,' Cable said. 'Or if I stay mounted too long.'

'That sounds like the kind of wound to have. Where'd you get it?'

'On the way to Nashville.'

'With Hood?'

'In front of him. With Forrest.'

'You're a lucky man. I mean to be in one piece.'

'I suppose.'

'Take another case. I was with Kirby Smith from the summer of sixty-one to a year later when we marched up to Kentucky River toward Lexington. Near Richmond we met a Yankee general named Bull Nelson.' Janroe's eyes narrowed and he grinned faintly, remembering the time. 'He just had recruits, a pick-up army, and I'll tell you we met them good. Cut clean the hell through them, and the ones we didn't kill ran like you never saw men run in your life. The cavalry people mopped up after that and we took over four thousand prisoners that one afternoon.'

Janroe paused and the tone of his voice dropped. 'But there was one battery of theirs on a ridge behind a stone fence. I was taking some men up there to get them . . . and the next day I woke up in a Richmond field hospital without an arm.'

He was watching Cable closely. 'You see what I mean? We'd licked them. The fight was over and put away. But because of this one battery not knowing enough to give up, or too scared to, I lost a good arm.'

But you've got one left and you're out of the war, so why don't you forget about it, Cable thought, and almost said it; but instead he nodded, looking at the shelves.

'Maybe Luz told you I was in the army,' Janroe said.

'No, only your name, and that you own part of the store.'

'That's a start. What else do you want to know?'

'Why you're here.'

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‘You just said it. Because I own part of the store.’

‘Then how you came to be here.’

‘You’ve got a suspicious mind.’

‘Look,’ Cable said quietly, ‘John Denaman was a friend of mine. He dies suddenly and you arrive to buy in.’

‘That’s right. But you want to know what killed him?’

When Cable said nothing Janroe’s eyes lifted to the almost bare shelves. ‘He didn’t have enough goods to sell. He didn’t have regular money coming in. He worried, not knowing what was going to happen to his business.’ Janroe’s gaze lowered to Cable again. ‘He even worried about Luz and Vern Kidston. They were keeping company and, I’m told, the old man didn’t see eye to eye with Vern. Because of different politics, you might say. So it was a combination of things that killed him. Worries along with old age. And if you think it was anything else, you’re going on pure imagination.’

‘Let’s go back to Vern Kidston,’ Cable said. ‘I never heard of him; so what you’re saying doesn’t mean a whole lot.’

Janroe’s faint smile appeared. ‘Vern came along about two years ago, I’m told. He makes his living supplying the Union cavalry with remounts. Delivers them up to Fort Buchanan.’

‘He lives near here?’

‘In the old Toyopa place. How far’s that from you?’

‘About six miles.’

‘They say Vern’s fixed it up.’

‘It’d take a lot of fixing. The house was half burned down.’

‘Vern’s got the men.’

‘I’ll have to meet him.’

‘You will. You’ll meet him all right.’

Cable’s eyes held on Janroe. ‘It sounds like you can hardly wait.’

‘There’s your suspicious mind again.’ Janroe straightened and stepped into the next room. ‘Come on. It’s time I poured you a drink.’

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Cable followed, his gaze going from left to right around the well-remembered room: from the door that led to the kitchen to the roll-top desk to the Hatch & Hodges calendar to the corner fireplace and the leather-bottomed chairs, to the pictures of the Holy Family and the Sierra Madre landscapes on the wall, to the stairway leading to the second floor (four rooms up, Cable remembered), and finally to the round dining table between the front windows. He watched Janroe go into the kitchen and come out with a bottle of mescal and two glasses, holding the glasses in his fingers and the bottle pressed between his arm and his body.

Janroe nodded to the table. 'Sit down. You're going to need this.'

Cable pulled out a chair and stepped over it. He watched Janroe sit down and pour the clear, colorless liquor.

'Does my needing this have to do with Vern Kidston?'

Janroe sipped his mescal and put his glass down gently. 'Vern's the one living in your house. Not Vern himself. Some of his men.' Janroe leaned closer as if to absorb a reaction from Cable. 'They're living in your house with part of Vern's horse herd grazing in your meadow.'

'Well' – Cable raised the glass of mescal, studying it in the light of the window behind Janroe – 'I don't blame him. It's good graze.' He drank off some of the sweet-tasting liquor. 'But now he'll move his men out. That's all.'

'You think so?'

'If he doesn't vacate I'll get the law.'

'What law?'

'Fort Buchanan. That's closest.'

'And who do you think the Yankees would side with,' Janroe asked, 'the ex-Rebel or the mustanger supplying them with remounts?'

Janroe looked up and Cable turned in his chair as Luz entered

from the store. Behind her came Martha holding Sandy's hand and moving Clare and Davis along in front of her.

'We'll see what happens,' Cable said. He rose, holding out his hand as Davis ran to him and stood close against his leg.

'Mr Janroe, this is my wife, Martha.' He glanced at Janroe who had made no move to rise. 'This boy here is Davis. The little one's Sanford and our big girl there is Clare, almost seven years old already.' Cable winked at his daughter, but she was staring with open curiosity at Janroe's empty sleeve.

Martha's hand went to the little girl's shoulder and she smiled pleasantly at the man still hunched over the table.

'Mr Janroe' – Martha spoke calmly – 'you don't know how good it is to be back here again.' She was worried one of the children might ask about Janroe's missing arm. Cable knew this. He could sense it watching her, though outwardly Martha was at ease.

Luz said, 'I invited them for dinner.'

Janroe was staring at Clare. She looked away and his eyes went to Davis, holding him, as if defying him to speak. Then, slowly, he sat back and looked up at Luz.

'Take the kids with you. They'll eat in the kitchen.'

Luz hesitated, then nodded quickly and held out her hand to Sandy. The boy looked up at her and pressed closer into his mother's skirts.

'They're used to being with me,' Martha said pleasantly. Gently she urged Clare forward, smiling at Luz now, though the Mexican woman did not return her smile. 'While Caba . . . while Paul was away the children didn't have the opportunity to meet many new people. I'm afraid they're just a little bit strange now.'

'If they eat,' Janroe said, 'they still eat in the kitchen.'

Martha's face colored. 'Mr Janroe, I was merely explaining –' 'The point is, Mrs Cable, there's nothing to explain. In this house kids don't sit at the table with grownups.'

Martha felt the heat on her face and she glanced at her

husband, at Cable who stood relaxed with the calm, tell-nothing expression she had learned to understand and respect. It isn't your place to answer him, she thought. But now the impulse was too strong and she could no longer hold back her words, though when she spoke her voice was calm and controlled.

'Now that you've said it three times, Mr Janroe, we will always remember that in this house children do not eat with grownups.'

'Mrs Cable' – Janroe spoke quietly, sitting straight up and with his hand flat and unmoving on the table – 'if your husband has one friend around here it's going to be me. Not because I'm pro-South or anti-Union. Not because I favor the man who's at a disadvantage. But because I don't have a reason not to befriend your husband. Now that's a pretty flimsy basis for a friendship.'

'If you think I was rude,' Martha said patiently, 'I apologize. Perhaps I did –'

'Just wait a minute.' Janroe brought up his hand to stop her. 'I want you to realize something. I want you to understand that I don't have to smile at your husband for his business. If you don't trade with me you go to Fort Buchanan and that's a two-day trip. Add to that, I do business with the Kidstons. They buy most of the goods as fast as I receive them. And I'll tell you right now, once they learn I'm dealing with your husband they're going to come in here and yell for me to stop.'

'Mr Janroe –'

'But you know what I'll answer them? I'll tell them to go to Buchanan or hell with their business, either one. Because no man on earth comes into my house and tells me what I can do or what I can't do. Not Vern Kidston or his brother; not you or your husband here.'

Janroe relaxed against the back of his chair. 'That's how it is, Mrs Cable. I'd suggest you think about it before you speak out the first thing that comes to your mind.'