

**RON  
OLSON**

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**LONG DROP  
AT  
THE RUSTY DIME**

**Bannack  
Publishing  
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LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

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## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME



The road under Amos Carpenter's two lumbering freight wagons was one of those aimless prairie pathways which seemed content to follow the easy contours of the softly molded hill country with little regard for direction and even less for ease of travel. As it made its way toward the rising and falling distant horizon which lay to the south and west, the dusty road would occasionally drop sharply into one of the dry creekbeds whose long sandy fingers laced through the vast plain.

The abrupt run-downs where the road seemed to rush toward narrow bottoms were sometimes long enough and sharp enough to cause even experienced drivers to tighten their hands on the reins and quickly place a concerned boot on the brake lever. Generally, these little ravines presented no serious problem for a good driver who was awake and knew his rig and his animals. Trouble only came with the unexpected.

When the lead freight wagon reached the top of one such sharply pitching road, it halted for a moment, either to survey the road or to wait for the second wagon to catch up. One of the big horses stamped his foot into the dust while another turned and nudged the black straps of the harness as though he thought it was time to be unhitched.

Then the driver gently chucked the reins and the wagon carefully began the abrupt descent. As the heavy wagon box inclined downward, a rifle shot cracked through the quiet air of the ravine and a bullet ripped into the wagon box. Two more shots came in quick succession. The second screamed harmlessly overhead but the third tore into the ground under the hooves of the horses.

The team, just beginning the descent, had been walking downhill with the harness hanging slack over their big backs as they waited for the familiar tug which would come when the brake was applied. Instead, the gunfire and the accompanying spray of dirt under them caused them to jerk forward and the heavy wagon began to lunge forward.

The driver's companion moved with blinding speed. He pulled a rifle from behind the seat, leaned over the foot trail and pumped six shots down at the ground. It seemed at first to be an insane reaction. As quickly as the wagon had bolted forward on what promised to be a deadly ride to the bottom of the hill, it jerked to a halt as if it had run headlong into an invisible wall.

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The tall man with the rifle then swung the muzzle toward the horizon across the wash and sent two quick shots at the unseen bushwhacker. He dropped the rifle and spaced three more shots at the same target with his big navy colt.

It had all happened in the space of three breaths. There had been not time for either of the men on the wagon box to speak. With the hidden rifleman still in their minds, they leaped from the high seat and took what cover they could find behind the thick spokes of the wheels.

They held their positions for a few moments until the owner of the colt, using the muzzle to nudge back his high McKibbin hat, spoke, "I'm betting he's long gone, Amos."

"I don't think I'd call that bet. If he was still there, he'd be takin' some easy pot shots. These wheels ain't much against a rifle."

"Did Able get stopped all right?"

Looking back at the second wagon still sitting at the crest of the hill with its driver's box and seat empty, Amos grunted, "He's stopped sure enough and the brake's set, but I don't see him or Jane anywhere."

"I can. They're both okay."

With that, Owen Bannack rose and stepped into the open, his eyes fixed on the far hill. Amos retrieved the rifle and quickly reloaded it. While he watched the point from where the shots had been fired, Owen scrambled down the steep slope and up the other side.

After a few minutes he reappeared, walking easily back toward the wagon. It was evident that the sniper had fled and the wagons were secure, at least for the present.

Amos Carpenter stood looking down at the oak wagon tongue that looked like it had been cut in two by a giant axe. He pulled a blue flowered bandana from his hip pocket and mopped his forehead. As Owen walked up he said, "It's busted clean through, Owen. That was the quickest thinkin' and shootin' I've ever seen. Yuh saved the wagon, the horses, and probably our skins to boot."

His companion only nodded as he surveyed the little furrow that had been plowed in the sod when the tongue had broken and dropped to the ground. The jagged end of the tongue had gouged itself into the dirt and it was that fact which had brought the wagon to such a jarring halt.

They were joined by grizzled old Able who appeared from behind the second wagon. "Now what in tarnation was all that?" he stormed.

Looking at the stump of the tongue which had been driven into the ground with such force that it very nearly held the front wheels off

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the ground, he whistled softly through his bushy beard. "The whole shebang would've gone if she hadn't busted. But who did it ...?"

He never finished the question. His eyes found the matching end and he suddenly realized what had happened. He looked at Owen, "Then it was yuhr shootin' that snapped it?"

"It was, Able, and it was the only thing that could have stopped us. The brake would've never held," said Amos.

Old Able looked at Owen narrowly and observed, "Them things is easier to shoot than to fix. Yuh jest ain't got no sense fer wagons." Still surveying the broken wood he added, "I can see now, Bannack, that they ain't no chance in glory that I'll ever make a wagon driver of yuh."

Owen Bannack smiled at the old freighter. "You'll have to talk to your boss about that, Able. He was driving. I'm only along for the ride."

Amos smiled at the two who maintained a mock running feud, but one that was founded on affection and admiration. Ever since the two-wagon party had left the town of Frailey in Wyoming territory, Able had been fussing at Owen for his lack of wagon driving skill. Owen, in turn, kept the banter going with his observations on Able's cooking skill, or, as he put it, the old driver's "pot whompin'."

"I never had a wagon stop that quick," said Amos shaking his head in amazement. "We both almost came over the footboard on our heads. It's a good thing we've got the team we do. Most would've kept on goin' and we would've had a lot of busted harness besides that tongue to worry about."

"But what pot-bottom scum started the shootin'?" asked Able.

"No idea," said Owen shaking his head. "There wasn't any sign over there except some trampled grass. I'd say there was only one. And not a very good shot at that."

"Is Jane all right?" asked Amos.

"Fine," Able assured him, "I jest told her to stay put 'til we sang out that it was clear."

"I guess we could stand here all day wonderin' who it was, but that ain't goin' to fix that tongue," said Amos.

"Remember that cowpoke we talked to yesterday, Amos?" asked Owen. "He said something about a town along this trail. Last Chance, I believe he called it."

"That's right," brightened Amos, "from what he was sayin' it should be within an easy ride. By golly, that might be jest what we need."

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"Ain't much of a name fer a town," snorted Able. "Probably jest a saloon fer drovers."

"If it's a stage stop like he said, we ought to be able to make do though," said Amos hopefully, "but right now we might as well make camp because we sure ain't goin' any further today."

Hours later as the three men settled down around a cheery fire, Jane Carpenter was pouring coffee and thinking about the coming break in the long weeks of monotonous wagon travel. "Pa, there's no other way. I say we all go to this town. What's the name? Last Chance?"

Amos was sorting out the possibilities, or at least trying to, but the enthusiasm of his daughter was eliminating all options except the one that had them all going on the excursion for the repair of the broken wagon tongue. "Well, I suppose we have all been gettin' a little trail sore. Might be interestin' fer us to see the sights of this town. Able, yuh want to join us?"

"If the thing's goin' to be fixed right, I 'spose I best go along."

"Might be they'll have a cafe there and we can all get a good square meal," drawled Owen with an innocent and serious look at Able.

The weathered old driver squinted at him and "harrumphed" in reply.

As they ate, the four travelers found themselves gathering a bit closer to the fire. Their journey from the Platte River, begun in the last days of summer, had taken them well into the fall and the chill night air made a coat feel welcome after the sun disappeared. The trail they were following was carrying them ever closer to the Colorado Mountains and their immediate goal, which was Denver. Although they had made a deep swing to the south as they came out of Wyoming so Amos could talk to a man in Idalia who had once offered to buy the Carpenter freight yard, they were now on a direct line into Denver.

Behind them they had left a town and countryside torn and weakened by the violence of a war between ranchers and a marauding band of cattle rustlers. The long simmering trouble had come to a quick and violent end when Owen Bannack had ridden into the barren little town and hanged one of the gang members from the sign over the saloon.

As they learned later, Bannack had been on the man's trail for months after the outlaw had killed Bannack's wife and children. The justice had been vigilante style, swift and certain.

In rapid fire order after that, there had been more raids and killings. It had ended when the gang leader was blasted out of his fortress in the saloon into the waiting rope of Bannack who persuaded him to

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reveal the whereabouts of yet another of the men Bannack was pursuing. It was Colorado, so the tall vigilance committeeman had joined the Carpenters for the trip southwest.

An oncoming railroad line from Nebraska had spelled doom for Amos' Wyoming freight business and that coupled with a desire to leave the Wyoming troubles behind brought the freighter to his decision to start anew in the booming mountain mining areas of Colorado. He had formed a close tie to Owen Bannack and was glad to have him along. The same held true for his daughter, Jane.

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The freight wagon halted at the top of the grass-covered hill and Owen, on his big chestnut horse, Cocoa, drew up even with the driver's box. "Doesn't look like much," he observed.

Able, who had refused to squeeze onto the narrow seat with Amos and Jane, rode a big black horse which seemed upset and uncomfortable at being pressed into service as a mere riding pony. "What'd yuh expect? Brick buildin's and a herd of people?" growled Able, holding tight to the reins he had rigged to the heavy halter.

"I'll settle for one good, unbusted wagon tongue, no matter how mangy the town looks," offered Amos from the driver's seat on the wagon.

"That long building is a store. I know it is," declared Jane.

"Only way to find out is go have a look," said Amos as he gently snapped he long reins, starting the team down the slope of the long hill.

The corral for the stagecoach horses was a continuous series of split rails laid on gawky jacklegs. The fact that all the rails were in place suggested that the operator of the station was either a careful attendant or that he disliked rounding up straying animals.

Planted on the uphill side of the corral was a weathered wooden house whose one window was covered with a sagging piece of gray canvas. The canvas had once been splashed over with white paint, but the wind had wrinkled and shaken the little flap until the color showed only in a few long irregular creases. The same painter had also applied his art to the ill-fitting door of the house but with only moderate success.

Attached to the corral side of the house was a three-sided working area, apparently used for harnessing the teams. The roof of the house had been extended to cover the space, making the arrangement look to the entire world as though a wall of the living quarters had simply fallen down.

Parked alongside the house was the skeleton remainder of a spring wagon. Both rear wheels had been removed and one side of the box had been stripped away. A healthy growth of tall grass and weeds had inherited the remains and established itself around the front wheels and blocks of wood, which supported the bare rear wheel spindles.

Propped against the wall near the dilapidated wagon was an assortment of wheels, planks, springs, and braces. The forlorn collection of parts and pieces was mute evidence of the effects of miles and miles of rough roads on stagecoaches and other wheeled vehicles. It was also

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an invitation to the anxious eyes of Amos Carpenter who pulled his own big wagon to a halt near the way station.

As Amos climbed down one side and Jane scrambled over the wheel on the other, they were greeted with a loud, "Howdy folks."

The speaker was a stout man in baggy blue denim overalls. The sleeves of his faded red long handles were rolled up over his elbows and his bare arms were smudged with grease and dirt. As an echo to his greeting he continued talking without waiting for any word from them. "Welcome to the Last Chance station. Isn't much but it's all we got. What can I do fer yuh?"

Before Amos could utter a sound, the round friendly face continued smiling and talking, "Can't offer yuh my hand. I've been in there oilin' harness, and, by jingo, that's a chore. But I can see that yuhr riggin's sure been tended proper so yuh knows what a job I have. I'll tell yuh fer sure some of those other station keepers must never oil a strap. It comes in here dry, jest dry. I am not one to say much, but dry'll ruin good harness quicker'n anythin'. Only thing that's worse is poor rivetin' and sloppy lacin'. Soon's I get finished oilin' I got some of that to do. Course I can see that yuh're wagon folks so yuh know jest what I'm sayin'."

Amos and Jane exchanged glances, but neither knew exactly how to interrupt the man long enough to even acknowledge his greeting. Owen and Able had ridden up and they sat listening to the flood of talk about oiling and repairing harness. Owen was as much at a loss as Amos and Jane, but, strangely, Able was not. He simply plowed right in. "Oilin' are yuh. If a man's oilin' that's a sure sign he knows somethin' about leather."

Sliding off his big wagon horse mount, Able kept right on talking, and "If they's anything worse 'n dry harness, it's poor hub greasin'." Jerking his thumb over his shoulder at Owen, Able continued, "This here's one that proves it. His axles ain't nuthin' but an ear-tearin' squeak. I've told him time and time again about greasin', but I think his hearin's as dry as his hubs."

Ignoring the others, the station keeper and Able rattled on about wagon and harness maintenance. Owen was struggling against open laughter and Jane stood wide-eyed, as amazed at Able as at the man in the blue overalls. Amos scratched his head in wonder, but finally shrugged and began filling the large pipe bowl which hung at the end of a long curving stem.

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As he fired the tobacco, Amos finally looked at Jane and Owen through a blue cloud of smoke, "It might be that Jane was right. That may be a store over yonder. Owen, if yuh wouldn't mind lookin' after her, the two of yuh could amble on over and see what they got that we need and can afford. I'll stay here and, soon as those two run down a bit, see if maybe we can oil up a wagon tongue."

As they strolled toward what they guessed was a general store, Jane joined Owen in a great laugh. "All the years I've known Able, I've never heard him go on so. It's almost like he had found a long lost brother."

"If there's a wagon tongue in the county, I'll bet Able can get it," laughed Owen as he swung open the door of the store.

The interior of the general store was filled with the strong smell of freshly ground coffee. The shelves behind the one long counter were stacked with an odd assortment of dry goods including endless stacks of dark blue shirts and work clothing. In front of the counter were barrels of crackers and hard biscuits. Alongside them was a smaller keg of pickles and on the counter was a wheel of yellow cheese. There were the usual sacks of dry beans, flour sugar and salt.

Along the back wall was a collection of shovels, pickaxes, and other hand tools together with an array of nails and other small items of hardware. On the wall opposite the counter were two racks of women's dresses and a modest offering of related clothing. The few pairs of side-button shoes and giant ribbon bedecked hats were faded and dusty.

As they had, for the many women who had preceded her, the dresses proved to be a magnet for Jane. She was instantly drawn to them. While Owen examined a glistening new saddle, she chatted gaily with the balding storekeeper who joined her and watched while she selected one after another to hold up under chin before the long speckled mirror.

At the end of the counter and near the rear of the store there was a wide doorway which led to a small barroom. Through it came occasional bursts of hoarse laughter and loud snatches of talk. The storeclerk, who apparently doubled as barkeeper, cast quick nervous glances at the door at each explosion of noise.

Suddenly the doorway was filled with a burly man wearing a worn and frayed blue coat which, in past days, might have been part of a cavalry uniform. He wore a water-stained, formless hat pulled low over his forehead and strapped tight against his thigh was a well-oiled forty-four revolver.

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"Hey there, four eyes," he called at the spectacled storekeeper. "My poor old glass is bone dry. Me and Wilts is dyin' of thirst while yuh're in here gapin' at the wimen."

As he spoke, his eyes fell on Jane. He shoved his floppy hat back and stared at her. "But seein' what's got yuhr attention I can't say's I blame yuh." He sauntered into the store to the dress rack. He pulled a dress off the rack and held it out toward her. "Why don't yuh jest try this one on fer old Karp. Then maybe yuh'd come into the bar an I'd buy yuh a drink."

He had not seen Owen when he entered the store, but the tall man brought him up short, "Put the dress down and turn around."

The man did just as he was ordered, but his movement was slow, deliberate and menacing. He stood with his feet wide apart and his hand curling close to the butt of his revolver. "Lookee here," he mocked, "the little dame's got herself a sassy friend."

The man was a bully who was accustomed to standing off and threatening his victims. He was totally unprepared for an Owen Bannack.

As he fastened the man with his level gray eyes, Owen said nothing and without hesitation walked straight at the other whose whiskey-soaked mind was slow to comprehend what was happening. If he had stopped to argue or had faltered in any way, Karp would have been able to sort out the situation and make a threat. As it was, the man barely had time to open his mouth before Owen was less than two feet away staring down at him.

"I think you had better go back and join your friend," said Owen quietly, "and I think you should do it now."

Karp's eyes jerked around and past Owen and he suddenly found his voice, "Step back big man or I'll drill yuh a new belly button." Again his glance went past Owen to something back near the barroom door.

Without waiting for the situation to develop further, Owen's hand shot out like a bolt of lightning and he seized the lapels of Karp's coat. With a blur of motion he swung the man's body and whirled with it. In the twinkle of an eye Karp's back was to the barroom door and Owen stood facing the startled Wilts who was blinking in the doorway with his gun still in its holster.

Karp clawed for his six guns but even as his fingers managed to touch the butt, Owen's big fist closed over Karp's hand. Owen's arm muscles stood out against his shirt and Karp cried out in pain, "Let go! Yuh're breakin' my hand."

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He struggled and tried to pull away but the grip of one hand on his coat and the iron lock on his other made the effort useless. He cried out again, "Kill 'im, Wilts. Damn yuh, kill 'im."

Owen's big hand tightened more. "Tell your friend to step back into the bar."

The pain must have been intense because it had the desired effect. "Okay, jest ease up." Then louder, "Wilts, yuh damn weasel, get outa here. Hurry!"

As the bewildered Wilts disappeared, the bones in Karp's hand cracked with a brittle snap. The man screamed in pain and would have gone to his knees when Owen released his grip had it not been for the hold Owen kept on his lapels. Then, holding him by his jacket, Owen propelled Karp backward to the door of the bar. Quietly he said, "If you're still around here in one minute, I'll have a go at your other hand."

With that Owen released the man who doubled his body over his crippled hand and rushed into the bar. There were a few loud exchanges between Karp and Wilts, a banging door rear door followed by the sound of horses being spurred away from the building.

Turning, Owen saw that Jane had been shaken by the events and he walked over to her. "Want to leave?"

"No," she finally answered. Then getting a quick hold on herself, she added, "I'm all right, but you could have been killed."

Dismissing it, he shook his head, "Just a couple of cheap gunnies. I don't think there was any real danger." Changing the subject, he reminded her, "I believe Able's storehouse needs some attention and I know Amos needs pipe tobacco. Feel up to it?"

The brown eyes softened at him and she touched his arm in thanks and quickly turned to the storekeeper. "I'm afraid the dresses wouldn't fit very well with our freight wagons, but we do need some provisions."

The clerk was clearly pleased to be rid of his bar customers and he thanked Owen for what he had done. "Those were some of the worst I've had in here for a long time," he sighed. "They've been hanging around here for almost three days. As a matter of fact, just before your wagon pulled into the station, there were three of them. The one who had been bragging that he had been a sheriff in Wyoming left the minute the two of you started across the road. I thought it was a bit strange since he seemed to be with the others. It almost seemed that he was trying to avoid you."

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The storekeeper's words trailed off as he began scanning the list that Jane had handed him. He didn't notice the quick exchange of glances between Owen and Jane nor the worried look that clouded her face.

Later, as Jane busied herself storing the provisions in the wagon, Owen found Amos and Able finishing the job of modifying the tongue of the spring wagon to fit the heavier role it would play as part of their rigging. As Able and the station keeper chattered over the work, Owen sketched the events in the store, concluding with his information that somehow Jake Ritter had found his way to the Last Chance bar.

Amos scowled with suspicion, "How in blazes do yuh suppose he ended up here of all places?"

Owen shrugged, "It's too remote a chance to be a coincidence and I'll have to admit that I don't like the looks of it. Until we learn more about this, we'd do well to keep our eyes open."

"Yuh suppose he's the one that was usin' us fer targets yesterday?" wondered Amos.

"No way of knowin' but if I had to bet, I'd probably say that Ritter's our man."

Both men remembered how Jake Ritter, who had been a self-proclaimed sheriff in the town of Frailey, had also been the right-hand man of the outlaw chief, Mead. At the very end of the bloody events in Wyoming, Ritter had fled only minutes ahead of the arrival of the ranchers and left Mead to face them alone. The man's presence in Last Chance was a mystery, which added a dark and foreboding note to their journey.

They loaded the replacement tongue and managed to slip in a word of thanks to the still-talking station keeper, as they rolled out of the little settlement and back toward the broken wagon. Owen related the developments to Able as they rode along ahead of the wagon. The old driver's reaction to the information about Ritter was to throw a sharp quick glance at Jane and Amos sitting on the seat in the driver's box. "She know it was Ritter?" he asked.

"I'm afraid so, but it's just as well. There really isn't any point in trying to keep it from her, and since she stands a chance of being injured as well as any of us, it'd be unfair not to let her in on everything we know."

Able looked again at the wagon, hoping that his long greener was secure where he had stowed it behind the seat. "It don't make sense, Owen. We're a hundred miles south of the trail from Frailey to Denver.

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Last Chance isn't even a cow speck out here on the prairie. It's almost like he was waitin' fer us."

"I have to agree with all that, Able, but all we have are questions without answers."

"Even if he was roostin' here, we don't know why. When he left Frailey he was on the run. It jest don't figure that he would go to the trouble to track us down. We ain't got anythin' he wants do we?"

"I'm not sure, Able," said Owen absently.

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"Damn yuh, Ritter, jest double damn yuh," snarled Karp who was fussing with the crude splint and bandage on his right hand.

"Nobody told yuh to go messin' with that crowd," shot back Ritter as he eased himself down to the ground and leaned back against an embankment.

"Wilts, bring that bottle," ordered Karp. "Yuh didn't tell me about that Bannack," he complained to Ritter.

"If yuh had jest stayed outa their way, we'd been all set. We had 'em spotted and could've tailed along waitin fer a our chance."

"What makes yuh so all fired sure they got that paper?" asked Wilts, handing a bottle of whiskey to Karp who held it for a moment then thrust it back in Wilts' face.

"Open it yuh damn soapweed. My hand's useless."

Wilts took the bottle and worked the cork with his fingers as he looked at Ritter, waiting for an answer.

"I ain't sure," answered Ritter. "But it's the only chance we got of laying hold of that money. That banker at the Miners Federated says he needs the book and the number before he'll release anything from the account. When Mead and me put all our money from them rustled cows in that Denver bank, I trusted him with the account business. Like I told yuh, the other jasper on the account is still up in the mountains and hasn't heard about Mead gettin' hissself strung up. If we can get that account number and get to the bank, we got a good chance of gettin' the whole account without sharin' it with some damn pine needle from the mountains. It'll be easy pickin's."

"Easy pickin's yuh say, but yuh ain't got a busted hand," complained Karp bitterly. "And yuh've had us ridin' these trails and askin' questions fer weeks to locate that outfit. All the pickin's I got so far is saddle blisters and a busted hand."

"Cut the bawlin' about yuhr hand," sneered Ritter. "A few thousand dollars'll fix lots of hands."

"Why didn't yuh run the account yuhrself instead of trustin' that Mead feller?" asked Wilts.

"I was too busy with the whole operation," bragged Ritter.

"That fool Mead thought he was pullin' a shady on me by puttin' it in an account with his pal, Serill. Well, after that polecat, Mead, got hissself hung, there was nuthin' left to do but to try and save that fund." Ritter paused and took a pull from Karp's bottle. "The Denver banker

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sent a telegram to the banker in Terwell and found out the account paper wasn't in any of Mead's stuff so somebody has it. Then I found out that freighter, Carpenter, was headin' fer Denver. It stands to reason he's got it and is goin' to try to collect hisself."

"I suppose they offered that Bannack somethin' to throw in with 'em," speculated Wilts.

"Might be," answered Ritter, "but I think it's more likely that he's on the trail of Serill, Mead's crony. Seems that Bannack's hooked up with some vigilante committee in Montana, because Serill killed some of Bannack's folks. Anyhow he's probably jest taggin' along with Carpenter."

The word "vigilante" brought Wilts upright and even arrested Karp's moaning about his hand. Quick and certain hanging by aroused citizens was more feared by outlaws than any other fact of their lives.

"Paper or no paper, I don't need no fuss with a damn vigilante," cried out Wilts, "And yuh say this Bannack hanged the man yuh had workin' fer yuh. What was his name? Mead?"

"That's what I hear," said Ritter, "but all that's past. Our problem here is that since Karp tangled with Bannack, they probably talked to the barkeep and figured out that somethin's up. The question now is how do we get that damn paper."

"I fer one say we head back to Denver," put in Karp, "I've got to get to a sawbones with this hand 'er it'll set crooked."

"Sounds like the thing to do," agreed Wilts, "besides, I don't hold with the notion of ridin' into any camp if they know I'm comin', 'specially if one of 'em is a vigilante."

"Yuh may be right," agreed Ritter. "Our best bet might be to hole up in Denver and jest make certain sure they don't get to that bank before we have a little powwow with 'em."

The distance between the truth and Jake Ritter's version of the facts was a chasm. From the bare facts of money stashed in a Denver bank by a rustler, he had managed to contrive a false story about "his" gang and "his" money, but it was sufficiently plausible for him to have been able to enlist Karp and Wilts in helping him locate the Carpenters.

Ritter now saw his problem as being centered on the bankbook. His defective understanding of events, his desperate flight from the ranchers, and his faulty logic persuaded him that it was in Amos Carpenter's hands. Ritter had reached that conclusion by assuming that all men were motivated by the same greed that directed his own life.

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Ritter remembered Owen Bannack's gun at his throat when Bannack had caught him in the act of preparing to slap information out of Jane Carpenter. That memory was not a small factor in causing him to agree to wait until they got to Denver to try for the book. There he and his helpers might catch the Carpenters alone.

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The two wagons had rolled westward for days through cold drizzle, which seemed to have settled over the world permanently. The broad backs of the giant horses were constantly wet and steaming. The ground became mushy and the road itself was impassable. They traveled on the prairie grass, but even then the wheels of the heavy wagons sank deep into the sod.

They were forced to halt often to rest the teams. Whenever they stopped there was nothing to do except sit under their slickers and shiver.

The four of them were all weary from struggling against the wet, which made every chore more difficult. It was harder to feed grain to the horses, it was almost impossible to start a fire and it was frustrating to heat food. In addition to the usual and expected trials of wet weather, they felt the need to maintain a constant vigil against trouble from Ritter and his companions.

As they sat under the shelter of one of the wagons eating their evening meal of semi-warm beans, they were despairing of ever seeing clear weather again. "How often is it like this around here?" asked Jane of no one in particular.

"Oh, it'll clear," said Amos. "We jest hit a little spell of it and it's that time of the year."

A wisp of breeze had been toying with the little fire and Able sensed that it had become stronger in the last hour. "There's a change blowin' up right now," he observed.

"You guarantee that?" asked Owen.

"If yuh can guarantee me that a tomcat won't have kittens, I can guarantee clear weather tomorrow," answered Able.

They pondered that for a while, finished eating and kept the fire going until their little supply of wood was burned down to the stack left for breakfast. The weather did seem to be changing. The wind held steady from the northwest and when they turned in, it was with extra blankets.

At first light, they turned out to what promised to be a clear sky. Chores were done with a brisker step in the chill air, the horses were a bit frisky, and the coffee smelled more fragrant than usual. The oatmeal even tasted good to the four people and to Jane's dog, Wink.

"Yuh'd think that scoundrel could catch his own breakfast instead of takin' the food out of our mouths," said Able, eyeing the dog who was leaping about anxious to be rolling.

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"I think he likes riding on the wagon more than eating," laughed Owen.

"We might even let 'im try drivin' one. Couldn't hit more bumps than some people I know." Able threw Owen a pointed look.

"Someone has to mind the reins while others doze off," teased Owen. "Those bumps just seem worse when you're sleepin'."

Able "harrumphed," and scratched the last bit of his oatmeal onto Wink's pan.

The four rotated riding and driving and today it was Jane's turn to ride with Owen on the lead wagon. By the time the team was in the traces and camp was broken, the travelers found themselves under a clear bright blue sky from one horizon to another. The sun was sliding up on their backs as the wagons pulled to the top of the first hill above their campsite.

Suddenly, there before them were the mountains. The clouds, which had made them miserable for days, had given the mountains their first heavy dusting of snow. With the first light of the sun, the peaks fairly glistened. The snow line ended at the foot of the Front Range. Below it the frost covered grass swept away toward the plains like a sparkling mat which extended up to the wheels of the wagon.

Jane, who had only heard of the awesome Rockies, was speechless. No painter had ever or ever could fully capture the scene. Without thinking, she grasped Owen's arm and stared at the panorama. "It's... why...I never...," she stammered.

"No need to talk," he said quietly, "there are no words for it."

Amos and Able in the second wagon had pulled up alongside and the sight, too, took them. No one spoke for a very long time. Finally one of the horses gave a mighty shake of his great body. It served to rouse those on the wagons and, almost as if they were reluctant to break the spell, they moved the wagons forward toward the cluster of buildings that was Denver.



Anse Heely was busy with the thick, heavy ledger and had been struggling with a long column of ink scrawled figures when Miss Biwell appeared at his desk. He did not see her at first and it was only after she cleared her throat and tentatively murmured, "Mr. Heely?" That he looked up. Her upswept hair piled on her long face combined with small rimless glasses to give her a severe look that belied the deferential tone she used with her employer, "A Mister Serill is asking to see you, sir."

"Serill?" frowned Heely. "Did he say what it was about?"

"Not exactly. He mentioned the name Mead. I believe that's the man in Wyoming you sent the wire about."

Remembrance eased the banker's frown. "Oh, yes. That's the account the other man was asking about a few weeks ago. What was his name? Ritter, I believe." Heely leaned back and scratched his thick mane of iron gray hair. He pulled a large silver watch from his vest pocket, snapped the lid open, closed it and returned it.

"It's close to closing time, but I suppose I have to see him. Would you please bring me the deposit account file. I believe it's under the names Mead and Serill."

As Miss Biwell nodded her understanding and turned to leave the office, he added as an afterthought, "And would you hold the payment books open for a few minutes, Miss Biwell. I have a notion that I may be wanting you to process a withdrawal before we close them tonight."

As Heely sat waiting for his customer, he shuffled through a stack of miscellaneous papers on a side table finally pulling out a single sheet which he placed in the middle of his wide green ink blotter. Beside it he placed a clean sheet of paper and, with a long black pen, began writing. He had written no more than two lines before the purring voice called his name, "Heely?"

Heely looked up into the face of Pane Serill. A black felt cap was pulled low over the dark eyes that stared from the unshaven face. The straight thin lips were set in a grim line below a mustache which seemed at first glance to be twisted at a grotesque downward slant. There was a deep scar above the corner of his lip and the fact that no facial hair grew there caused the mustache

The man wore a six-gun tied low and tight against the dirty striped trousers which were pulled over the tops of high black boots. On the side opposite the gun dangled a knife scabbard as long as his forearm.

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The leather was decorated with gaudy tin flowers that stood out against the dark grease-stained leather.

"Yes. Please have a seat Mister Serill," Heely said, indicating a nearby chair covered with a black steer hide.

Serill accepted the offer. As his guest took the two steps to the chair, Heely noticed how short the man was. Yet his glimpse of Serill's face was enough to insure that the banker would not find any reason to mention the man's size.

"It's been quite a time since you've been in. At least three or four months. What can I do for you?"

"I need some money," said Serill, "a thousand should do."

"I assume it was your intention to draw that from your joint account with Mister Mead?"

"I ain't got any other account here, Heely."

"Yes. Quite so. We can accommodate you, of course. However, I'm afraid that in this instance it will be necessary for you to sign a statement that you are the survivor..."

"Survivor?" interrupted Serill, his voice cutting like a knife into Heely's words.

"Why, yes. Mister Mead is dead. I had assumed you knew about it."

"Mead, dead?" snapped Serill. "How?"

"I don't know all the details, but I have a telegram here from a Sheriff Hale who says that Mister Mead was hanged almost two months ago."

"Hanged?" spat out Serill, leaping from his chair. "How in bright blue Hell do yuh know that?"

"I don't know it for an absolute fact. However, that seems to be the only conclusion to draw from the Sheriff's somewhat strange expression." Heely picked up the telegram and read, "F. Mead died September 15 this year from rope sickness."

"Lemme see that," snarled Serill, ripping the paper from the banker's hand. He studied it for a few minutes, his lips forming the words as he struggled to read. "What's this about, 'No bank papers found?'"

"That's the Sheriff's reply to my request. You see, Mister Serill, another man was in here a few weeks ago asking about the money in your account. He said he was an associate of Mead's. He told me that the man had died and that he was to collect the funds from the account. I, of course, asked for verification of Mister Mead's death and for some

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evidence of his authority to close the account. Since the man had no authority and no account book we did not pay him any money. I attempted to confirm his story by sending a telegram to Terwell. The answer is what you have in your hand. The man who had been in here claiming the account left saying he would return with the account number and book."

"What was his name?" asked Serill who seemed to have recovered from his surprise over Mead's death.

"Ritter, I believe it was." He looked up at Miss Biwell as she laid a yellow file on his desk. "Wasn't that the name?"

"That's correct, sir. I looked at my note. It was a Mister J. Ritter. He said he was a law officer from Wyoming."

Serill's black moustache twisted with contempt. "So Jake came scootin' in here to help himself?" He spoke more to himself than to the banker or the cashier. As if making a decision, he looked hard at Heely. "I'll jest close the account, Heely."

The banker showed no surprise. In fact he seemed to be expecting Serill's reaction. "Of course, Mister Serill. As I started to say a moment ago, I will need your signature on a declaration that you are the survivor of the two on the joint account."

"Sure, sure. I'll sign," waved Serill impatiently. "I'll take it in cash."

After writing for a few moments, the banker laid the sheet in front of Serill who made no attempt to read the lines of neat handwritten text. Heely dabbed a long wooden-handled pen in the inkwell and carefully offered it to Serill, trying to prevent any drops from falling on the paper.

The unkempt little man snatched the pen from Heely who frowned at the blot which formed as Serill pressed the point against the paper and scratched an illegible signature. The banker took the document, turned it over on his blotter, deftly slipped it into the file, which he handed to his waiting cashier. "Miss Biwell will you please prepare the close-out of Mister Serill's account?"

Heely turned his attention to Serill and observed, "I believe there's quite a sum coming to you. It's getting late and since most everything is closed for the night, we would be happy to hold your cash in the vault if you wish."

Serill hesitated as if he were suspicious of the offer, but finally, accepted. "Yuh may have a point," he muttered. "ain't no sense in carryin' that kinda stash around."

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"Fine, I'll have Miss Biwell prepare a receipt. We open at eight o'clock sharp and you can pick up your money any time after that."

Miss Biwell returned with a thick stack of bills which she counted out on the desk under Serill's watchful eye. "...five thousand seven hundred, five thousand eight hundred, twenty, forty, sixty, five, six, seven dollars and twenty-five cents. That's five thousand eight hundred sixty seven dollars and twenty five cents," she announced.

"I'll jest take the hard stuff," said Serill snatching the three twenty dollar gold pieces and the quarter off the stack of bills.

A receipt was prepared and much to the relief of both the cashier and the banker, Serill was through the door and out of the bank.

"I must say, sir, I'm glad to see him leave," sighed Miss Biwell.

"Amen to that," agreed Heely.

"Where ever did such a person get that much money I wonder."

"I'm not quite certain that I want to know the answer to that," mused the banker as he closed the door of the vault and spun the chrome wheel until it clicked an end to the bank's operation for the day.

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The early morning sun streamed between the brick buildings which lined Denver's Larimer Street and was welcomed by the merchants and tradesmen who were opening their doors for morning business. A few windows were being wiped clean, boxes of goods were being carried out and arranged on the wide boardwalks, and sleepy boys were sweeping dirt out of stores and back into the streets.

At one store, however, the atmosphere was quite different. Already there was horse and wagon traffic clustering in front of Prospector's General. Men anxious to get their supplies loaded so that they could get an early start for the gold camps passed in and out of the wide doors carrying sacks and boxes. They exchanged loud boisterous greetings, asking one another which diggings they were bound for. Some gathered in small groups laughing and trading gossip about events and about rumored strikes.

Amos Carpenter stood off to one side talking with two sturdy teamsters who were loading a cargo of nail kegs, ropes, pickaxes, and shovels. As he talked, Amos gave the men a hand with their work by passing up miscellaneous boxes and odds and ends of cargo.

"Yuh'll do jest fine as long as yuh make 'em pay on delivery," advised one. "Don't give none of 'em credit fer even a few days. Chances are yuh won't ever see 'em again."

"If yuh came to do freightin', do freightin'," said the other as he spat at a knothole in the boards of the loading dock. "If yuh stake 'em, it won't be long before yuh wind up sellin' yuhr horses and wagons to stay alive."

"Whatever yuh do, don't buy nuthin' up in the camps. It'll be the stuff yuh hauled up there and yuh'll pay a mountain high price fer it," advised the first man. "Things is too high here in Denver, but up in those shack stores, it costs a good man's life fer an egg and yuh have to throw in yuhr hat fer the bacon."

Finished with the loading, the wagoneer climbed up on the high seat and prepared to roll away. The driver tossed down one further bit of advice, "Gold Hill ain't got any freight service to speak of and yuh might do all right by doin' some haulin' up that way. Only one thing though. That's a pretty rough crowd and there's been some trouble with claim bustin' and it might get worse."

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With that the two waved their thanks to Amos and the wagon rattled away from the store. Amos left the loading dock and went inside the store to search for Able.

He found him in conversation with a driver who stood with a whip coiled over one shoulder while he buckled a scarred pair of leather cuffs onto his wrists. "Yuh jest follow the damn creek," he was saying. "There ain't no way to get out of it until yuh get to the them bottoms and in about two miles yuh're right at the turn off."

"Road tolerable fer our wagons?" asked Able.

"If I can whip an eight teamer up it loaded with them big wheels and mine winches, yuh know it's passable," answered the man as he picked up a rifle and prepared to leave. He paused for a moment and turned back to Able. "One thing, old timer, keep yuhr eyes peeled and watch yuhr up trail and most of all watch yuhr back trail, especially if yuh got anything in yuhr load worth havin'."

Able and Amos stood looking at his retreating figure and wondered how to read what seemed to be a strongly charged warning. Their reflections were interrupted by a store clerk who stepped over. "Can I help yuh, gents?" he asked, hands on aproned hips.

"I hope yuh can," answered Amos extending his hand. "Name's Carpenter, Amos Carpenter, and this is my driver, Able. We're planning on doin' some haulin' between here and Gold Hill. I been told that no one's been workin' that route regular like so I thought it might be worth a try."

The clerk's friendly smile drooped a bit and he cocked his head at them as he asked, "Ever do any freightin' around here before?"

"Not a bit. We jest pulled in from Wyomin' and we been talkin' around tryin' to get a line on things."

"Well, I don't want to be the one to discourage yuh," drawled the storeclerk, "but that may not be the easiest run in the area. It's true that no one's been goin' up there much and it might be a money maker, but there's been claim trouble and some killings. That's why most of the drays have been stayin' away."

"They been devilin' the wagons?" asked Able.

"From what I hear one load disappeared while it sat overnight. There've been other drivers shot at and some teams stole."

"Don't make no sense to me," scowled Able. "What're they doin' fer supplies?"

"There is one outfit that makes a run up there," said the clerk. "From what I hear it ain't a regular run and the man that owns the

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wagons is in cahoots with the camp store. I don't have the facts on it, but I hear tell he's the one that keeps down the interest in haulin' in that whole area."

They talked a while longer and the store man seemed to take a liking to Amos and the crusty old Able. The talk returned to Gold Hill and sensing the disappointment in Amos, who was anxious to get his freight business going, the clerk scratched his rumpled hair as a speculative look spread across his face.

"Yuh know, there may somethin' worth thinkin' about up there after all. A few miles this side of Gold Hill there's a little place called Champa. It ain't much, but I heard a few days ago that they found some color right close. There's only a few buildin's, but I know a man there name of Doler. Milt Doler. He was in here some time back talkin' about openin' a camp store."

The more he thought about it, the more the clerk seemed to like the idea. "Yessir. Milt Doler is yuhr man. I'm near certain that he ain't had no love for that Gold Hill crowd and would like to get somethin' goin' in his own place."

He ushered the two wagon men back to a rolltop desk and introduced them to the proprietor of Prospector's General. The owner shared his clerk's enthusiasm for the idea and the conversation soon turned to accounts, credit, schedules, and types of goods which would be best suited to their first loads. The owner explained to them that some goods could be obtained in Boulder and that still other materials mostly came from Denver. It was his view that the essentials they would need to start could be found in his Boulder store. It was clear that a new business venture was underway.

Owen Bannack found Able examining some new harness while Amos continued his dealing with the storeowner. Able looped a trace line back over its wall hook and asked, "Finish yuhr business?"

"Depends on what business you're asking about." Owen's indirect answer ruffled the old driver.

"Whatever damn business it was that yuh found to be so all fired important when we started rearrangin' the load, Mister High Hat."

"Oh, that business," said Owen with mock gravity. "Yep, I finished it all up. It was probably just about the time you finished hefting those boxes around."

Able glowered at him and grumpled something unintelligible as he returned to his examination of the new harness. At that moment Jane Carpenter joined them.

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"Good morning," Owen smiled. "Town life must agree with you. The day's half over and you've been sleeping while Able and I've been working like slaves rearranging the loads."

Able gave him a very loud "harrumph" for his teasing lie and moved off to examine some wagon box braces.

"I never would have believed there were so many stores in one place," Jane said. "I looked in so many windows that I lost count."

"Did you buy anything?" asked Owen.

"Oh, no," she answered quickly. "I didn't even go inside, I was just looking."

"They don't charge for going in the front door and walking around," he laughed. Owen knew that she had very little if any money and that her wardrobe was limited to worn work clothes which were extensively patched and mended. Yet he made no mention of that nor did he pursue the subject of shopping because he knew it could be a great embarrassment to her.

On his way to Prospectors' General, Owen had seen her across the street staring wistfully into the window of a dry goods store. He had waited until she passed on down the block before going to see for himself what had captured her attention. It was a bolt of scarlet wool. It was spectacular and looked as soft as a puffy red cloud at sunset, and its price placed it as far from her reach as the sky.

As they shuffled along looking at the mining camp supplies, they chatted idly about the idea of freighting in the rugged mountain country. Jane was excited about the prospect, but a bit apprehensive because of the many uncertainties.

"Do you suppose they get as much snow as Able says?" she wondered.

"I expect that there'll be plenty, but it doesn't snow anywhere in the world as much as Able's been claiming for the mountains," he smiled.

"Do you think they'll pay for supplies with actual gold dust?"

"That seems to be a pretty generally accepted way of operating. I expect that you'll have to be on the lookout for fool's gold though."

"Fool's gold?" she asked.

"It's gold colored material," he explained, "that usually is even brighter than gold. Most often you see it in little flakes and compared to gold there's an awful lot of it around, but it's worthless."

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"Then how do you tell the difference?" She seemed genuinely alarmed by the thought of being paid with the worthless glitter of the fool's gold he had described.

"Once you've seen real gold dust, you'll never have to worry about being taken in. Come on, I'll show you." He led the way to the counter of the store. The clerk who had been talking with Amos and the owner came over to them. Owen introduced her and explained that she had never seen any gold dust. The man nodded his understanding and went to the big iron safe and returned with a small leather pouch.

"Hold out yuhr hand," he said.

Into her palm he poured a generous pinch of what looked like sand. Its deep rich gold color spoke volumes. She poked at it with her finger. "So that's the stuff that's building all these brick stores and bringing all these people from everywhere," she said.

"That's the stuff," the clerk assured her. "Of course, it isn't always just like that. Sometimes yuh see it as little nuggets or more coarse than this, but once yuh see it and get the feel for it, there's no mistaking it fer somethin' else."

Able had wandered over and joined them. "May be purty, but yuh can't eat it," was his comment.

"True enough," agreed the storeman, "but it'll sure enough buy anything to eat that yuh want." He then went on to explain some of the accepted values. So much for a pack mule, so much for a grubstake, so much for a meal, and so much for anything that a miner would ever purchase.

They were quickly learning the terms of the mining life into which they were moving. Although hard work and simple living were second nature to them, there were aspects of the lives of miners that were still unfamiliar and alien. They would come to learn about the staking of claims, the myths about mother lodes, and the ways of looking for color. They would also perhaps learn more about human nature than they had known before.

As they stood on the walkway outside the store, Amos looked at Owen and without asking a direct question said, "Haven't seen yuh since early on today."

Owen looked at him for a moment. "You been asking around about Gold Hill?"

"Able and I both did some talkin' around and that seems like the best bet fer us. The folks here have given me a good lead on a man

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named Dolar who wants to open a store near there. The sooner we get headed up that way, the sooner we can find out if that's the thing to do."

Owen looked at Amos, at Able and then at Jane before he spoke. "I've got some business up there myself. If you wouldn't mind the company, I might just ride along."

Amos' wide smile was itself an answer. "Glad to have yuh," he said warmly.

Looking at the old wagon driver, Owen said, "Besides I might be able to give some of you a few pointers on mountain drivin'."

Able jerked at the brim of his tattered hat, "P'inters yuh say? Yuh ain't a goin' to be doin' much p'intin 'if yuhr scared board stiff from lookin' into them canyons, yuh 'onery wagon tongue shooter."

Amos and Jane burst into laughter at Able's bluster. It only confirmed that the old wagoneer was he delighted at hearing that Owen would be staying with them on the trip to the Gold Hill country.

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The third day out of Denver Amos Carpenter was having second thoughts, lots of them, about his decision to move his freight business from the Wyoming flats to the mining camps above Boulder. The entire day had been one switchback after another. On the uphill pulls the team strained against the breast straps and collars. On the downhill runs his boot never left the brake.

As his two wagons continued up the canyon, the water of Boulder Creek raced in the opposite direction as if trying to escape the mountains ahead of the freezing weather of the coming months. The trail was hard packed dirt dotted with rocks that fell from the mountainsides. Smaller rocks were ground into dust under the iron wagon rims and the larger ones which occasionally blocked the way were customarily shoved off the road by cursing and grunting drivers or pulled away by their teams.

As the sun settled behind the high peaks for the day, Amos came upon a space where the creek and the mountains had gone in different directions for a while leaving a relatively flat and wide area ideal for stopping. He pulled forward far enough to allow his second wagon room to haul up behind and clear the roadway.

Amos set the brake, wound the long reins around the worn handle, and turned to his daughter. "Had enough fer one day, Jane?"

She stretched her arms over her head and stood up in the narrow driver's box. "It's been plenty for me, Pa. You must be worn out." As she clambered over the wheel, she added, "I hope that you're as hungry as I am, because I aim to do some cooking."

The creek had shrunk to its fall season low and rushed along through its deepest channels. There was an abundant supply of thoroughly dry wood of every size imaginable along the bank. Before the men had unhitched the horses and rubbed them down, Jane had an eager fire dancing in the rock pit that some earlier wagon party had built on the gravel embankment.

What little heat there had been in the thin mountain air quickly dissolved as twilight came upon the little party. Coats were drawn closer and they settled in near the warmth of the fire as they waited for the fat cast iron pot of stew to come to a boil.

"This must be the place they call Netters Flats," said Amos looking around at the clearing.

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"If that's so, we take a turn away from the creek a few miles upstream and then things get interestin'," grumped Able. "I 'spect that might be a good time fer Bannack here to start givin' his p'inters."

Owen settled his high crowned McKibbin hat back on his unruly blond hair and smiled. "Why I've been giving driving lessons all day. You mean all my advice has been sailin' right over your head?"

Even as they spoke and gave the appearance of being completely relaxed, there was an underlying expectancy in the attitudes of the three men. They had all noted the signs that there was someone on their back trail. They had been catching glimpses of dust on the canyon road that wound through the mountains behind them. As they finished their bowls of thick stew, Jane's big dog, Wink, suddenly sat up and his ears perked into stiff peaks.

Amos tapped out his pipe, rose to his feet and said to Jane, "We may be havin' company. Until we find out who it is, take Wink and plant yuhrselfes way over behind them rocks."

Jane looked from one to the other realizing that there was no room for argument and no point in hesitating. She set down her bowl, called Wink and hastened toward the pile of rocks on the edge of the clearing.

Able moved quickly toward his wagon. "I need to walk off some of that stew," he said.

Amos stepped out of the firelight, and Owen did the same but in the opposite direction.

The sound of an oncoming wagon grew rapidly, and with a rush a team of light horses pulling a small wagon swept around the curve and toward the pulloff area. The wheels grated harshly against the roadbed as the driver hauled back viciously on the reins and locked the wheels with his brake. His one passenger had to grab desperately at the seat back to keep from being thrown to the ground.

"What the hell's goin' on here?" yelled the driver.

He flung down the reins and stood up looking at the fire and peering into the gloom around it. He finally spotted Amos and as he did, he leaped out of the wagon and stalked toward him.

"Who are yuh there, yuh damn squatter?"

As the man stepped into the firelight, Amos answered. "Name's Carpenter. Who wants to know?"

"These yuhr wagons?"

"They are."

"Where yuh headed with 'em?"

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"Wrong," shot back the angry man from the little wagon. "Yuh're pullin' these big wheelers outa here right now."

"Why would we do that when we jest unhitched fer the night?" asked Amos in quiet measured tones.

"'Cause this is my campsite and I don't aim to have any rag tag pilgrim haunchin' down on it." The man had been joined by his passenger who carried a rifle angled over the crook of his arm.

"I don't believe I ever heard of a man ownin' the road or the side ditch," replied Amos.

"I suppose yuhr the damn flatlander I heard about," sneered the man. "Came up here jest to run me outa business. Well, Sil Gulder don't run and I'm tellin' yuh the line from Denver to the Gold Hill country is closed. If these wagons aren't rollin' downhill in about five minutes, I'll fire 'em. Now where's yuhr other driver?"

"I guess you must be talking about me," said Owen from the far side of the fire. As he spoke he remained in the outer ring of growing darkness.

"Whoever yuh are, yuh better start doin' some fast hitchin' or yuhr boss won't have a job fer yuh much longer," growled Gulder.

"No, I think Mister Order-Giver there must've meant me," said a voice from the top of the nearby lead wagon. "Must be me 'cause I'm so all-fired nervous about losin' my job. My fingers is jest a twitchin' and fidgetin' on the triggers of this greener like fishin' worms in fresh-turned, black sod."

Gulder's head swung around looking for Able. His companion also scanned the silhouette of the freight wagon. When their attention turned back to the fire Amos remained where he had been standing, but the tall form of Owen had disappeared.

"Where the devil?" grunted the man with Gulder.

Before he could finish the question, Owen's words sliced through the darkness. "I'm right here behind you. I don't think you'll be needing that Winchester. Just slide it easy like down on the ground."

The man did as he was told. Gulder started to protest, but Owen, too, cut him, short. "I believe we've had enough of your threats, Gulder. No man owns the road in this canyon and no man has a lock on wagon trade from Denver up to any mining camp. Now climb back on your rig and pull out of here."

Gulder stared hard at Amos. "This may be yuhr go around, flatlander, but I can guarantee the next one'll be mine. When I finish

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with yuh, there won't be a spoke left of yuhr freight business and even less of yuhr men."

With that, Gulder turned on his heel and stomped his way back to his wagon. His ally had to rush to catch up and just managed to pull himself into his seat as the wagon lurched forward at Gulder's slap of the reins on his team. As suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone around the dark uphill bend in the road.

"That horse of mine has been trotting along at the end of a rope too long," mused Owen. "I think it's time he got a chance to wear a saddle again."

In a matter of minutes Cocoa was saddled, and Owen was mounted and ready to ride. "I don't think there's really much of a chance that we'll see any more those two at least for now, but a little ride'll help me sleep better."

"I think Owen's little sashay'll make us all feel better," observed Amos as the sounds of Cocoa's hooves died away.

Able, who had wanted to rig up one of the team horses and go along, but who had been overruled by Owen, shook his head and complained, "That man's head is harder'n a brake block." He added in a more reflective tone, with the slightest hint of a smile, "and when he's pressed against the wheel, he can get hot and really smoke."



The President of the Miners Federated Bank was a few minutes late in raising the shade and unlocking the door and, since business in the early morning hours was usually pretty slow, an occasional delayed opening didn't seem very important. On this morning, however, there was a man standing by the door waiting.

He was a tall, wide-shouldered man whose height was accentuated by a high McKibbin hat. As the shade slid up, Heely found himself looking into a pair of deep set, unflinching gray eyes that seemed to rest on high prominent cheekbones.

Anse Heely quickly turned the knob of the lock and swung the door open. "Good morning, sir. Sorry if I kept you waiting. I guess we are a couple of minutes late in getting things going."

The man did not answer but instead stepped through the door and surveyed the interior. His gaze then came back to Heely. "Are you the officer in charge?"

"Yes. My name is Anse Heely and I'm President of the bank. Can I help you?"

"I hope you can. Name's Owen Bannack."

The men shook hands and Heely gestured toward his office door. "Perhaps you would like to step back to my office, Mr. Bannack. We can talk there."

Owen accepted the invitation and was soon seated in the steer-covered chair. He rested his hat on his knee as Heely spoke briefly to his cashier before coming into the room and closing the door behind him. Seating himself behind his desk he folded his hands on a stack of papers and returned Owen's level gaze. "What can I do for you Mr. Bannack?"

"Mr. Heely, I arrived in town last evening from Wyoming. Just before I left there a Sheriff in the town of Terwell suggested that I see you as soon as I got in. My business concerns a man named Mead and another named Serill. Mead was a rustler and a murderer who sent his rustling profits to this bank through the bank in Terwell."

Heely at this point was sitting straighter in his chair and listening more intently than when Owen had begun talking. The man's honest, straightforward manner was impressive to the banker whose success in business often lay in being able to accurately assess the people he dealt with.

Owen realized that the man was, for some reason, more interested than he had expected him to be. Choosing his words carefully,

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Owen continued. "I learned that Mead had an account here with Serill and suggested to the Sheriff that the ranchers whose cattle had been stolen had an interest in that money. I believe Sheriff Hale wired you some of this information."

"That's correct, he did. In fact Sheriff Hale suggested that the account be frozen until the matter could be straightened out. I agreed to do that but only upon receiving proof that the funds in the account were in fact proceeds from a series of cattle thefts. No such evidence ever came to me and I had almost forgotten the matter until yesterday."

Now it was Owen who was listening with special care. "What happened yesterday that brought it to mind, Mr. Heely?"

"The joint owner of the account, Mr. Serill, came in and closed it out."

Owen's eyes narrowed and the muscles in his face and neck tightened. "Then Serill has already pulled the funds out?"

"Out of the account, yes, but out of the bank, no." Heely explained how Serill had left the money in the vault overnight.

"Then he'll be in here today to pick it up," asked Owen.

"I expect so."

Owen pulled a leather folder from the pocket of his jacket. He spread the covers, leaned forward, and laid the open folder on Heely's desk. "There are affidavits proving that the money Mead funneled into the account was from stolen cattle. There's also a letter from the territorial Governor's office asking that you put a hold on those funds until claims can be filed and heard by a proper court."

Heely studied the documents for a few moments and, as he did so, he occasionally looked up at Owen. "Interesting how Mead met his death," he observed smiling. Abruptly, he stood up and headed for the door. "Sit still, Mr. Bannack. I'll just alert Miss Biwell to let us know if Serill should come in."

The banker returned and continued reading the documents on his desk. As he finished and leaned back, his face told Owen that he had reached a decision. "As far as I'm concerned, the money will stay in the safe. There may be some question about my right to do that since the account was officially closed, but I'm willing to let the lawyers fight over that point. That is if Serill wants to take the matter to a court."

"He won't," said Owen flatly. "He's one of a gang of four men that murdered some folks in Montana. If I can lay my hands on him, he'll go back there with me to face a vigilance committee."

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Heely's eyes widened at the statement and at the matter-of-fact way that Owen spoke. Before he could react, the office door opened and Miss Biwell appeared.

"Mr. Heely?"

"Yes?"

"Should I speak in front of... I mean..." her voice trailed off as she looked at Owen.

"Yes, by all means. Out with it," urged the banker.

"You told me to keep an eye out for Mister Serill?"

"Yes. Is he out there now?"

Before the cashier could utter a sound or move, Owen was out of his chair, through the door and into the lobby of the bank. It was empty except for a startled assistant cashier who was counting bank notes into a drawer. In a second Owen was on the street, but it was as empty as the bank lobby had been. There were a few wagons sitting along the street but no sign of Pane Serill. The only people visible were a farmer and his wife who had just come out of a nearby store. When Owen asked them if they had seen a man come out of the bank, they only shook their heads from side to side and walked away.

Owen's shoulders sagged and he walked back to the bank meeting Heely on the outside step.

"Gone?" asked the banker.

"I'm afraid so. It would only take a minute for him to get lost in any one of a dozen stores. Trying to search them would be a gamble at best."

"I see what you mean. By the time you looked in one he could be blocks away. Miss Biwell said that she told him she would get me and Serill only shrugged, but when she said I was meeting with a Mister Bannack, he was gone before she could close her mouth."

"Tell her it isn't her fault," Owen said. Looking at Heely, he asked, "My information tells me that Serill had been using the funds in the account to purchase property. Is that your understanding?"

"I believe that's true. He did make periodic withdrawals but exactly what he used the money for, I don't know. Unofficially, I have heard some talk about Serill being in the middle of some trouble up in the Gold Hill area. It's been rumored that Serill has purchased a number of claims, many of them worthless I'm told. I expect that's where you'll be headed?"

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"Yes. I have some friends who are headed that way. If you should need to get in touch with me, you might try leaving a message at the Prospector's General for one of the Carpenter freight wagons."

The men talked for a few moments more and Owen related Amos' plan for a freight business. As they shook hands, Heely warned him to be careful since the Gold Hill area had a bad reputation. "Remember to tell your friend Carpenter to drop in and see me if he needs some financing to get his business on its feet."

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Jake Ritter was bitter at having missed his chance to intercept Amos Carpenter at the bank. The plan failed for at least two reasons. Amos had no reason to visit the Miners Federated and did not do so. The second reason was the failure of Wilts to be at his post at the early morning hour when Owen paid his call on Heely. Even if Wilts had been prompt and even if he had gone to call Ritter, there is room for grave doubt that Ritter could have arrived during the short space of Owen's visit.

"Wilts, yuh damn jack-o-lantern, I told you to get on that corner and stay there. Now, thanks to yuhr nighthawkin' in the saloon, yuh didn't get up early enough and we missed the grab bag. That cashier told me that the account was froze harder'n wet leather in January. Bannack was in and out of there and so was that weasel, Serill."

"Can't yuh use yuhr Sheriff's badge to thaw it out?" taunted Karp. He and his hardcase friend, Wilts, had long since realized that Ritter was not all he had represented himself to be and they now were suspicious of all of Ritter's plans and orders.

"One thing I could do, Karp. I could arrange fer yuh to have another talk with yuhr big friend, Bannack," rejoined Ritter.

"Good idea," piped up Wilts. "He and Bannack could shake hands and make up."

The reference to Karp's broken hand roused him to further criticism of Ritter. "Listen here, Ritter, yuh came along a snappin' yuhr damned suspenders and spinnin' a long sandy about some quick cash. Yuh gave us a line about how yuh had a big outfit and a big account in the bank. Well, so far yuh hasn't come up with enough fer one lifter off the bar. I fer one think we're throwin' the bucket in a dry well."

Ritter knew rebellion when he saw it. He knew that he needed something to hold the two or he would have to either go it alone or recruit new men. He was persuaded there was still a way to use his information to good advantage, but he needed their help. He reached inside his wide belt and pulled out a packed wad of paper money. It was part of the handful he had taken from his former outlaw boss in Wyoming only minutes before he had left Mead behind and fled for his life.

He threw the money on the table in front of Karp. "If yuh're bound to cut and run there's somethin' fer yuhr trouble," he said casually as if dismissing them. As Karp and Wilts snatched the bills and began

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counting them, Ritter belittled them. "That's peanuts compared to what I've got comin', but take it and be damned. I'll find me a couple of partners who'll do as they're told and who're interested in some big money."

Ritter waved another bill in the air at the bartender. "Barkeep, bring me a bottle of some of yuhr good stuff," he yelled, making a studied attempt at ignoring Karp and Wilts, "and one glass."

It was Wilts who broke first. "Say, Jake, I never said nuthin' about cuttin' out of this deal. If Karp wants to, that's his business. He don't speak fer me. Make that two glasses," he yelled at the bartender. Now that he had made his decision, he was anxious to nail it down. "Me and Mister Ritter got some plannin' to do."

"I dunno, Wilts," said Ritter, "it was yuhr doin' that we got shut outa the bank." Relenting a bit, he drawled, "Of course, if yuh think yuh could do as yuhr told, I might let yuh back in."

"Who do yuh want plugged?" asked Wilts bursting with enthusiasm. "Yuh want somethin' watched? I got more eyes than a horse fly."

It was all too much for Karp. He, too, caught the new spirit and tried to good-naturedly grumble his way back into the operation. "Jake, yuh got to have somebody to watch yuhr watcher. I guess we were gettin' a mite steamed. My gun hand is comin' along good and I would like to kinda hang on jest in case we meet up with that Bannack fella again."

"Three glasses," called Ritter.

With that he leaned on the table and began outlining his plan. The first step was for them to bestir themselves and get up to Gold Hill where he knew Serill had invested some of the money from the rustled beeves.

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Gold Hill was more of an idea than it was a town. A prospector in the early days of the great rush had on some forgotten day been panning for gold in one of the dry washes high above Boulder Creek. He had found some promising color and in a frenzy of discovery proceeded to dig a glory hole down toward what he was sure was the mother lode of the Rockies.

His efforts had rewarded him with a heavy pouch of dust. The strike became generally known when the prospector led his mule off the mountain to a saloon in Nederland where liquor loosened his tongue and he began bragging about finding a "hill of gold." A rush began but, like most, it soon settled into pure hard work for what often amounted to little more than wages.

The eager dreamers soon rushed off to other strikes and Gold Hill settled into the routine of a mountain mining camp. Mostly it was lots of hard work and sweat, but an occasional find kept the miners at their shovels. What little streambed was there was soon panned out and a few sluice boxes were tried.

The best success was in the glory holes, which were usually dug at the very feet of the hills where erosion had formed what amounted to a dry streambed. A good one could make a man rich overnight.

The trick in locating the glory hole was to guess where some, in especially wet years, paused and puddled up in its plunge down the mountainside. There in the ages old catch-basins which were, in effect, natural sluices, gold collected. Erosion would occur and cover the pockets and the stream might have dried up or gone off in another direction. The successful miners could almost smell out the good pockets where a vertical shaft would make it possible for them to tap the golden sediment by hauling the rich ore to the surface, washing the dirt and rock away and capturing the precious mineral.

Some industrious miners tried horizontal shafts into the sides of the mountains, but the hard rock and need for shoring and bracing usually spelled abandonment unless the veins were especially rich. Where there was real promise, heavy crushing equipment began to appear in the area and the old prospectors, getting the scent of civilization, packed their shovels and pans on their mules and disappeared into the more remote and distant mountains.

Gold Hill was in that stage where some strikes were still being made but abandonments of claims were increasing when some

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particularly thick veins were uncovered in the area. It was the new surge of activity and interest which brought Pane Serill to Gold Hill.

He was simply one in the floating band of rag tags that accompany any sudden increase in business. He gambled a bit and at the end of one long game of draw, stabbed a man to death with his long knife and offered to perform the same service upon any man who suggested convening a miner's court to look into the matter.

After a few months, he disappeared for a time. Nobody noticed and no one cared where he had gone and what he did when he got there. When he returned, he spent money freely and bought a few claims from miners who were packing in their operations and heading for new camps. It was when Serill went for some of the larger operations with the thick new veins that trouble began.

The owner of one horizontal shaft which had just come upon ore with a spectacular assay was found one morning on the road leading to the camp with a bullet in his back. Serill produced a deed to the mine and declared that he had bought the property for cash the day before. He voiced loud comments about how a lawless element in the camp had killed the owner for his money.

Soon after that another owner disappeared and Serill again produced a deed and an explanation. The man had simply taken his money and left the mountains, said Serill. Months later the late mine owner was found at the bottom of a glory hole with a gaping knife wound at his throat. By that time few men dared openly question Pane Serill.

Over the next few months, Serill became the owner of other properties. Sometimes he made his deals in loud public displays in the camp saloon. He would slam the money on a table and call out for witnesses as the owner signed over his claim.

Finally, the outlawry drove some of the more decent men from the area. Thievery and even murder were all too common and, at long last there was a general demand for a miners court. The court was convened and undertook to try and decide who should be tried and for what crime.

The discussion had just gotten underway when Serill ambled in and sat down. The talk became undirected and vague. A member of the court suggested they meet in secret. Serill was not a member, but he drew his well-known long knife and, and began stropping it on his boot top. He seconded the motion for a secret meeting.

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"It's a damn good idea to have a secret meetin'," he drawled. "That way we'll be able to get down to serious business."

Rumor had it that the last meeting of the miners court was conducted by two drunken prospectors as they led their mules down the road toward Central City.

The properties, which Serill bought, may have had a potential for producing great wealth, but they were poorly operated and frequently left unworked after the easy gold was taken out. Serill boasted that he was going to bring the newest mining methods to the area, but that plan never seemed to gain substance. He did haul in some heavy winching machinery and install it over a deep glory hole, but after a few months it sat idle and began to collect rust.

The camp itself would have become a ghost town except for the fact that enough new strikes were made to keep a stream of men coming in to replace those who drifted out. Those who left took with them stories about Serill and his cutthroats who ran roughshod over the settlement. Gold camps, like people, had reputations, and Gold Hill's was one of the most unsavory.

A little group of the more honest citizens finally migrated to a quieter place a few miles from Gold Hill. The inhabitants of Champa made it known that while they didn't approve of Serill and his crowd, they would be content to ignore the lawlessness in the larger camp as long as they were left alone.

It was toward this uneasy peace that Amos Carpenter headed his wagons. The last mile to Champa was along a high road that hugged the side of a bare, rock-strewn mountain. A misstep by a nervous horse could mean disaster and the bywords were "slow" and "careful."

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Sil Gulder, who made irregular freight runs along the road and down through the canyon, was as familiar with the road as any man. His seething anger at having been put on the run by a potential competitor made him remember the high exposed stretch of road. It would have been a simple matter to spook the horses and have done with Amos Carpenter, but Gulder's greed whispered in his ear that it would be a shame to lose two fine wagons and some excellent horses.

Gulder bided his time and watched the two wagons roll along the high road and down the long slope toward Champa. Instead of continuing on toward Gold Hill as he had expected, they halted. From his observation point in the heavy timber above the camp, he could see one of the riders leap down and talk to one of Champa's citizens who was cutting and stacking firewood beside a tiny cabin.

The one from the Carpenter wagon, who had obviously been asking directions, pointed at a larger cabin some distance away. Gulder recognized the building being pointed out as belonging to Milt Dolor. Gulder frowned and scratched his neck, which itched from his dark woolen coat. He knew Dolor by sight because he had sold him some provisions, but the man always seemed standoffish. Gulder also remembered that Dolor had been one of the first to move from Gold Hill to Champa.

The wagons rolled again but stopped at Dolor's. After a knock on the door, Dolor himself appeared. There was a long conversation with much pointing at the wagons and around the camp. Finally the entire group disappeared into Dolor's house and Gulder was left sitting alone on his horse in the cool shade of the trees which had been a cover for his spying on the Carpenters.

Milt Dolor was one of those men who always talked as though his listeners were nearly deaf. His voice, however, was always pleasant and friendly, and it matched his wide smiling face and twinkling blue eyes.

"By golly, I did talk about openin' a store up here, those fellers at Prospectors General were steerin' yuh right," he boomed as his guests sat down around the big main room of the cabin. "I jest ain't been able to figure a way to freight stuff up here. Those wagons of yuhrs would sure fit that bill."

"It looks to me like this big room was made with a store in mind," said Amos.

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"That it was," Dolor assured him with a roar. "This looks like it might be a good day fer all of us."

"That coffee really smells good, Mister Dolar," smiled Jane. "Is there anything I could do to help you."

"I ain't one to say no to some help from a pretty lady." His words almost bowled her over. "Jest set out them cups while I open some of my red berry jam fer these biscuits. I'll bet yuh're all near starved. This mountain air'll sharpen yuhr appetite fer sure."

Dolor banged loudly and happily around his fireplace and cupboards. He was obviously delighted to have the company and the fact that it was a man with two wagons and a driver elated him. He looked at Able as he set a tin of hot biscuits on the hearth. "Yuh look to me like a man that's handled a few teams," he bellowed.

Able seemed perfectly at ease with the jovial man. "I've hitched more'n a few and hauled a little less'n the most."

Even Dolor was quieted a bit for a moment while he tried to digest Able's remark. Finally, like the others, he decided it was best left alone. He offered only a general, "I'll bet yuh have, yessir, I'll allow that yuh have."

As they sat devouring the hot sourdough biscuits and sweet red jam, Dolor filled the air with talk of how he proposed to set up his store and how he and Amos were sure to be able to fill each other's business demands. He identified a nearby cabin, which was not occupied and in fact had been abandoned by its owner some months ago.

Amos sat back and fired his great large black pipe. He listened as Dolor explained how the need for a corral could be managed and how it would be necessary to lay in a stock of grain with the very first load from Boulder.

"Tell me about this man, Gulder," said Amos.

"He runs the store in Gold Hill. Accepts nuthin' but dust fer payment. He's the only one operatin' hereabouts and has a sky-high price on everything but mean. He's got a thick vein of that and he gives it away," said Dolor, with perhaps an ever so slightly subdued voice.

"We met 'im on the road last evenin'," drawled Amos. " He made it pretty clear he didn't want any wagons to start runnin' goods up this way."

"Most men would listen to that kind of warnin'," said Dolor, watching Amos carefully.

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"Last time I heard, it was still a free country," Amos observed as he puffed easily on his pipe. "I expect it'll take more than Mister Gulder to change that."

In an almost normal, room sized tone, Dolor pressed the point further. "Gulder ain't a man to stay level if he's pressed."

"His warnin' was to turn around before we left the big canyon, and we already ignored him on that, so it may be a little late fer lookin' back," replied Amos. "Besides, I'd think Gulder would be lookin' sidewise more at a another store than at a couple of wagons workin' the road."

"He may be at that," smiled Dolor. "Gulder ain't no fool and he'll think twice about which horse he wants to whip, but they ain't no question that he'll be heard from."

"May be," agreed Amos, "but freightin's my business and that's what I aim to be about. Able, I think we'd best be lookin' at that empty cabin and offloadin' our housekeepin' things. We ain't goin' to be haulin' much fer Mister Dolor if we don't get them wagons on the road."

As Amos and Able stood and prepared to take their leave, Owen quietly asked Dolor, "Have you heard of a man named Serill?"

"Who in these camps ain't?" scowled Dolor. "He's a cheap little mine rat who's been at the bottom of most of the trouble in Gold Hill in the past year or so. He somehow came up with some cash some time back and ever since he's been buying mines and claims. Problem is, some of the owners haven't always wanted to sell, leastwise at Serill's price."

"Where would someone who wanted to find him start looking?"

Dolor sensed that Owen was a man with more than idle curiosity. The seriousness of the tall man's question was penetrating and ominous. Dolor had the feeling that Owen Bannack was a man Serill would not like to see. Yet he did not inquire into Bannack's purpose. "He's got a place about a mile out of Gold Hill. Jest stay on the road through the camp until yuh comes to a cabin at the bottom of the hill. It used to be a stage station until Wells Fargo got tired of their coaches bein' shot up and quit comin' through here."

Jane, who was standing by the door waiting for her father and Able, listened to the comments about Serill. Her face paled as she heard Owen ask his questions and as Dolor answered in his loud room filling voice, she shrank within her heavy coat and she pulled her gray woolen scarf tighter over her head as if to close out the words she could not help hearing.

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Pane Serill had stood watching Owen Bannack from behind the green shutters of a land office as the tall vigilante looked up and down the street in front of Miners Federated. Serill's chest heaved from the half block dash he had made upon hearing Bannack's name. There hadn't been time to ask questions or to try to put the story together, but Serill's last letter from his Wyoming partner had recited how Bannack had hanged Serill's sidekick, Lupe, and was looking for Serill himself.

In the moment he stood peeping through the narrow wooden slits, Serill's cruel mouth tightened over the stumps of his stained teeth. He remembered the drunken raid on Bannack's ranch house in Montana and how the raiders had been a bit surprised, but not saddened, to find that their wild shooting had killed the rancher's two small boys. He and his murderous friends had left Bannack for dead and gone on a rampage with the half dead wife. Later he learned that a vigilance committee had been formed and that it was looking for him. At first he laughed and ignored the clumsy ranchers. Then with amazing swiftness and deadly purpose, they had hanged one of his friends. Serill had immediately left the area.

Over a year passed and he had come to believe that this episode in his life could safely be forgotten. Then he had been warned that Bannack had appeared and was handing down swift and terrible justice on the members of the gang of killers.

Now, as Bannack returned to the bank, Serill ran out the back door past a startled clerk who looked up from his stack of papers and shrugged at the intrusion of the outside world on his closed and ordered life.

Serill was quickly in the saddle and out of Denver. As he urged his horse toward Gold Hill, he began to reflect on the sudden rush of events.

He cursed himself for leaving the money in the bank vault overnight. If he had taken it with him the evening before, he would have had it safely tucked away in his saddlebags. Yet if he had not returned to the bank this morning, he would not have known that his pursuer was so close on his heels.

Bannack would be certain to find out that he was living in the Gold Hill mining camp. Serill ripped out another string of curses as he realized that he now had to make a choice of either hightailing it out of the Colorado mountains or trying to somehow eliminate Bannack.

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Running and leaving his holdings and the mining camp he had cowed into submission did not appeal to him. However, even less palatable was the thought of standing up to Bannack.

If he lit out, there would be very little that he could salvage from his mining properties. Quick sales were almost always cheap sales and nobody knew that better than Serill. He had stashed nothing since he always had the notion that he would acquire as much property as he could before he hired some men to work it for him.

Killing Owen Bannack would end the vague and gnawing feeling, common to outlaws, that a vengeful force was seeking him, that a noose of justice was hanging just over his head waiting to suddenly seize him and squeeze away his life's breath. Serill shook off the chill of the thought. He knew, but would not admit to himself, that he did not have the stomach to face Bannack alone and in the open. He needed help for that job and he needed to find it very quickly.

Serill figured he had three maybe four days before Bannack would be able to track him to his holdout near Gold Hill. That didn't leave much time and his options were limited. Serill had nearly always worked alone. His inclination was to encourage confrontation between others while placing himself to one side and in a position to take advantage of both parties.

There was a large population of hardcases in the camp. He mentally sorted through the list. Some he rejected because they were independently cunning and Serill knew they were not to be trusted any more than he himself would be in a similar situation. Others were petty and lived on scraps of theft and cheating so common in many boomtowns. Most of that stripe was not up to the work that Serill needed. Others lived for the drinks they could beg in the saloon Sil Gulder operated as part of his store. They would only take his money and drink themselves into oblivion.

Still, Serill knew that the kind of men he needed could be found. He urged his horse forward. He had to get to Gold Hill and he needed to do some fast recruiting if Owen Bannack was to be dealt the loaded hand that Serill's mind was putting together.

Hours later as Serill entered the mouth of Boulder Creek Canyon, he paused and, as was his habit, studied his backtrail. It was well that he did for trotting along about a mile back was a group of three riders. A cold chill scratched down his back and wound around his stomach. His first thought was that it was Bannack and perhaps even some law dogs.

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The last thing Serill wanted to do was to have three unknown men dogging his trail no matter which they were. He dismounted and searched the mountainside above the wagon road. A short distance ahead, the tree-covered slope broke into a small ravine which split the side of the mountain. Serill quickly led his horse into the bare sided ravine. By pulling, cursing, and scrambling, he was able to work his way up the ravine, over its lip, and into the trees above it. He tied the animal in a thick grove of young blue spruce and returned to an outcrop of gray moss flecked granite where he could survey the road below.

Serill did not have long to wait. The three riders trotted out of sight for a moment as they followed the inside curve of the road. When they appeared, they were almost directly below Serill and he could clearly see their faces. Serill sucked in his breath sharply and his eyes snapped and gleamed as his lips drew down in a hard smile.

After they had ridden past his lookout station a few yards, Serill called out. "Freeze right there, gents."

The three did as they were ordered. Slowly they turned their heads and looked up at the leering face of Pane Serill. He sat on the rocks with one arm resting casually on his knee, in his hand he dangled a Colt. The revolver was not pointed at the riders, but there was no doubt that Serill had the drop on them.

"Yuh're a long ways from Wyoming, Jake," drawled Serill.

Jake Ritter was recovering from his surprise as he stammered, "Why...I'll be damned. Serill." Growing quickly familiar, he continued, "Yuh're the last man I expected to throw down on me. Yuh shore had me fer a minute there, Pane."

"I might say the same, Jake. Yuh're the last man I expected to see ridin' up this canyon."

Karp and Wilts were looking from Ritter to Serill, not fully comprehending the situation. They did understand that this was the man that Ritter had told them about. No plan had been agreed to by the three as they left Denver, but Ritter had persuaded them that Serill had a load of money and the three of them were going to relieve him of it.

Suddenly here was Serill looking down at them like a highwayman and holding a gun that he obviously knew very well how to handle. The abrupt meeting and the cool familiarity between Serill and Ritter prompted Wilts to snap at Ritter. "Is this the jasper yuh was tellin' us about?"

Ritter would just as soon Wilts had kept his mouth shut. The suggestion that they had been talking about Serill made the situation

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more difficult. Ritter glowered at Wilts but tried to put the best face on it he could. "Boys, this is Pane Serill. Yuh're right, Wilts. This is my old pard from Wyomin'."

Serill snorted at Ritter's description. Ritter had been a flunky in the Wyoming operation, but a flunky that kept getting too big for his britches. However, Serill made no comment on their earlier association. "I hear yuh been tryin' to make a withdrawal from the bank, Jake."

Serill's reference to his unsuccessful attempt to lay his hands on the money in the account in the Miners Federated caught Ritter by surprise. "Who told yuh that?" he asked.

"That isn't the point, Jake," answered Serill quietly. "What made yuh think yuh could ride in and empty the account without first talkin' to me?"

"Hell, Pane," blustered Ritter, "I never intended no such a thing. Fact is we were ridin' up to see yuh. Ain't that right boys?"

Ritter's companions glumly nodded agreement as they squinted up at Serill. Their obvious disadvantage made them uneasy and both realized they had to play along with Ritter until Serill explained his game.

"I believe that, Jake. Question is, why were yuh ridin' up to see me?"

"I was comin' to tell yuh how yuhr old pal, Mead, got hisself hung by some big, high hat from Montana. The same damn hombre hung old Lupe." Ritter watched Serill closely for a reaction, but he saw none.

"Yuh ain't tellin' me anything I didn't already know. Why don't yuh admit that yuh were ridin' up to Gold Hill to see if maybe yuh couldn't lay ahold of some easy cash."

"Pane, I'm plumb struck dumb by that kind of talk. If they's some cash to be had we'd be fools not to pick it up, but we shore ain't gunnin' fer yuh. 'Course, that's only speakin' fer us. It might be that someone else is."

Ritter's hint of someone looking for Serill was a shot in the dark, but it hit much closer to the mark than Ritter could have ever hoped. Ritter's notion that the one on Serill's trail might be Bannack was only a fool's guess, but Ritter often had fool's luck.

Serill's hand tightened on his revolver and his eyes narrowed at Ritter. "What do yuh mean by that, Ritter?"

"Why, nuthin' in particular, Pane. I jest now remembered that we saw that damn hanger near Denver the other day. His name's Bannack. Didn't know if that meant anything to yuh or not."

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Serill was a long moment in answering. He looked the three men over. Ritter he knew from days past to be handy with a gun. He also knew that Ritter was given to exaggeration and to stretching any truth to fit his selfish notions of what would be to his own advantage. In short, Ritter could be counted on to look out for Jake Ritter.

The other two looked to be typical of the greedy, ruthless men who haunted society and lived on the outer fringe of the law. The one with the bandaged hand wore dirty striped trousers and a badly frayed blue coat that had an indistinct military cut about it. The other had an expression on his face that seemed to reflect perpetual wonder. The eyebrows that rolled up like window blinds when he spoke and the wide eyes combined to suggest that Wilts never really understood the world around him and that he was in a never ending search for some explanation of why he had ever been placed in the world at all.

Both Karp and Wilts could be led, given an incentive both would perform larceny, and if the incentive were sufficient, murder. Ritter also could be managed. Serill sensed that his recruiting plans were going to be met sooner than he had expected.

Serill spun the revolver deftly and slid it into his holster. "Boys, I ain't got the money yuh thought I had, but I've got some minin' property that'll make yuhr eyes pop. If yuh're willin' to talk, I think we can do some business. In short, there's some gold in Gold Hill and I can see to it that yuh can ride outa these hills with some heavy saddle bags."

The mention and promise of gold had its predictable effect. Smiles spread all around and without another word an unholy alliance was formed. Soon the four men were riding up the canyon talking like long time friends.

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## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME



Amos Carpenter was anxious to get his freight business started and, after installing his household effects in the comfortable log cabin in Champa, he talked with Milt Dolor and the two agreed upon a list of supplies that would enable Dolor's store to be set up as a going business. Amos also needed to sweat some new rims on two of his wagon wheels.

With these needs in mind it was agreed that Amos and Dolar would take one wagon and make a run to Boulder. Amos and Dolor believed that with luck they could get to Boulder one day and back the next. Despite Jane's insistence that Able should go with them, Amos flatly refused and the old driver was left behind. Jane only accepted it when the men insisted that it was only because Able needed to begin work on some harness repair and on the makeshift corrals they would need for the teams.

When Owen said that he wanted to do some "scouting around," nobody ask any questions or made any comments. The tall man saddled the big chestnut horse, Cocoa, and, with a nod, rode off toward Gold Hill.

Left alone when Able went outside to fuss with his harness and to work on the corrals, Jane worked to make the cabin as comfortable as possible. She first thoroughly cleaned the two rooms from one end to the other. Following Dolor's suggestion, she then gathered armloads of thin pine branches and worked her way around the walls chinking the logs with the flexible, tough pine branches wherever there seemed to be space for air to blow through.

Her hands were soon sticky from the sap, but she loved the smell of the pine needles which she stripped from the branches. The tamping of the pine branches was only temporary because the thin stems would grow brittle and would fall out, but they would serve the purpose for now and could be replaced with adobe in the spring.

Jane arranged the furniture first one way and then another. She and Amos had decided that she would occupy the small room at the far end of the building. She had laughed and made much ado about the fine elegant quarters and, in truth, they were better than the cabin she had known before.

After the cabin was spotless and the furniture arranged to her satisfaction, Jane donned her heavy woolen coat and sought out Able. He was working in a small lean-to that was serving as a storage and all-

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

purpose shed for the freight equipment they had hauled from the old yards in Wyoming.

The late afternoon sun streamed in the open side of the crude log structure and it was warm where the bearded old driver sat working the black leather. He only grunted as she sat down and watched his expert hands twist the leather, punch holes in it and weave thongs through the splice he was making.

Sitting there, Jane could see the sweep of the evergreen forest from the little stream below to the top of the nearby rounded hill. Over the top of the trees on that crest she could see the high snow-covered peaks of the Continental Divide. The jagged peaks were dazzling white and they were cast in strong relief by the dark tree line that staggered up and down along their lower slopes.

The east faces of the peaks were now in shadow and the sun caught only their sides. Deep in the shadows she could see the long rockslides and the cliffs above which looked down upon her like the random walls of a cold gray fortress.

The color in the sky over the mountains was a deep blue. So blue that she thought of a poem she had once read and she remembered the word "azure." Until now, whenever she thought of the poem, she wondered why the writer had not simply said, "blue." Now she felt that she understood.

"Isn't is beautiful, Able."

Puzzled, he looked up and saw her staring out over the landscape. He followed her gaze and conceded that it was indeed quite a sight, "especially for a flatlander."

"The colors are brighter than I ever imagined they could be," she marveled.

"Yup, kinda like a new buggy wheel."

After a long pause she spoke almost to herself, "How long do you think it'll be before he gets back?"

"Well, by the time they get down there and get the wagons loaded, I'd say our guess was about right. Two days."

"Wagons loaded? I meant, I mean," her voice trailed off.

Able looked at her through his bushy white eyebrows and there was a smile under his beard. It might have been that he very well understood her when she asked the question. "Oh, yuh mean that Bannack feller. I 'spect he's on the trail to the North Country by now."

"He said he was coming back here directly," she argued.

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"Don't know why he'd want to waste time sittin' around here," Able teased.

"Oh, Able," she scolded. "I think I'll take a walk to the top of the hill."

"It'll be gettin' dark soon," he warned her. "I hear tell there's both mountain lions and timber wolves out there. Yuh mind where yuh're walkin' and keep the cabin in sight."

His brow furrowed as he watched her whistle for Wink and, with the big dog rushing off ahead, stroll toward the nearby trees. His eyes anxiously scanned the hillside and he felt the weight of concern press upon his shoulders as she and the dog disappeared into the timber.

LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME



Pane Serill and his new found friends were gathered around a table in Sil Gulder's saloon, drinking the last of a cheap bottle of whiskey. Gulder was leaning over the crude planks of the bar listening and joining into the general conversation. In fact it was Gulder who was urging them to action.

"I been watchin' 'em off and on fer a couple of days now," said Gulder insistently. "They offloaded over in Champa near Dolor's place. Then they pulled out and with Dolor aboard. I'll bet a bottle of my best bourbon that they're headed fer Boulder."

"What if they are?" asked Serill. "We can't do much 'til they head back, so what're yuh steamed up about?"

"They left one of their wagons down there. I saw it from the hill yesterday. I've got a pouch of dust fer anyone that's willin' to hitch it up and haul it to my place."

"I don't think he'll take kindly to that when he gets back," said Ritter helping himself to the last of the bottle.

"What would yuh do with a stole wagon?" wondered Wilts.

"Jest leave that to me," answered Gulder.

"How much is in that pouch of yuhrs?" asked Karp suspiciously.

Gulder reached into a nearby wooden box and withdrew a small smooth leather sack. Its top was folded over and tied with a leather thong. He tossed the pouch onto the table. "Heft it yuhrself."

Karp snatched up the little gold sack and bounced it up and down in the palm of his hand. He then pulled the knot loose, pulled back the top flap and poured some of the gold dust into his other hand. Every man's eyes watched the trickle of gold dust. Ritter who was not accustomed to trading in gold and its values asked, "Is that the real stuff?"

"It's real enough," Karp assured him. "I'm not sure it's enough to risk gettin' pumped full of lead for."

"Looks kinda like golden powder," mused Wilts. "Seems sorta funny that anyone would give yuh real money fer it."

The others looked at Wilts and shook their heads. They ignored his remark as they watched Karp carefully pour the dust back into the bag.

"Tell yuh what I'll do," said Gulder, "I'll throw in another bag jest like if fer the horses."

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"I don't like the idea," complained Serill peevishly. "Our deal is fer yuh to wait around the camp and keep yuhr eyes peeled fer Bannack. He could show up here any time and if yuh're down in Champa stealin' a damn wagon, yuh might miss him." Somehow the association between Bannack and the Carpenters had not been established and Serill was unaware of the fact that Owen had been with the Carpenters when they met Gulder in the canyon. Had the connection been made, Serill would have been much more interested in Gulder's plan, and he would surely have endorsed it with his own innovations.

"It'll only take a few hours," Ritter said airily. "Besides we can leave Wilts here. Karp and Wilts both know what Bannack looks like but Karp here ain't healed up enough to want to meet up with him jest yet."

"Let 'em go, Serill," urged Gulder. "I'll help watch fer yuhr man. When he rides in I'll see him. Wilts and me together'll spot 'im. I see most everyone that comes to town."

"It's gonna be a night run anyhow," announced Ritter snapping his wide suspender straps and feeling that he was somehow in charge. "I fer one am partial to workin' so's I ain't watched by every Johnny peekaboo in the territory."

Serill slammed down his whiskey glass and stood up. "I don't care a rap about yuhr damn wagon business. Jest yuh mind what I say. I'm goin' to be in the cabin up at the "High Step." The minute Bannack is spotted, one of yuh let me know, fast. And yuh best ease off that swill while yuh can still see straight."

As Serill's figure disappeared through the door, Ritter snapped a suspender and called out to Gulder, "I ain't one to work dry, Gulder. If yuh want that wagon, haul out another bottle and don't make it any of that cheap tongue blister stuff either."

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The twilight had deepened to near darkness and the high peaks of the divide were only faintly visible against the deep blue of the sky when Able decided to go looking for Jane. He took his 10 gauge Paterson Colt shotgun off the nails in the cabin, checked the revolving cylinder for loads and headed up the hill where he had last seen her.

Able walked quickly at first, but slowed as he reached the darkness of the trees. He stopped frequently and strained to see and listened for even the faintest sound. The thick blanket of pine needles muffled his steps and the only sound was made by the hollow rattle of occasional pinecones that his boots kicked across the dry mantle of needles.

After a while Able realized that the moon had risen and thankfully was throwing a plentiful glow of silver light down through the trees. He found himself near the top of the hill and entering a large clearing when he first heard a faraway sound. Able stood stock-still and cocked his head trying to pick out the direction of the noise.

Finally his patience was rewarded and he again heard what sounded like a rustle in the thin grass across the clearing. He knelt down and continued to listen. After another long minute Able whistled softly, once, twice, and he listened.

The sound was more distinct and Able became more confident. He whistled again louder and Wink darted out of the trees across the clearing and bounded toward him. Able stood up and called the dog that was by his side in an instant. He heaved a great sigh when he saw Jane step into the clearing and heard her call out, "Wink?"

"It's big Wink, and I'm right here," called Able. His voice must have been welcome to her. She trotted quickly toward him across the clearing.

"Am I glad to see you," she said, with relief strong in her voice.

"Next time yuh go night strollin' take along a pan so's yuh can sit and beat it 'til we find yuh," he scolded. "I got better things to do than to go pokin' around in the woods lookin' fer lost girls whose heads is all mushied up with 'how beautiful it is' talk."

"Able, listen to me. I wasn't lost, honest. Just as it started getting dark I heard some horses and as they got near, I could hear some men talking. They were loud and making jokes. I think they were drunk. They stopped and one of them ordered the others to quiet down. He said they were getting close enough to be heard."

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Able instantly dropped his sour attitude. "Close to what," he asked.

"To us, Able. To us. I could hear almost every word they said. I'm sure they plan to steal our team and the wagon."

"Where are they now?"

"A few minutes ago they mounted up and headed down the hill toward our cabin. I'm sure they were terribly drunk, and just as they left they threw a bottle in my direction. It almost hit Wink."

"We'd best get headed back," said Able hurriedly.

She stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Able."

"What is it?"

"The one that seemed to be the leader was Ritter and the other two were the ones in the store in Last Chance."

His first answer was a few seconds of silence. "Don't know what to make of that," he finally said. "We'll have to sort that out later but this smells like a load of busted eggs in August."

Moving as quickly as the darkness and prudence would allow, Able and Jane made their way down the hillside. When they reached the edge of the wide clearing, they stopped and peered down at the cabin. "Stay here," Able ordered.

"I most certainly will not," she countered.

Able knew that she was concerned about the horses. He also knew that arguing with her was useless. "All right," he muttered, "but stay behind me and keep Wink quiet."

They crept across the open grass to a clump of bushes that rustled loudly with its dry leaves as they brushed against it. Kneeling they peered around the brush and saw a man leading the team around to the front of the wagon. Jane rose as if to rush forward, but Able's hand caught her shoulder and held her. "Don't make a fool play," he whispered hoarsely into her ear. "They ain't goin' nowhere." He added, "When yuh said they was drunk, yuh

hit the rivet dead square. Blind staggerin' would be closer to it."

Even in the dark Jane could see what Able meant. The two men on the ground struggled to back the team up to the wagon. They fumbled with the harness and the one sitting on the horse cursed them softly for their slowness. The noise would certainly have awakened anyone sleeping in the cabin and Jane could only conclude that they must have thought everyone was gone, or they were so drunk they didn't realize how much commotion they were making.

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Eventually the thieves were satisfied with their rigging. One climbed up on the driver's seat and slapped the reins against the backs of the big team. The wagon rolled forward but only a foot or two. The rear axle was pulled off the blocks and it dropped with a heavy thud to the ground. No better or more effective brake could have been imagined.

The startled driver dropped the reins and leaped off the wagon. "Karp, damn yuh, bring my horse," yelled Ritter abandoning any further attempt at silence.

The two mounted men wheeled back toward him and as one of the riders tossed the reins at Ritter, Able raised the 10 gauge and fired a great roaring blast at the group. A startled yell went up as Able let fly with another round from the long shotgun.

Ritter had managed to swing himself up into the saddle, but the second and third blast from the bushes terrorized the animal and sent it into a spin. After two or three turns it bolted, but almost directly at the bushes where Able and Jane stood watching.

Able had intended to frighten more than wound or kill and as Ritter's horse dashed past their position, Able held his fire for fear of killing the crazed animal. Wink, however was not as restrained. Like a furry brown cannonball he fired out of the darkness and slammed into Ritter. The dog had taken aim on Ritter's throat but the darkness and the speed of the horse deflected him enough that he fell short and succeeded only in tearing a deep gash in the man's stomach. The horse lurched to one side and before the dog could do further damage he slipped off to the ground.

Ritter was yelling like a madman. "Ambush," he screamed. Then as Wink hit him, Ritter bellowed, "A wolf. A wolf." As the fleeing outlaw disappeared into the night he was calling out, "Karp, Wilts, wait fer me yuh damn scamps or I'll wooden slug gut shoot yuh."

As Jane and Able surveyed the wagon by the first light of day, they seemed to take their mood from the sky which was starting to fill with large looming gray clouds. One wheel spindle was snapped off and the brake block along with it. The brake board on the underside of the wagon was split and it was impossible to see how much additional damage had been done to the other parts of the undercarriage.

"They sure busted it in the worst places," growled Able.

"If Pa and Mister Dolor hadn't taken the wheels for repair, we wouldn't have anything left," Jane reminded him.

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"It's the work of that Gulder, sure as I'm a foot high, said Able. "And now we got to start wonderin' when they'll come slippin' back with some other slitherin' trick."

"Able, one of us has got to ride down and meet Pa to warn him. While those riders were drinking and boasting last night one of them said something about the other wagon and another easy pouch of dust. I'm just sure they plan to shoot Pa and Mister Dolor and take the wagon."

"I 'spect yuh're right about them skunks plannin' a raid on the other wagon," agreed Able. "But I can't leave yuh here 'cause they might come back and I can't let yuh go down the trail alone. Looks like we both go. I'll tie some ridin' blankets on them fat team bags of yuhrs."

"I'll collect some tins and biscuits," she said as she turned and headed for the cabin.

In only a few short minutes Jane and Able were mounted and riding up the slope toward the long road which wound its way down through the canyon. Wink was eagerly exploring the road ahead, the sides of the road, bounding all around. The burst of activity had revived some of Jane's spirit and she chuckled as she looked at the dog. "Do you suppose he's looking for another wagon thief?"

"He'd have to be bare rib hungry to eat that kind of varmit," snorted Able.

They talked some more about the strange events of the previous evening and finally concluded that the raiders had somehow believed that no one was at home. Jane and Able agreed that Gulder was at the bottom of the whole affair but couldn't decide how Jake Ritter had become a party to it.

"That pot bellied bragger never in his miserable life had an idea he could call his own," said Able. "Back in Wyomin' he had someone to do the thinkin' fer him and it looks like he's gone and found hisself another lead horse."

"Do you think we made a mistake coming up here when we knew there might be trouble?" she asked.

"Folks has to live and folks has to work. A man can't crawl under the hay ever time some flat cactus starts slingin' scare words at him. No, Amos knows what he's about and Milt Dolor's a solid one, too. Gulder's had things his way too long and he's jest actin' like a mean bronc. He's got hisself all puffed up, but I'll put my money on Amos and Dolor to cinch all that hot air out of 'im."

Jane knew that Able was trying to encourage her. The tough old wagon driver's words were sincere and they carried conviction, yet she

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somehow felt uncomfortable. Gulder's threats at their camp and the raid combined to almost make her afraid. In addition to all that, Jane tried to sort out and examine a feeling of isolation, of incompleteness, that had been nagging at her and growing during the past few weeks.

It was too vague and elusive for her to identify and trying to deal with it only frustrated her. She forced herself to think of the trail ahead and meeting with Amos and his new partner. She liked Milt Dolor and knew that her father and Able also took to the exuberant man. His hearty manner was well suited to operating a store in a mining area and business couldn't help but grow. Amos and Able would hold up the freighting end and there was certainly plenty for her to do. Still she couldn't shake her melancholy. She tried to convince herself it was just the weather, which, with each passing hour, grew more threatening.

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Owen Bannack disliked riding off and leaving the Carpenters and Able to fend for themselves. There was much to be done by way of settling in and making the first runs down the mountain for goods to be sold in the new store. There also was the threat by Gulder. It may have been an outburst of temper, but Dolor's description of Gulder suggested that the threat might have more substance than just words.

Still Owen knew that he had no choice in the matter. Serill was almost certain to be in the area and he had to be found. The image of Serill and the other murderers bursting into his ranch yard with guns roaring was burned into his mind. It would remain there until Serill was brought to justice. Only then could that picture be filed in its proper place with other memories where it could fade with time and be replaced with newer and happier impressions.

With an effort Owen forced himself to concentrate on the business at hand. Manhunting was not for the absent-minded or careless. He knew that from the past couple of years with the vigilance committee. Those experiences had sharpened his innate sense of caution and made him an expert in risk taking. Riding now into the rough mining area looking for one of the most cunning gun slicks around was just such a risk, but consistent with his nature, Owen was riding directly at the source of the danger.

Gold Hill appeared as Cocoa picked his way through the trees on the hillside above the camp. Most of the buildings were crude log huts and only a few of the newer ones had been constructed from rough planking.

There didn't seem to be any pattern to the camp. The buildings were randomly scattered over the wide rounded bottom of a creek bed. What passed for a road was a smear of brown that dissolved near the center of the area and reformed itself on the far side of the settlement before slipping over the top of a gentle hill.

Owen pulled the big chestnut to a halt and studied the town carefully. Rather than ride toward it, he followed the line of aspen and evergreens on a circle around the camp. The creek that ran on down the mountain and became the foundation for all the houses in Gold Hill intersected his path. The sides of the creek bore the ugly marks of years of ill use by the gold hungry prospectors.

There were stakes bearing scrawled names and arrows. Broken boards lay in the creek bed itself where water trickled over and around

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their jagged ends. An abandoned sluice box, which was one source of the water soaked and broken boards, lay mangled and broken.

Looking upstream Owen could see where trees had been felled and left to rot, some in, and some out of the creek. Men who hoped to find gold among the roots had ripped many of the stumps out of the earth. The exposed earth had eroded into the creek bed where it collected in brown little islands along the water's edge and among the rocks.

The constant digging along the creek and the use of its waters to wash for color had transformed it from a mountain stream into a watercourse. The violated earth and vegetation had been mauled and abused by shovels and pickaxes until it too had been changed from a creek bank into an alley of litter and decay.

Owen nudged Cocoa across the stream and into the trees on the opposite side. It was mid morning by the time he picked up the road on the far side of Gold Hill. Instead of riding on the roadbed, he took the more difficult route parallel to it but in the thick timber above. Following Dolor's directions was simple and he soon spotted the abandoned stage station where he hoped to find Serill.

There were no horses in sight and the place lay quiet in the bright sunshine. The road passed directly in front of the large building, which had once served as living quarters for the attendant and as a waiting area for passengers. Only a few steps away was the harness shed and horse corral.

Behind the station, the mountainside rose sharply to a hogback which formed the lower step to a rugged mountain whose peak jutted up through the surrounding green tree cover. The lower trees were close to the rear of the station and Owen patiently made his way around the buildings until he was immediately above the log house and only an easy pistol shot from the back door.

He dropped Cocoa's reins into a little patch of grass that had found enough sunlight to grow even among the tall evergreens. A fallen spruce provided him a perfect observation point from which he could see the road in both directions, the corral and the rear of the station. Owen settled himself down among the sheltering branches and began his vigil.

Late in the afternoon, Owen made a meal of the hardtack and jerky that Jane had handed him just before he had ridden off. As he ate, he thought of her anxious but silent face. Owen sensed that she had wanted to speak, to urge him to abandon his unrelenting pursuit of Serill. Yet she had said nothing and he was grateful because it saved discussion

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and explanations. More than that it told him that she understood, at least in part, what was driving him.

Darkness came and he donned his sheepskin, wrapped himself in a blanket, and pulled the thick boughs of the spruce close around. Owen could hear the occasional soft thump of a hoof as Cocoa, who had been unsaddled, tried to be patient with the inactivity.

As the gray light of morning began filtering through the trees, Owen roused himself, rose and stamped life back into his stiff legs. He was hungry and thirsty and thoroughly tired of his waiting game. Cocoa welcomed the blanket and saddle that Owen tossed up on his back because it spelled an end to the standing around in the pine forest.

Owen led Cocoa directly down the slope to the way station. After making sure it was unoccupied, he broke the thin, glass like ice on the trough, watered the big chestnut, and threw a forkful of hay onto the ground in front of him. Owen then went into the house and sorted through the clutter until he found coffee grounds, hard biscuits, and some soft but edible potatoes.

After eating the passable fried potatoes and biscuits, he leaned back with a steaming cup of coffee and surveyed the interior of the building. It was quite spacious by mining camp standards. At the end of the main room was a large fireplace made from native mountain rock. There was a bench along one side covered with what had once been a bright Indian blanket. Now the braided cover was soiled and tattered almost beyond recognition.

There were two wooden chairs with spindly legs and braces scarred from the many spurs that had been hooked over them and jabbed into them. A log section from a tree served as a squat footstool and a catchall table. The saw, which cut the log, had veered off course and left a decided angle to the top of the stump.

Near the center of the room stood a long table made from rough-cut planks. The upper side of the planks was worn smooth from having been the stage for a multitude of plates, cups, knives, spoons, and bowls. There was no space that hadn't been dripped on, spilled on, or smeared with something.

At the far end there were two sets of stacked bunks. One set was apparently unused and the thick strips of rawhide which served as slats were uncovered. The other bunks had been in recent use as was evidenced by the rumpled gray blankets and blue flannel sheets.

As Owen was carefully pouring himself a second cup and trying to keep the grounds from spilling into his cup, he heard the sound of

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horses coming to a halt in front of the building. He barely had time to set the cup on the sideboard before the door burst open.

Immediately the gray early morning light filled the doorway, and into the rectangle of light stepped Karp. He blinked as he looked around the room but his eyes quickly found Owen who was standing and looking at him across the long table.

It was evident that Karp was angry and the first words of an angry greeting were in his mouth before he recognized Owen. Karp became tense and expectant.

"So, it's the big man from the store," breathed Karp as he recovered from his surprise. "What're yuh doin' here? Thieving the place, I expect. I can tell yuh the owner ain't one that'll take kindly to bein' stole from."

Owen was certain that more than one horse had been ridden up to the station and he knew that Karp would wait for his companion before making any kind of play. He also noted the dirty bandage, which was wrapped around Karp's right hand. The man was right handed and Owen guessed that if it came to gunplay Karp would be slow and clumsy.

Before Karp had finished speaking, a tough carrying a Winchester joined him. Owen recognized him as the one who had been with Gulder when the storeowner had threatened Amos and the wagons. The man recognized Owen and shoved past Karp and came inside.

Speaking to Karp over his shoulder he asked, "This the tall weed we been lookin' fer?" Then resting the rifle in the crook of his arm as spoke directly to Owen. "I guess yuhr name's Bannack ain't it? Now ain't this a coincidence?"

"That's right and you're Gulder's man. The one that was going to help burn some wagons a couple of days ago," said Owen evenly.

"Why, yuh must have the wrong man," taunted the man with the rifle. "I'm jest a peace lovin' coyote hunter, and I think I jest found me a mangy brush runner that needs a good shootin'!"

"He oughta be worth a couple of fat bags of Serill's dust," drawled Karp through his crooked smile. "Might be that we shouldn't ventilate the hide jest yet. Pane may have some questions he'd like to lay on 'im before we give 'im a taste of lead."

Owen quietly measured the two as they taunted him. Both were hardened and cynical men and neither would hesitate to kill him at the slightest provocation. At the same time, they were greedy and it was evident from their words that Serill had enlisted them to help find him.

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Owen knew it would be a gamble and one with the odds strongly against him, but one way of finding Serill would be to let him be taken to him. Owen realized that he had to avoid appearing too easy and giving the impression that he wanted to be taken to Serill.

"I don't believe I'll go anywhere with you," Owen said. "I'm partial who I travel with and generally look for men who have at least enough brains to know when they're outgunned. One of you has a busted hand and the other a long gun with an empty chamber. I just wonder if you're really rock headed enough to try to take me anywhere."

Karp quickly looked down at his broken hand and his companion nervously shifted the Winchester which rested across his arm. Owen realized that his guess that the man would have to lever the rifle was probably right on the mark. He thought for a minute that his show of resistance had backed them off and was wondering how to let them take control of the situation again when the rifleman swung the muzzle full upon him.

"If yuh think they ain't no shell in the chamber, Bannack, make a play."

In any other situation Owen would have gambled that the man was bluffing. Carrying a round in the chamber of a Winchester was risky business. Sliding the rifle in and out of a saddle boot could easily cock it and lead to an accidental discharge. Even reckless men seldom took that kind of chance.

Passing the opportunity of testing the man, Owen slowly raised his hands up above the level of his belt. "I don't believe that you're loaded, friend, but on the chance that you are, I'm not calling your hand."

The other, now confident and cocky, snarled, "Collect his hand gun, Karp."

Karp lifted the big navy colt out of Owen's holster and quickly stepped back. He hefted the revolver in his hand as if weighing it, as if deciding whether or not to turn it on the tall man.

"I think we jest pulled some fangs from this snake," grinned Karp. "Now we need to step on his rattles."

"Time fer that later," answered the other. "Right now I say we get him up the hill. I also say that we may have us a real prize here, and we had best be gettin' on with findin' out jest how big. If Serill don't want 'im, Gulder will."

Later, as Karp and the man with rifle rode along the narrow trail that wound up from the valley road, they conversed in low tones about their prisoner. They cast occasional glances over their shoulders at Owen

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who, with hands tied behind his back, sat astride his big chestnut horse that was at the end of a long tether secured to the rifle man's saddle horn.

"Lookie here, Karp," the other was saying, "we know that Serill wants this waddie real bad. We also know that Serill's got a barrel of money. Everyone hereabouts knows he's been buyin' claims left and right for months. I say we stash ole Bannack somewhere and then jest see how bad Serill really wants him."

"I dunno," Karp hesitated. "That Serill strikes me as a man with a spikey cactus temper. I don't know that I want to cross him."

"It ain't crossin', dammit," argued the other. "We done what Serill wanted. We found Bannack. Now we're jest havin' a little auction. Besides, if we get as much fer 'im as I think we will, we can skedaddle fer Denver and fergit about Pane Serill."

Karp who had been tempted up to the mining camp by Jake Ritter was anxious to get back to town and the thought of a pouch of gold put his objections to rest. "I'll go fer it on one condition."

"What's that?"

"Before we deliver Bannack to Serill, I get a chance to even a score." Karp raised his bandaged hand as his narrowed eyes looked back at Owen.

"We ain't goin' to promise anything about his health," laughed the man with the rifle.

Having agreed on this plan, they changed their direction and began following a trail which wound steadily up through a thick stand of aspen whose fluttering leaves were bright yellow against the gray of the overcast morning. As the climb became abruptly steeper, the aspen gave way to an uneven grove of fir interspersed with blue spruce. Outcroppings of rock became more frequent and the trail bent its way around them.

After a while Karp and his companion pulled up on the edge of a little clearing. "How much further?" asked Karp who was clearly growing impatient.

"We're here." As he spoke, the man carefully scanned the clearing ahead. "There's a lean-to across the clearin'. We can plant Bannack there."

"Yuh sure there ain't no one around?"

"Yep. The place is a claim owned by a half-wit name of "Pilfer."

"Strange name," muttered Karp.

"Strange old man," laughed the other. "He's always claimed to be a miner, but in fact never panned a day in his life. He jests collects things

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from others. Anything, everything he can put his hands around, he takes. He's a human pack rat. He carries everything off and hides it here on his claim. Ain't been seen around fer a long time now, probably gone off to some new camp."

The lean-to was a three-sided affair that looked like one half of a small roof planted under a ponderosa pine. The entry came up to Owen's waist and he had to squat in order to pass through it. Inside there was room only for Owen and Karp's cohort who tied Owen's hands over his head to one end of the little enclosure and securely tied his feet to the other. Stretched out on his back Owen was effectively prevented from moving more than a few inches in any direction.

The man crawled out of the lean-to and pulled a worn and dirty canvas down over the opening. Karp, who had not even dismounted, asked, "What about his horse?"

"We can't have 'im wanderin' off. I'll rig a hobble."

Satisfied with their work, the two then turned their mounts to the downhill trail and toward Serill's hangout which was a cabin miles away. As the sound of their horses died away, silence enveloped the clearing and the crude hut. Small flakes of snow began drifting down through the tall trees.

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The day seemed to grow more and more gloomy as Jane and Able rode down the long trail into Boulder Canyon. The clouds grew heavier and the snow began falling more rapidly and began accumulating in little skiffs on the grass and on the wide boughs of the trees. "Do you suppose they could still be in Boulder?" Jane wondered as she shifted on the blanket, she had enlisted as a makeshift saddle.

"Depends," was Able's less than useful answer.

"I know," she sighed, "it depends on whether they were able to get the wheels fixed right away. It depends on whether they had any wagon trouble on the trail. All the same I'll sure feel a lot better when we find them." After a few moments of silence Jane asked the old wagon driver, "Able, do you think Pa and Mister Dolor will be able to work things out with Gulder?"

"Before last night I would've thought so," said Able shaking his head as he brushed a few snows flakes from his beard. "Now I'm more of a mind to hang Gulder on a different peg. The rot goes a lot deeper in that spud than Amos and Milt thought. There may only be one thing that speaks that man's lingo." Able looked down at the big Patterson 10 gauge.

Jane understood his meaning and rather than pursue the matter further lapsed back into silence. The mountains of the canyon seemed to close in upon her and she unconsciously drew the heavy mackinaw closer up under her chin. She knew that Able had not intended to alarm her and if he realized how desolate she felt, he would try to reassure her. However, brave words now would be empty.

The prospects for the Carpenter freight business did not seem at all promising. They had only just arrived in the area and had already been threatened by a man who had shown his character by sending paid toughs on a night raid against the Carpenter's wagon. To make matters worse, she and Able were separated from Amos and his new business partner.

She fought the notion, but it welled up within her nonetheless. It was a burst of resentment at Owen Bannack who had ridden off leaving them shorthanded. If he had only stayed on for a few days until things had settled down a bit, the situation would not now seem so impossible. Her better sense told her that Owen owed them nothing and that the debt he felt to his dead family was a stronger force in his life than any other. Still Jane felt a bitterness at the dead woman and dead children who

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made such a claim on the living. When her father had explained to her how four men had murdered Owen's family and that two of the killers were now dead and that the man, Serill, was the third, she had thought she understood his manhunt. The further fact that the two who had already paid for their deeds had done so by a vigilante code also made sense.

The point of it all seemed indistinct and difficult to accept when she considered that her father and Able could use his strength and his courage in the difficulty with Gulder. Her thoughts were interrupted by Able who seemed to read her mind.

"Be nice if that wagon tongue shooter had stayed around fer a few days," he said, giving her a sidelong glance.

"You mean Owen?" she asked.

"Well, 'Miss Purty Sunset,' who else do yuh think I meant?"

Ignoring his jibe, Jane pretended to have only thought about Owen at that moment. "Now that you mention it, Able, I suppose it would be nice to have another hand just now."

"Nice," he harrumphed.

Before she could answer, Wink, who had been trotting alongside, turned and faced the road behind them. The big dog's ears came to a sharp point and the eyes stared intently as if trying to see through the falling snow. Jane and Able looked back at him and then at each other.

"A varmit maybe?" asked Able looking at her for confirmation.

"I don't think so." As she spoke the dog seemed to lose interest in their backtrail and he turned and loped up to his position alongside Jane's horse.

It was only a brief moment before Wink repeated his maneuver, but this time he added a menacing growl at his invisible subject. He also seemed more determined to wait for something to appear and only Jane's quiet call turned him around.

"Someone or something is behind us and catching up," said Jane looking at Able.

"We couldn't go much faster on these plugs and they ain't but one road," he reflected. "Still I'd druther wait fer Christmas fer my surprises, especially after the ones we've already had in the last few days."

The long wall of mountain which had been paralleling one side of the road for the last mile or more continued ahead as far as they could see through the increasingly heavy snow. The other side of the road was a long precipitous slope down to the rocky creek bed. There did not

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seem to be any way for Jane and Able to go except to continue on their present course.

"Think these big lugs might have a little trot in 'em?" Able asked.

Without answering Jane nudged her huge horse to an amazingly smooth, distance eating trot and Able's mount matched the pace. Like the team they were the horses stayed abreast of one another and swept down the mountain road. Wink, with occasional glances over his shoulder, easily kept his position alongside.

They had gone almost a mile when the roadbed broadened somewhat and seemed to level out. The mountain barrier receded to a more gentle slope and there were paths open to them by which they could pull off the road. Able raised his hand and they brought the team to a halt.

"These two ain't built fer keepin' that up fer long," Able observed. "That looks like a good place to let 'em rest and fer us to get outa the way," he said indicating a stand of evergreens on the upslope side of the road.

"Come on, Ned. It's uphill for a bit." With that Jane turned her horse off the road and toward the trees.

Safely deep into the cover of the bushy spruce trees, Jane and Able dismounted and tied the horses to a stout branch. They then made their way back to a vantage point where they could watch the trail below them. The first thing they both noticed was that they had left a visible trail in the light snow cover and their tracks pointed like a dark arrow directly at their hiding place.

"Only thing more obvious would be fer us to stand in the middle of the road and wave a red shirt," snorted Able.

"We don't know how close they are and by the time they get here, it may be covered," she said looking up at the gray sky and the drifting white flakes.

"As long as we're being wishful, I'd say it might be someone who wouldn't give a busted wheel spoke who we are and who would think we've popped a rivet fer pullin' off the road and hidin' behind the trees." As an afterthought he added, "They might even think we're up here to dry gulch 'em."

"I suppose we are acting pretty skittery," Jane agreed. The way Able put it, she almost felt foolish sitting behind the tree and spying on the empty road.

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Expectation began to grow into a puzzle as they waited and watched but saw nothing except the quiet mountains and the snow scene around them. As Jane had hoped their tracks were finally covered by the snow which was falling so thick and fast that they could hardly see the road any longer.

Able looked down at Wink who was stretched out between them with his head on his paws. For a time after they had taken up their observation post the big dog had been alert and menacing. Looking first down at the road and looking back into the trees he had been tense and had rumbled deep in his throat at something beyond their view. Jane had kept him near and quiet with a few soft commands.

During their expectant watch, however, the dog had become silent and disinterested. His name was reflected in his behavior as he looked from Jane to Able and winked lazily. He seemed now to consider the actions of these people to be somewhat strange but anything they did was all right with him. Wink was content to wait out whatever it was they were doing.

Able looked again at the dog and the old wagon driver's brow wrinkled with suspicion. "Yuh ugly mongrel. I don't think yuhr wagon box is full. All that growlin' and all that hot sniffin' was nuthin' but a poor chipmunk or somethin'."

"You may be right, Able but I would have sworn there was someone on our trail. Wink doesn't act like that about little animals. Even when he's hungry and catches one, he just does it without any fuss. Maybe whoever it was turned off. They may have a claim somewhere along the creek."

"Lots of maybes in the world," he grumbled. "Maybe we lost some ridin' time, too."

With that they rose from their hiding place and trudged back through the timber toward the horses. Jane was the first to realize that the animals were gone.

"Oh, Able," she cried raising her hand to her mouth as if trying to hold back the fact. "They're gone! Ned and Zack are gone!"

They stumbled and ran to the trampled spot where the horses had been tethered. Only the bare trampled ground and the drooping limb with a few scattered green pine needles on the white snow told them this had been where they had left their mounts. The indistinct trail leading away from the area had been covered with snow as had their own trail leading up from the road.

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No words came to them as they stood looking at the empty space. When Able turned, he studied the girl who looked stricken. Her scarf-covered head was bent toward the ground, her ragged coat was pulled close about her and although he could not see them, Able knew tears were streaming down the drawn white cheeks.

"Jane," he said tentatively.

After a moment her head came up and she answered, "Damn, Able. Just damn." She wiped her face with the sleeve of her coat. "I guess we got some walking to do."

"Appears so," he agreed turning and looking downhill toward the road.

"I meant this way." She was looking along the mountainside in the direction of the disappearing tracks of the horses.

"I was afraid that was what you would say," he frowned. "But we're afoot and that trail is disappearin' faster'n lemonade on a hot Sunday. Our best bet is to go back to the road and hike fer Boulder."

She recognized the logic of his words, but her mind had already been set. "We've got to at least try. If we lose the trail, we can always turn back, but right now we have to get moving. We can't stand here while someone is taking our team away."

The tough old wagoneer agreed with her. His instinct was the same, to pursue the thief and try to recover the horses, but the argument to the contrary had to be made. He had to offer her the choice of doing the sensible thing and he had to be sure she was fully committed to making the effort to track the team.

Without another word they turned and began moving in the direction of the indistinct and disappearing hoof prints. As they walked, the snow began filling in their own tracks as if determined that all sign of them should forever be hidden from the rest of the world.

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Pane Serill sat moodily staring into the flames in the little rock fireplace. He was beginning to grow impatient for word from Gold Hill. The men he had hired to watch for Owen Bannack were not bound to him by anything other than a promise of gold. The by-play of Sil Gulder annoyed him. He was afraid that in going off and trying to steal the Carpenter's freight wagon, Ritter and the others would miss Bannack. Serill was also suspicious of Ritter's story about Bannack. Ritter, true to his character, had tried to paint himself as a friend of Serill.

The pot-bellied Ritter with his wide suspenders had been vague about the encounter with Bannack in the little town east of Denver. The best Serill could make out was that Karp had a run in with the vigilante and somehow had ended up getting his hand broken in the process. Ritter had also been less than candid about his unsuccessful attempt to withdraw Serill's money from the Denver bank. In any event, Serill knew that Ritter was not to be trusted and he also knew that Karp and Wilts were only marginally intelligent and that they would follow the orders of whoever paid them the most.

Serill spat angrily into the fire. He had been over and over the situation without seeing any sure-fire way of coming out on top. If he could dispose of Bannack, his troubles could all be managed. He had toyed with the idea of going back down to Gold Hill and looking for Bannack himself. Yet he dismissed the notion because he knew that in a one on one, Bannack would face him down. The thought of being dragged back to Montana to face a vigilance committee sent a shiver down his spine.

He rose, threw some more wood on the fire and poked at it savagely, sending sparks in all directions. He then sat down again and began honing the long thin blade of his knife on a round rock. Occasionally he would slide the knife-edge across the leather upper section of his tall boot which was polished to a shiny luster from the wear of his trousers.

The rhythmic scrape of the knife on the stone was interrupted by the soft unmistakable thud of horses riding into the clearing. Serill was instantly on his feet and standing by the grease paper covered window. Through a torn corner he looked out and saw the forms of two riders take shape in the blurring whiteness of the snow.

Finally recognizing them as Karp and Sil Gulder's sometimes wagon driver, Serill resumed his seat and apparently gave his attention

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back to his knife and the rock. Easy indifference was the picture he presented to the two who barged in through the door and began brushing snow off their hats and coats.

"Close that damn door," he snarled without looking up.

Karp did as he was ordered. The two then began pulling off their coats but were frozen in the process when Serill rapped out at them. "Plannin' on settlin' in fer the winter. Who the hell asked yuh to make yuhrselfes to home?"

The men looked at each other and shrugged. Hunching their arms back into the sleeves of their heavy coats, they walked over to the fireplace.

"Not much of a greetin' from one that's askin' favors," grinned the one with the rifle, making an attempt to be hearty and friendly.

"I ain't askin' favors. I'm payin'," snapped Serill glaring up at his visitors. "Yuh got somethin' to sell or did yuh jest get addle-headed lonely and ride up fer a visit."

"Might jest be that we got somethin' all right," said Karp trying, like his companion, to be smug and lighthearted.

"The only thing I asked any of yuh to do was bring me information about Bannack. If yuh got any spill it, if not, tell me why yuh rode up here. Then get out."

"If I hear yuh right, yuh only want information?" Gulder's man emphasized the word information.

Serill did not answer immediately. He sensed that the two were more confident than mere information would make them. At the same time they were total failures as poker players. Serill, who himself had been involved in nearly every type of crime possible, sensed a shakedown was underway. It made him deeply angry, but he concealed his emotions behind a mask of carelessness and nonchalance.

"If yuh really have somethin' fer me, boys, I may have been a bit hasty. It's this sittin' alone up here that's got me a bit edgy." Serill's voice was smooth and easy. "Take off them coats and have a drink with me. Bottle's over on the table."

The two welcomed the change in attitude but did not stop to ask themselves the reason for it. They accepted Serill's explanation at face value and his offer of a drink eagerly.

After they had settled themselves in a confidential attitude next to the fire, the rifle man leaned toward Serill and said with a knowing grin, "We got somethin' better'n information, Pane."

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Serill's stomach knotted and he fought back the impulse to grab the man by the throat and force words from him. He continued casually working on the knife for a while. Then he nodded at the bottle, which sat on a box near the fireplace. "Say, yuh act like yuh don't like my whiskey. Have another slug. It'll put some warm in yuhr bones."

Both accepted and neither noticed that Serill had not joined them. Their suddenly friendly host had not changed his position or moved since they entered the cabin. It was only his voice that had gone from cold cynicism to warm comradeship. If either of the two guests had any vague thought about the reception they were getting, it would have been an unconscious nervousness about the methodical sharpening and tending of the gleaming long knife which continued to grate across the rock and occasionally visit the boot top.

"Pane, how would you like to have more than information about this Bannack fella?" asked Gulder's man.

"Meanin'?" asked Serill as though not caring a whit about what was being said.

"Meanin' Bannack hisself," put in Karp who could not contain himself any longer.

"Are yuh sayin' that yuh know where he is?" asked Serill who, if it was possible, was more calm than ever before.

"Shoot, that'd jest be information now wouldn't it," laughed Karp's companion. "We said we might have somethin' better and the only thing better would be the big man hisself."

"Look, boys, so far this is all jest a lot of talk. Now have another drink and then yuh can spell it all out fer me. I must say though, it does sound interestin'."

"Interestin'," whooped Karp as he sloshed a plentiful helping of whiskey into the tin cup he had been drinking from. Adopting the first name approach of his cohort, Karp continued, "Why, Pane, yuh ain't even thought of half of it. We got 'im. We got that damn hand crusher dead to rights."

The whiskey was having its effect. Already they had told him more than they intended without having received a promise of payment. The reaction to the revelation was not what they had anticipated. Serill's response was easy, almost disinterested.

"Got 'im? I guess yuh mean Bannack?"

"Who else?" said Karp sloshing more whiskey into his cup and into the cup of his companion. "Bannack hisself, all wrapped up like a fat hog."

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Wiping the blade of his knife on a greasy trousers leg, Serill said nothing. He tested the edge of the blade on this thumb and held the edge up to the light of the fire and surveyed it with a squinted and practiced eye. "What yuh aimin' to do with 'im?"

Neither of the two had anticipated this kind of question and they had no answer. Finally the brighter of the two, Gulder's man, spoke. "Why we was aimin' to sell 'im to yuh."

"To me?" chuckled Serill. "Now why would I want to buy 'im?"

"Yuh offered gold fer information on when he rode into camp," stammered Karp. "Jest now when we came in yuh said yuh was payin' fer information. Now we got 'im in the flesh and we're offerin' to sell 'im to yuh."

Serill was again silent for a long moment. He was glad that Ritter was not with them because Ritter knew just how much Serill really wanted Bannack. These two had only vague notions of some bad blood between Serill and the man they had somehow captured. Serill had never in his life paid for something he could get free and that habit controlled him now. The fact was that his two visitors had Bannack and Serill figured he could get the captive either for money or for a little more talk. He chose the inexpensive way.

"Relax, boys and have another slug of that. It's not yuhr cheap, top of the bar stuff. I brung that whiskey from Denver myself, and believe me it's some of the best." Without giving them a chance to answer or comment, Serill himself leaned forward, took up the bottle and poured a generous helping for each of his guests.

"I think there may be a misunderstandin' here," continued Serill again taking up his knife and balancing it in his hand. "I wanted to talk to Bannack sure enough. We had a misunderstandin' about some money, but yuh probably heard Ritter talk about that."

Karp's whiskey soaked mind struggled to remember and he finally agreed. "He did say that Bannack was on yuhr trail and wanted to catch up with yuh. I somehow thought it was a killin' matter."

Serill laughed heartily. "No such a thing. Jake always was one to stretch things. But yuhr right, I would like to talk to the man and get our little money disagreement straightened out. If yuh remember, I asked whoever spotted Bannack to let me know. Now it sounds to me like yuh went and snatched him up like a wild bear."

The man with the Winchester stared at Serill through bleary eyes. "I think yuh want 'im more'n yuh're lettin' on, Pane."

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Serill was growing increasingly impatient with the two, but he forced himself to play the string out a bit further. "I tell yuh what I'll do," he said cheerily, "since I was askin' about Bannack, and since the two of yuh have got 'im holed up somewhere jest fer me, I say let's go see 'im and I'll pay fer yuhr trouble."

"Pay now," said the rifleman with a thick tongue.

"Sounds okay to me," said Serill. "Karp, if yuh'll sling a bridle on that nag of mine, I'll get my stuff together and we'll go see this prisoner of yuhrs."

Karp threw down the last of the contents of his cup, pulled on his coat, and stumbled through the cabin door. The pull he gave the door was not sufficient to close it, but Karp did not notice as he stood looking for Serill's horse.

It took only a few minutes to catch the horse which was in a corral attached to the end of the cabin. Karp then began looking around for a saddle and blanket. Not seeing one he moved back toward the cabin door, but while a few steps away, the scene his eyes caught through the partially opened door halted him in mid stride. Serill was standing over the body of the rifleman wiping blood from the long knife. Only one of the man's legs was visible and it was angled from the floor up over the wooden box, which had been serving as the stand for the whiskey bottle.

Even Karp's numbed mind realized what had happened and what was in store for him as well. Turning, he ran to his horse and pulled himself into the saddle. Without thinking or knowing why, Karp hesitated long enough to grasp the reins of his now deceased friend's horse and the reins of Serill's unsaddled horse. He then spurred his way across the clearing and into the surrounding trees.

Serill swiftly seized the rifle of the man he had just killed and rushed to the door. There was only an indistinct target blurred by the snow and even as he raised the rifle the trees swallowed the horses. Serill fired anyway, in anger and frustration.

The man had insisted on gold and had demanded payment before they left the cabin. When he announced that he and Karp would need three pouches each, Serill had lost his control and put a knife to the man's throat. The information on where Bannack had been left came gurgling out, then in a drunken and desperate moment he had made a foolish attempt to reach for his rifle.

Serill was furious at his own bungling and at the fact that Karp had made a clear getaway. He was also afraid that Karp would head for old Pilfer's lean-to and free Bannack. Under no circumstances did Serill

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want that to happen. He jammed his knife into its scabbard, threw on a coat, and moved quickly out the door and began the hike down the trail toward Pilfer's camp. Karp's mind cleared a bit as he thundered through the timber toward Gold Hill. He was almost certain that Serill, who was now afoot, would be on his trail. Yet he had a good lead and it would be some time before Serill could make his way down the mountain. Karp hauled in the horses when he reached the turnoff that led to Pilfer's lean-to. Serill's vicious killing of Gulder's driver made it clear that he would do anything to get to Bannack. Karp realized that Bannack was the key to dealing with Serill. With that thought in mind he took the trail which veered off and headed up the mountain through the timber toward Pilfer's.



As soon as Karp and the other man rode away and were out of hearing range, Owen began to test the strength of the cords which had been used to bind his wrists. They seemed tight and had no stretch or give in them. He then tried pulling his legs up, but an expert too had tied them.

After his eyes adjusted to the dim light which filtered in through cracks in the warped and ill-fitting boards, Owen began to survey his little cell. Under him there was a matted blanket which was dry and musty and which gushed out puffs of dust around him as he twisted and tried to turn. Tucked in a corner under the slanting roof were miscellaneous utensils, including a rusty cup and a scattered array of tarnished knives, forks and, spoons. Also nearly hidden from view, was a rusty shovel lying far out of his reach along the back edge of the roof where it met the ground.

The roof of the little structure seemed tight enough since no light came through there. Lining it on the inside were strips of burlap held in place by small wire staples. The four roof beams were studded with nails and from each nail there hung some trifling object. There was a thimble on one, a small green bottle suspended by a thread wrapped around its neck, a lid lifter from a wood stove, and on one nail Owen saw a string of keys.

All the items in the lean-to were tantalizingly close yet far out of reach. By raising his head, Owen could see that the ropes around his feet had been tied to the heavy main support beam that held most of the weight of the roof. Although he couldn't see his hands, he guessed that they were tied in the same way.

He hadn't bargained for this kind of event. He had hoped that Karp and the other man would take him to Serill. Somewhere in the trip or in the meeting with the murdering Serill he felt that he could free himself. The greed of his captors had caused things to take an unexpected turn and he realized that his life depended upon his ability to get loose.

Owen again tested the ropes on his hands and only managed to cut off the blood. After pulling with all his might, trying to stretch them a bit, he was forced to slack off for a minute. He tried turning from side to side and only raised more foul smelling dust, which settled in his eyes and nose.

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As he made a number of unsuccessful attempts at freeing both his feet and his hands, Owen began to feel that he had gained a slight bit of freedom and that he could slide up and then back down a bit. It was slow work but he was encouraged despite the fact that his wrists were raw and bleeding and cramps were settling into his arms and shoulders.

Following a moment of exertion, Owen lay resting and trying to ease the tension on his arms as much as possible. He turned his head toward the front wall of the lean-to and his eyes fell upon a crack between two boards. To his astonishment he found himself staring directly into a wild blue eye less than a foot away. It disappeared and Owen wondered if he had imagined the staring eye.

Before he could decide what to make of it, the canvas on the door stirred and as it came away from the door, Owen saw two eyes. They were set under a white mane of hair that pushed out from under the sides of a round fur hat. The hair mingled with a bushy white beard that engulfed the lower part of a bright red face.

The blue eyes snapped at the dim interior and then focused on Owen. The man wore a full length black overcoat held closed by a wide leather belt. At first he stood looking cautiously at the interior as though ready to sprint away at any sign of trouble. Then he knelt in the doorway and stared at Owen.

He did not seem disposed to speak and at the same time did not appear at all uncomfortable by the silence. He simply stared at Owen and, after a while, tilted his head to the left and then to the right and back again to the left.

Owen sensed that this situation might require some tactful maneuvering. "Hello," he said, in as friendly a tone as he could summon.

There was no answer.

"My name is Owen Bannack. What's yours?"

The whiskers twitched and the air of expectant watching softened a bit.

"Do you live around here?" As he asked the question, it occurred to Owen that this might be the man's house. "Does this place belong to you, old timer?"

The man's response was to change his position. He sat down in the doorway and drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around the bony legs. The thought went through Owen's mind that the position seemed natural to the old man and somehow Owen knew that it was indeed his lean-to.

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

"I'd be glad to leave your place, but as you can see I'm tied hand and foot. It's none of your affair and need not involve you. If you would just cut me loose, I could be gone in a minute."

None of what he said had any visible effect on the strange man. Owen tried everything he could to get a response but nothing worked. It was clear that his visitor was slow-witted and Owen knew that he might never get any help or any kind of answer from him.

Owen returned to his struggle to loosen the ropes. He strained with all his might to pull his feet up. Again he had very little success.

"That ain't a goin' to work," came a raspy voice from behind the beard.

"Maybe," answered Owen, "but I've got to try."

"Yuh can try, but it ain't a goin' to work," said the raspy voice again.

Owen felt it was a ridiculous thing to say but he felt that anything was worth the attempt. He asked, "Do you have any idea of something I could do that might work?"

The old man surveyed him from head to toe. His gaze lingered on the ropes and knots. He truly seemed to be trying to puzzle a way out of the situation.

"Have yuh tried sliding yuhr feet outa them boots?" asked the white beard.

"Yes, but I believe the ankles are tied a bit too tight for that."

"Can yuh reach any of them knives or forks?" The old man asked with the utmost gravity.

"No, sir, I cannot. I have tried but there is no way that I can even come close to them," Owen answered with equal seriousness.

The old man reflected for a long time before he spoke again. "There ain't no way yuh could reach the shovel?"

"I'm afraid not," answered Owen, "As you can see, I can only move a few inches from side to side. No, the shovel is out of the question."

The man's head fell forward and his great beard flattened out against the dark overcoat. Owen could not tell for sure, but after a few moments he was reasonably certain the man had fallen asleep or his mind had simply drifted off. Giving up on the oldster as being hopelessly insane, Owen resumed his struggle against the ropes.

Instantly the old head came up and the raspy voice reminded him, "Pilfer has said it won't work."

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

"Is that your name? Pilfer?" asked Owen. "Pilfer, I wonder, if you would please use one of those knives to cut the ropes around my hands. That surely would work."

The bright blue eyes never wavered or registered any comprehension of the request. As they had before, they examined Owen from head to toe and gave special attention to the ropes. Then the eyes traveled around the inside of the lean-to. They fastened on the beams over head.

"The nails," suggested Pilfer, "Could yuh pick open the knots with the nails?"

"That might work if I could reach the nails," agreed Owen, trying to humor the man. "The difficulty is that I can't reach them. Perhaps if you untied some of the ropes, I could reach up and then use the nails."

Again, Pilfer made no response. While Owen was trying to think of something that would capture the man's attention in a constructive way, he saw the white head tilt quickly to one side in a listening attitude. Then he, too, heard the approaching thump of horses.

With the quickness and nimbleness of a wild animal, Pilfer was on his feet and gone. Owen was straining on the ropes as Karp cautiously appeared in the doorway of the lean-to, gun in hand. Karp's caution was, in part, brought on by the drawn back canvas door cover which he was certain had been pulled down when he left.

Karp carefully surveyed the interior, giving close attention to the ropes. Satisfied that the prisoner was still secure and incapable of moving Karp holstered his gun and squatted in the doorway.

"Bannack, I'm gonna cut the ropes holdin' yuh to them posts. But remember that yuhr hands will still be tied. If yuh make any kind of play, I'll plug yuh and leave yuhr carcass to the wolves."

As he dug into a pocket under his coat, Karp spoke of his recent brush with Serill. "We planned on sellin' yuh to yuhr pal, Serill, but he ain't interested in buyin'. Leastwise that's what he says. I think he's lyin' so I'm gonna stash yuh somewhere else until Serill and me can make a deal fer yuhr hide."

Karp had produced a pocketknife and opened it. He was leaning over to cut the ropes on Owen's hands when the club hit him. The thick timber smashed into his lower back with a thump. The blow knocked Karp forward and he fell across Owen's chest. With a scream of pain he rolled to one side as another sweep of the club brought it down on his side.

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The startled Karp clawed his way up to his hands and knees and backed out of the lean-to. As he pulled his gun from his holster, the club fell again on his forearm and wrist. As he rolled away screaming in agony, he had the impression of two flaming blue eyes burning in a fiery red face entirely surrounded by a white halo. Raised over the white head were two arms and in the hands was a thick, heavy tree limb. The limb came crashing down again on Karp's shoulder. The limb was raised again and down it came.

Karp rolled over and over until he was some distance from the lean-to. He was badly injured and the pain of coming to his knees almost caused him to lose consciousness. The man with the club did not pursue him, but stayed by the door of the hut as if guarding it. Karp stumbled and crawled to his horse. He pulled himself upright, moaning from the pain. The fear that the assailant would come after him gave Karp the strength to drag himself into the saddle. Having done that, the outlaw headed his horse away, and as he entered the forest, he slumped over his saddle in a red daze of blinding pain.

The clubbing of Karp came as much of a surprise to Owen as it did to the victim. After Karp had crawled out of the lean-to, Owen could hear a few more thumps and Karp's injured cries, but he could see nothing. After a few moments of silence, Pilfer again appeared in the opening of his house. The thought crossed Owen's mind that he might be next in line for the club, but as the old man resumed his seat, that became a less likely prospect.

It was as though nothing had happened. Pilfer wrapped his arms around his legs and stared blankly at Owen. After a time the red brow furrowed as though the mind had come upon a great puzzle.

"That'll work," the voice grated into the silence.

"What'll work, Pilfer?"

"That'll work." The rasping voice was louder now and the tone was more insistent.

The bright eyes flitted toward Owen's hands and were caught by something near them. Owen's mind raced, trying to understand Pilfer's strange behavior and apparently empty words. Owen concluded that the key must be connected with Karp's sudden appearance and forced departure. He retraced the events, second by second and tried to recall Karp's words.

"The knife!" Owen remembered that Karp had been leaning toward him with a pocketknife when the first blow landed. He began exploring the area around his hands and almost instantly felt the knife

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handle. He carefully maneuvered it into his hand and positioned the edge on the ropes.

As he began sawing at the cord, Pilfer nodded and said, "That'll work."

It did and in a few moments Owen's hands were free from the post allowing him the great relief of bringing his hands down to his stomach. It was the work of only a few seconds to cut the ropes away entirely. The ropes on his feet parted with one flash of the blade and the only thing between Owen and complete freedom was old Pilfer, who had watched the entire operation with the greatest interest.

"Well, Pilfer, that certainly did work. I'll give you back your house now and thank you for your hospitality. As a matter of fact, I might be able to go one better than that."

Owen reached back and retrieved the big McKibbin hat, which had been crushed, under his head. He carefully straightened it and punched up the crown. From under the band he withdrew a bright red ribbon which was tied to a small, dainty piece of embroidery.

He extended the ribbon to Pilfer. "I've been carrying this too long and it's time it gave someone else a bit of pleasure. Would you like to have it, Pilfer?"

The old hermit's eye's widened. He obviously understood the offer. A skinny hand tentatively reached out and gently took the offered gift.

Owen was soon in possession of both Karp's revolver and his own navy colt, which had fallen from Karp's belt as he rolled away from Pilfer's beating. Cocoa was freed from his hobbles and Owen was saddled and ready to ride when old Pilfer looked up at him with a hint of sadness on his face. "If yuh come back, it'll work fine."

"Don't worry, Pilfer, I won't forget you," Owen promised. "I think you're right, everything will work fine." With that Owen looked for the tracks of Karp's horse in the snow. The trail was fresh and simple to follow and Owen urged Cocoa to the task of following the wounded man.

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME



Amos Carpenter and Milt Dolor squinted their eyes against the snow as the team steadily worked its way up the canyon road. The snow level had risen to the height of the horses' ankles but was not yet a serious problem. The snow was a nuisance though, because the iron wagon rims were wet and, as they turned, clots of snow occasionally stuck to them and were carried around and thrown in front of the wheels. The effect was to magnify the bumps in the road.

They had left Boulder early in the morning and hoped to get back to Champa that evening. Amos was concerned that the snow might get deep enough to slow them down and force them to hole up for the night. He wanted to avoid that if possible. Able was a solid and dependable man, but Amos still felt anxious about Jane. This was new country for her and despite her brave words, Amos knew that the change from Wyoming to the mining area would be difficult for her.

"Sure is gettin' thick," observed Dolor in his always-loud voice. "I hope we can make it in tonight. I'd rather hole up in my own house during one of these early storms than under a tree somewhere."

"We're doin' fine fer now," answered Amos. "Problem is that it's pilin' up pretty fast. Pretty soon it'll add to the pullin' and the team'll start to wear out."

"They're sure a fine pair," said Dolor looking down on the broad backs of the giant horses.

"They're a mite spoiled. Jane tends to overfeed 'em and keeps after me about workin' 'em too hard, but, yes, they are fine animals." Then he added, "Right now they could use a good blow. I don't think they're doin' so well in this thin air."

"Netters Flats shouldn't be far ahead," advised Dolor. "In fact it's just a couple of more bends of the creek."

"Good, we'll pull up there," nodded Amos.

The team was more than willing to stop when Amos hauled back on the long reins. Amos set the brake and the animals were able to ease back from the thick breast straps. The white steam from their nostrils came in heavy blasts and Amos realized that the pulling had been more difficult than he had thought. The combination of the uphill haul and the snow had been working against the horses and they needed the rest.

"We might as well climb down, Milt," said Amos. "It's going be a while before we're ready to take on that run outa the canyon."

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The men dismounted and flapped their arms to get the circulation going and to relax from the hours on the driver's seat. Amos walked around the wagon checking the load and looking over the rig itself. As he did so, he noticed tracks in the snow. In the sheltered area alongside the cliff above, the snow was not as deep as in the more exposed places. Thus the tracks hadn't filled as rapidly as they would have on the road itself.

"Say, Milt," called Amos, "what do yuh make of this?"

Dolor joined him and the two squatted down and looked at the tracks. They were larger than those of a saddle horse and indicated a much larger animal, perhaps a wagon horse. Amos carefully brushed some of the fresh snow out of the deep indentations and peered intently at the mark.

"By golly, I'd almost swear these were made by my other team," mused Amos. "Look at the bend in that shoe and the spacing of the cleats."

The wagon owner stood up and walked quickly to his team. He knelt down behind them and studied their fresh hoof prints. Dolor looked over his shoulder and whistled softly. "They look exactly the same to me, Amos. Too much the same to be an accident."

"I'd bet a new wagon that those tracks were made by Ned and Zack," exclaimed Amos shaking his head. "This spells trouble. Jane and Able wouldn't have ridden down here unless there was some kind of emergency. They couldn't have been pullin' the wagon because we've got the rear wheels."

"Could it have been some other wagon?" wondered Dolor.

"No, there ain't any wheel tracks."

"I don't want to be too quick on the trigger or to throw a scare into yuh," boomed Dolor, "but this has the earmarks of Gulder on it."

"If he's harmed that girl..." Amos' face had become an iron mask of cold fury. The threat was all the more ominous for never having been put to words. Yet his composure held firm. He stepped back to the set of tracks that had attracted his attention. He bent over and began scanning the snow, trying to determine which way the horses had been heading and trying to confirm his suspicions that they were in fact his team.

Dolor spoke first. "It's clear enough that there were two big horses and one, maybe two, saddle ponies."

"I'd guess two," said Amos. "Next question is which way were they headin'?"

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

"It looks like they came from down the road and were going up the canyon same as us," exclaimed Dolar looking into the snow toward the road which led to Gold Hill.

Amos forced himself to wait a quarter of an hour before announcing that it was time to get rolling again. He knew that the team needed the rest and that without it he ran the serious risk of having them give out on the steep Gold Hill road ahead.

When he snapped the reins, the animals were ready and willing to go. The cold was beginning to settle into the canyon and was beginning to be felt by both men and animals. The men were glad to be on the move because of the mystery which weighed heavily on their minds. The horses were glad to be moving because the work stirred their blood and drove away the cold that had started to press in upon them.

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME



Jane and Able were following an indistinct and uncertain trail, but on more than one occasion they found a sign telling them they were still on the right track. Once it was a trampled seedling that had suffered from the hooves of passing horses. Another time it was the droppings whose warmth had melted a little ring in the snow. Still another sign was the packed and scuffed area where the thieves had stopped to rest and perhaps get their bearings.

At first the two trackers found themselves crossing a long gentle bare slope. Walking there was difficult because the hillside was strewn with rocks lying just below the surface of the snow. Both stumbled and more than once each fell. The cruel edges of the rocks ripped at their boots and tore at their heavy coats when they fell to the ground.

They were glad to enter a timbered area where the snow cover was much lighter and walking on the soft mat of pine needles was easy compared to the slippery and treacherous hillside. They made good time while they were in the shelter of the timber and Jane began to entertain serious hopes of catching up with their stolen horses any minute. Even Able hefted his long shotgun in grim expectation.

Abruptly they found themselves out of the trees and in the open again, facing a rockslide. The rock consisted of chunks of what the miners sometimes called "rotten rock." The pieces resembled little bricks two to three inches on each side. Walking on the slide was almost impossible and with each step the rock gave way almost causing them to tumble down the face of the steep slope. After they had managed to scramble across the slide and as they sat resting under the wide, spreading branches of a ponderosa pine, Jane expressed her concern for the horses. "How did they ever manage to cross that place?" she wondered aloud.

"Maybe they went around," suggested Able. "We ain't seen any sign to prove that they went this way."

"But everything on the other side pointed this way," she reasoned.

"I hope yuh're right. I wouldn't want to cross back over them rocks. They're slipperier'n a wet bar of store soap in a Saturday night tub."

"Where do you think they're headed," asked Jane peering at the trees ahead.

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"We won't know that until we catch up with 'em," said Able, "but right now I'd say they were headed back toward the road. We been runnin' alongside it fer a couple of miles, but it's been too steep to get down to it. This long trough must meet with the creek and the road somewhere soon and if I were doin' it, that's where I'd go."

"That would mean they were probably going back toward Gold Hill wouldn't it?"

"That'd be a good guess, but I ain't no expert on this country. Could be some other minin' camp or town hereabouts that would be just as good a bet."

Hours later as the light began to fail and as the leaden sky began to darken, Jane and Able stepped out of the trees onto the level terrace of Netters Flats. Almost immediately Able recognized it as the place where Gulder had pulled up in his buggy and threatened the Carpenter wagons with fire.

"We'd have done a heap better to jest have gone back to the road in the first place," he snorted. "It'd been easier walkin' and we'd have made better time. We might even have got here ahead of 'em."

"This place is only a few miles back up the road from where we started isn't it?" Jane said acknowledging the truth of Able's remark.

"I ain't a good judge of walkin' distance, but I'd say more like a good five miles," Able growled.

The full impact of the loss was beginning to weigh more heavily upon Jane. She had refused to accept any thought that the horses might never be recovered. The tramp through the mountains had occupied her mind and somehow she had believed that they would catch the thieves and somehow get the animals back.

However, the fading light and the obvious impossibility of tracking the horses any longer began to force her to face up to their situation. She also began to feel the exhaustion of their long and difficult walk. Hunger had not bothered her all day, but now she remembered the tote sack of provisions that she had tied to Ned's harness.

Able, too, was feeling the wear of the day's events in his mind and in his old bones. Losing the team made him feel that he had somehow failed in his duties to Amos and the girl. On top of all that he now had to face the immediate problem of survival.

"I guess we ain't got much choice but to hole up somewhere," he offered.

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"Yes, I suppose so," she agreed with great resignation in her voice. "Trying to go on seems kind of useless, and you must be exhausted carrying that heavy gun all day."

He looked down at the long 10 gauge with its revolving chamber. In fact it was a burden and quite heavy. "This? It's like a part of my arm. Without it I'd probably walk with a tilt in the other direction. Come on, let's scout around and see what we can do fer a camp."

Able selected a fir tree with thick and low hanging branches for their camp. Up close to the trunk the ground was still bare and covered only with brown pine needles. He carefully cleared the dry debris away and built a small bed of the needles and fine twigs in the center of the little clearing. He broke open one of the shells from the shotgun and sprinkled the black powder over his firebed. Following a routine that he had obviously used many times before, he extracted a small piece of flint from a recessed space in the stock of the gun and scratched it along a small, finely serrated section alongside the barrel of the gun.

The little fire smoked then flamed to life almost instantly. Larger twigs followed and soon the fire took hold of the pieces of wood Jane had collected from the plentiful supply that lay in every direction around them.

Both of the campers worked to gather armloads of large pine boughs from surrounding trees. These they stacked in a semicircle around the fire until the green wall merged with the lower branches of their sheltering fir. By any standard the little encampment was quite snug and warm.

Able searched the ground along the roadway, kicking the snow off rocks and scuffing them with his feet until he found a flat stone about the size of a plate. It was shale stone and soft enough to yield to the blows of a sharp piece of granite. Hammering the shale gently, Able managed to chip away an indentation in the center of his flat rock.

He perched his rock on the edge of the fire and proceeded to fill his indentation with snow. As it melted he added pine needles which he crushed and twisted in his callused hands. "If yuh wouldn't mind tearin' me a piece of yuhr shirt sleeve, we'll have some of the worst tea yuh ever drunk," grunted Able.

She did as he directed and handed him a cuff from her work shirt. He sopped it in the steaming brew, tilted his head back and squeezed the cloth's contents into his mouth. "Could use a mite of sugar," he grinned as he handed her the sodden cloth.

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Jane duplicated his action a couple of times then handed him back the cloth, "I'd say a touch of cream would help."

Somehow the fire and the chance to sit and rest had revived their spirits. They laughed at their crude teapot but recharged it with more snow and pine needles until they each managed to feel the warmth of the liquid and feel that their stomachs were less empty than before.

They agreed to take turns sleeping so that the fire would be kept burning and so that it would not accidentally spread to the nearby dry mat of pine needles. Able insisted on taking the first shift and without any urging Jane curled up against their pine bough wall, covered herself with a few extra boughs and was soon fast asleep. Able sat staring at the fire and the looming darkness that encircled them.



Owen easily overtook the almost unconscious Karp before the injured man reached the trail, which angled down the mountain to Gold Hill. Owen almost felt sorry for the man whose shoulder sagged, suggesting a broken collarbone and whose limp arm was a sure sign of a fractured forearm.

"Hold up there," he said as he reached out and took the bridle of Karp's horse in his big hand.

Karp looked up and for a minute didn't recognize Owen. "Who in blazes?" he slurred.

"It's me, Owen Bannack."

Karp drew away and almost fell from his saddle. "Don't hit me," he whined.

"I don't intend to," he reassured the man. "You and I can part company right here if you'll tell me where I can find Serill."

"Serill?" The name cut through the mantle of pain that surrounded Karp's mind. "That filthy little weasel killed 'im."

"You mean your partner?"

"Yeah, Gulder's man."

"Where?"

It took some prodding but Karp told Owen what had happened and gave him directions to the cabin. By the time he finished his story, Karp was close to sagging off his horse onto the ground. Owen knew that if the man faded into unconsciousness he could either fall into the snow or freeze or get his foot caught in the stirrup and be dragged to death. Despite his wish to get on the trail, Owen took the time to tie the groggy Karp to his saddle so that the worst he could do would be to slump over the pommel. He led Karp's horse to the fork in the trail, headed the animal toward Gold Hill and gave him a soft slap on the rump.

Satisfied that Karp's horse would keep moving, Owen turned Cocoa toward Serill's hideaway and commanded the chestnut to a brisk trot. Following the trail was easy and he made good time up the gently sloping mountainside.

Owen did not see the staring eyes that lurked behind some snow covered bushes and watched him ride by. They belonged to Pane Serill who had darted off the trail the instant he saw the horse and rider ahead. The panting Serill had thrown himself behind the thick bush and strained to hold his breath as his pursuer swept by.

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Serill was tempted by the target presented by the broad back of Owen Bannack. However the opportunity was available to him for only an instant and he made no attempt to seize it. He considered the possibility of waiting for the tall man to come back as Serill was certain he would. However, any confrontation without support was unacceptable to him, and he quickly found excuses to avoid such an event. Serill told himself that a six gun was too uncertain for the task and that he would be prudent to wait for another time and another place, one of his own choosing. For right now he needed another place to hole up until he could put together a plan.

Serill's mind sorted through the possibilities. Gold Hill was out because that would be the first place Bannack would go. The way station also was out of the question because his ownership of it and his use of it as a residence was too generally known.

Suddenly he remembered a crude cabin on the far side of Gold Hill. It was located on a claim he had won in a poker game months ago. The loser in the game had left town immediately after losing the claim and, as far as Serill could recall, no one knew that he owned it. "Yes," he thought to himself, "the Rusty Dime is a perfect place to roost while I decide what to do about that damn vigilante."

Serill was correct in his guess that Owen would soon be riding back down the trail. Owen visited the cabin and surveyed the scene. It was just as bad and as gruesome as Karp had said. An inspection of Serill's possessions and housekeeping items gave no clue to where the killer might have gone.

Owen was relieved to get back outside in the cold air. He swung up into the saddle and spoke aloud to Cocoa. "I reckon it's time we paid a visit to Gold Hill, pard. It's getting dark and we might find some cold prospectors in the local bar getting warmed up."

From what Karp had told him, Owen hadn't really expected to find Serill sitting in the cabin. Yet he had hoped to find something that would suggest where to look next. The man had eluded him in Denver and this seemed to be a repeat of that experience. Still Owen had the feeling that it wouldn't be long before he found Serill. The trick would be to make sure that the meeting was not entirely on Serill's terms.

As he rode down the hillside toward the mining camp, Owen noted how the little cluster of buildings had been built along the bed of a mountain stream. Some of the cabins sat precariously on the very edge

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of the bank while others rested a safer distance away from the rushing water.

With the snow covering the ground and piled up on the roofs of the cabins and sheds, Gold Hill merged into the valley floor. A traveler, not knowing of its existence, might have even passed by it without realizing it was there. However the signs of human habitation were visible to the watchful eye. The smoke from the wood fires rose in the still air and where it met the cooler air above the valley it flattened out and lay like a great dish hovering over the buildings below. In the late evening hours when the smoke was not visible, light from the windows of the cabins was. The little squares of faint yellow from flickering lamps and candles were like eyes peering out into the darkness.

As Owen rode down what passed as a main street, he watched for something to indicate the location of the ever-present saloon. A number of horses tied to a hitching pole and the waffled snow in front of a long log building told him he had found it.

Before dismounting his eyes caught sight of two large horses tied far from the others almost out of sight around the corner of the saloon. The darkness permitted him to see only the heavy bulk of the animals, yet the size of the horses and a vague sense of familiarity caused him to walk Cocoa down to where they stood.

Having traveled from Wyoming with the Carpenters and having done much of the wagon driving, Owen immediately recognized Ned and Zack, two of Amos' prize horses. He rode over and placed his hand on Ned's neck. It was warm but did not have the heat of an animal recently ridden or worked in harness. Apparently the team had been standing there for some time.

Owen knew that Amos and Milt Dolor had driven to Boulder the day before and he remembered that they had left these two in the corral. That meant only Jane and Able remained at Champa, and Owen could not imagine either one of them having any business in Sil Gulder's saloon in Gold Hill.

A deep frown sat upon Owen's brow as he stepped down from the back of the big chestnut. Walking to the door he took note of the fact that there were only three other saddled horses standing and apparently waiting for the return of their owners.

The interior of the building was lighted by two large kerosene lamps hanging from nails driven into the log roof beams. The half

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of the building which served as a store was in darkness and the lamps hung only over the saloon area.

Sitting directly in the middle of the building and marking the store operation from the bar was an ornate iron stove. The store half sat in darkness and the other half was bathed by the yellow lamp light. From the center of the stove's round fat belly six red, fierce eyes peered through the isinglass and the fire appeared to be watching the human activity, waiting for an opportunity to burst out of its containment and feed upon the logs of Gulder's saloon.

Almost the entire back wall was lined with a crude bar. In fact, it consisted of planks resting on wooden barrels. Behind the bar and under it there was an assortment of boxes and some small kegs. There was an elk hide nailed to the wall behind the bar and above it was a large rack of horns. Below the hide was a crude little table holding a couple of cigar boxes and an assortment of tobacco plugs.

Leaning on the bar were two prospectors. One wore a tattered mackinaw topped by a black cap with earflaps standing out to the sides like broken bird wings. His companion wore a buffalo hide in a poncho style, his head protruding through a slit in the dark brown hair. His head covering was simply a long woolen scarf which now draped around his neck.

The prospectors were drinking and talking loudly about color that one claimed he had found a few miles outside of the camp. The one with the bird-wing cap was insistent. "By damn I know there's a pocket there that'll be deeper'n anything yuh ever saw."

His fellow drinker was skeptical. "They ain't been nuthin' doin' up thataway this year. It's been all panned and picked til they ain't a rock left right side up. If yuh found color, put 'er on the bar. Let's see yuhr proof."

"Proof. Proof." mimicked the other. "Yuh wouldn't know color if I was to stick it in yuhr eye. It's there. I jest know it is."

"If yuh want me to help yuh dig in a glory hole that's already been worked clean, yuh got to come up with somethin' better'n jest what yuh think." The owner of the buffalo robe flipped the end of the scarf over his back and took a long drink.

"If yuh ain't interested, they's others that will be," replied the man in the mackinaw with a knowing nod of the head. "Fact is, while I was workin' the lower wash I saw someone ridin' up there."

"To the Rusty Dime?" sneered the buffalo poncho. "A man would be a fool to be ridin' up there at night. The place is like one of

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them cheeses filled with holes. He'll likely end up in one with a busted neck. That's ain't my idea of gold diggin'. No sir. Not my idea at all."

Owen stood listening to the them as he stood just inside the door. The three men sitting at the table had also been listening to the heated exchange and had not noticed Owen's quiet entrance. The talk of the two drifted off to another subject as Owen stepped toward the table.

Wilts saw Owen first but failed to recognize him immediately. Then Wilt's eyes blinked with a sort of nonverbal stutter. The other two noted the reaction of Wilts and turned their heads.

"Don't bother to stand, gents," said Owen as Jake Ritter and Sil Gulder pushed their chairs away from the table. The words came as an order and not a polite greeting. Gulder and Ritter froze in their seats.

"Bannack," sputtered the startled Ritter. "What're yuh doin' here?"

"I guessed you might be in here, Ritter. I couldn't very well ride by without stopping to give you my regards," said Owen with a half smile.

"Yuh got a lot of gall waltzin' in here after what yuh did to poor ole Karp. He's near dead. Only a stinkin' lobo would club a man from behind." As he spoke, Ritter nervously slid his thumbs up and down under his wide suspenders. It was almost as if he were going out of his way to leave no doubt that his hands were in plain view.

Owen ignored the remark and turned the full force of his deep gray eyes upon Gulder. He looked the man up and down before he spoke. "We could dance around this for a while, Gulder, but I haven't got the time. I'll ask you straight out and one time only. How did you get that team of horses? I know that the people who owned them would not have sold them to you or to anyone else. Make it short and make it good. How?"

Gulder looked up into the wide face which was shaded from the lamplight, and he was taken aback by the intensity of the penetrating stare. Gulder was a strong man, tempered into hardness by his life in the mining camps, but he instinct told him that his life now rested on a delicate balance.

"Easy now, Bannack. Don't jump into somethin' that don't concern yuh. The first rule of the camp is that every man minds his own business." Gulder's tone was placating and soft, not belligerent.

"That may be the only reason that men like you are able to survive," Owen answered evenly. "If people did care what was happening to others and took the time to stand together, thieves and

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hired guns would crawl back into the ground." His quick glance at Wilts and Ritter as he said the words "thieves and hired guns," served to sweep away any thoughts they might have had about making a move against him. "But that doesn't answer my question. I told you that I wasn't going to debate the question. For the last time, how did you get that team?"

Gulder's rough character wouldn't permit him to yield without another attempt to resist. Despite what he knew to be a threat to his very life, the saloon owner bristled a bit. "I'm tellin' yuh that ain't none of yuhr damn business, and if yuhr worried about that old man and Carpenter's little tramp daughter..."

Before the next word could pass the man's lips, Owen's iron fist caught him full in the face. Gulder's head reacted as though it has been hit point blank by a cannon ball. It snapped back and when it reached the limit of bone and flesh, it pulled him backward in his chair. As Gulder and his chair went over backwards, his feet swung up and tipped the table into the laps of Ritter and Wilts.

Owen's arms went out on both sides in a wide arc and collected a wide-eyed Wilts and a startled Ritter. With a great surge, Owen shoved them back from the table and up against the far wall. He thus managed to keep them in front of him as he reached down and lifted Gulder from the wreckage of his chair.

The man was still stunned and shocked as blood spurted from his nose and mouth. With his left hand Owen pulled the man toward him. As he did so, he hit him again with the right. The bone in Gulder's face and jaw gave way. Senseless, Gulder sagged in Owen's grip.

He released Gulder, who sank to the floor, and looked first Wilts and then at Ritter. "I'll ask you, Ritter. How did those horses get here?"

"We...We brung 'em up here fer Gulder," Ritter stammered. Placing the blame on Gulder seemed safe enough. At least it was the expedient thing considering the circumstances and Jake Ritter's life was a series of doing and saying the convenient.

"From where?"

Ritter and Wilts began to speak at once. Ritter tried to say something about Champa, but Wilt's reference to the canyon caught Owen's attention. Fixing Wilts with a level stare, Owen urged him to speak. "I'd advise you not to follow the lead of Ritter here, it'll only land

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you in more trouble. You brought them up here from the canyon. Where in the canyon?"

"Down on the Boulder road about five or six miles from Netters Flats," said Wilts almost eagerly.

"What were they doing there?"

"I don't know," blinked Wilts as though the thought had never before occurred to him.

Still hoping to head off any further admissions, Ritter threw in, "We don't know nuthin' about that. We jest brought the team up here. That's the whole story."

"We shouldn't have left 'em there, Jake," said Wilts, shaking his head from side to side.

"Gulder mentioned the girl and an old man," Owen reminded them. "Are they the ones you left in the canyon?"

"Yeah, they're the ones we took the horses from," admitted Wilts looking down at the toes of his boots.

There was as much iron in his voice as in his fist as Owen asked, "What did you do to them?"

Seeing an opening for what he hoped would be good news, Ritter joined in the exchange. "We didn't do nuthin' to 'em. Fact is, they didn't even see us. They jest got some walkin' to do." Ritter, of course, made no mention of the night raid and the attempt to steal the wagon which led up to the events in the canyon.

Owen relieved the two of their six shooters and he also pulled a revolver from the belt of Gulder. He emptied the chambers of the cartridges, opened the door with the isinglass eyes, and fed the guns to the roaring flames. Turning to Ritter he said, "I keep running into you and each time I do you're causing trouble for Amos Carpenter and his daughter. I don't understand why that is, but I'd advise you to see that it doesn't happen again."

With that, Owen left Ritter and Wilts and walked to the two men at the bar. At first they had been alarmed at the suddenness of the events and concerned for their own safety. When it became apparent that it was someone else's trouble, they watched the proceedings with the keen interest of expert barroom observers.

"Yuh got a fist that's quite a convincer," admired the man in the buffalo poncho.

"Next time yuh come in, hold off a bit and let me get some bets down before yuh poleax someone," laughed the other. "I'll split the take with yuh."

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Owen acknowledged their comments with a nod. He looked at the one with the bird wing hat and asked, "You say you saw someone hightailing it away from the camp a few hours ago?"

"Sure did. He was ridin' like there was a pack of owlhoots after his poke."

"Could you see who it was?"

"It was purty far away and I was in the creek bed pannin'. I only saw him fer a minute and I'm not sure but it mighta been Pane Serill."

"Did I hear you say he was headed for a place called the Rusty Dime?"

The prospector confirmed that to be his belief and went on to oblige Owen with a description of how to get to the place. Owen thanked them for their information, tossed a silver dollar on the bar and invited them to have a drink on him.

"Why thank yuh, stranger," said the buffalo poncho, "but it looks like it'll be a while before we'll get any service out of Gulder." The two hooted and slapped the bar at the comment.

As Owen left the saloon, the prospector with the cap called out, "If yuh ever decide to give up punchin' barkeeps, I'd be glad to show yuh how to use a pick. I've got some good diggin's in mind." Then to the other he added, "Now maybe yuh'll go with me up to look over the lay of the land around the Rusty Dime. When that big jasper tangles with that little mine rat, Serill, it'll be a mountain shaker no one should miss."

Once mounted on Cocoa, Owen aimed a long and thoughtful look at the mountainside where, according to the prospector, he could find the Rusty Dime mine. There he could find one of the subjects of his long manhunt. Pane Serill, the killer of his wife and two children, was close and not expecting him. It might only be the work of a few hours to make his way up to the mine where he could confront and capture Serill. All that flashed through Owen's mind in the space of a few seconds.

Yet, overriding all those thoughts was a concern for his friends and their plight. The image of Jane and Able alone in the mountains and snow spurred him to action. He gathered the long reins of the team and headed for the Carpenter's cabin at Champa.

The few miles to the little mining settlement passed quickly and Owen soon found himself riding up to the little makeshift corral. He pulled the rigging off Ned and Zack and turned them into the

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enclosure. Suspecting that Ritter and Wilts were no respecters of animals, Owen rummaged around in the little shed until he found a sack of rolled oats. He filled a tin bucket with generous helpings which he carried to the horses. He kicked the snow off the ground in two spots and distributed the oats evenly on them. Before leaving the corral, Owen broke the thin crust of ice on the small wooden trough and stirred the snow and ice into the water until he was satisfied that it was as open as he could make it.

Returning to the dark cabin, Owen noticed the wagon sitting with its rear wheel spindles buried in the snow. He was puzzled how such a thing could happen and began to wonder if Wilts and Ritter had been telling him the truth about how they had acquired the horses.

He looked into the cabin just to confirm that it was not occupied. In the glare of the sulfur match he struck, Owen noticed how much the place had been improved since he had left the day before. The stores and possessions were neatly arranged, giving the appearance that there was more room than there actually was. Also remarkable was the cleanliness. The planks of the floor, something of a luxury in a gold camp, were swept clean. The hearth of the fireplace was spotless and a plentiful supply of wood was stacked nearby.

The overall appearance was of a place ready for human habitation. Owen could almost imagine a fire, a lamp, and Amos and Able sitting at the table. The bright center of attention in his mental scene was Jane with her shining blonde hair, her quick smile, and cheeks which so easily flushed with spots of red. He raged at himself for not taking more time before rushing off on his manhunt. If he had stayed around for a few days until things settled down, all this wouldn't have happened.

Owen remembered how Jane had looked as she handed him a little packet of biscuits just before he rode away. In her eyes there had been protest against his leaving. Her understanding of his problems had kept it from being expressed. Again he lashed at himself for giving too much attention to his own feelings and not enough to hers.

His musings were interrupted by noise from outside the cabin. He stepped outside and peered into the darkness. He didn't have to wait long. Soon the bulk of a wagon and team wheeled into the yard. Even before it stopped, Owen called out, "Amos?"

The response was immediate. "Owen, by hickory, am I glad to see yuh." Amos set the brake and swung off the seat to the ground.

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Milt Dolor, who was clambering down the opposite side, added his roaring greeting as though he had known Owen for years. "Owen, old hat, yuh're a sight fer these storekeeper eyes, by golly."

"Are you just rolling in from Boulder?" asked Owen.

"We jest pulled in," replied Amos. "As a matter of fact we didn't even stop at Milt's. We came straight here." Amos looked past Owen toward the cabin. "Jane and Able ain't here are they?" he asked, knowing the answer even as he spoke.

"No. When I saw the wagon, I hoped they might be with you."

"Owen, somethin's happened to 'em. Milt and me found wagon horse tracks down in Netters Flat. Yuh remember that's the place Gulder came a howlin' into the other day. As sure as I'm standin' here those tracks were made by some of our horses."

"That backs up what I've just found out," said Owen. Without all the details of how it had been done, Owen told of his encounter with Ritter and Wilts. Hoping to take the edge off the worried tone of Amos' voice, Owen adopted Ritter's theory. "It looks to me like Jane and Able have just got themselves in for a long walk up the road."

Picking up on the optimistic note, Dolar loudly agreed. "I'll bet they're hikin' up the road right now. From what I remember about that old driver, I'll bet he'll have some blazin' blue words fer someone."

"We've got to get down there," Amos declared, "but I pushed these horses hard and they ain't fit for anything more tonight. Yuh think Ned and Zack are up to a night ride?"

"They seemed to me to have plenty of ginger," said Owen as the three men headed for the corral.

They paused by the broken wagon and speculated on the cause of it. "We left it propped up on those stumps," said Amos. "I can't imagine how it would've slipped off."

"Do yuh suppose it had anything to do with Jane and Able being down on the canyon road?" wondered Dolar.

Unable to put together a good answer to the question they continued on to the corral and as they began putting the rigging back on that Owen had only a few minutes before taken off, Amos reminded Dolor. It's like we guessed, Milt. Gulder's behind this. We knew he'd make a play, but there was no way of knowin' it would be anything like this."

"It may be our luck that he picked a couple of real wooden heads to do his dirty work," said Owen thoughtfully. "I have the feeling they told me the truth and that it was only by chance that they took the

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team. What we don't know is the reason those two were headed down the road in the first place. If I had to guess, I'd say that you were the target and that Jane and Able just happened to come along."

"Yuh mean Gulder sent 'em out to bushwhack us?" whistled Amos softly.

"That way it would make sense," Owen reasoned. "Gulder wouldn't have told them to bring the team to his saloon and tie them in plain sight. But, if he told 'em to get rid of the two of you, he would have ordered them to bring the wagon right up to his place. His hired hands didn't stop to think about the need to get rid of the owner. They just took the easy way. They somehow got the horses away from Jane and Able and brought them up here."

"From what I remember of Jake Ritter, that's jest the way he'd do it," agreed Amos. "If Gulder told him to do one thing, it's likely that Jake would do something else as long as it was easy and didn't have a lot of risk involved."

"Amos, my guess is we'll find 'em in good shape," boomed Dolor, in obvious reference to Jane and Able. "When we do, you and I need to have a talk with Sid Gulder. A real serious talk."

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Jane stirred sleepily and rearranged herself closer to the fire, but her own movement awakened her. Sitting up she looked around for Able, but the old wagon driver had disappeared from his place in their little camp.

She didn't know how long she had been sleeping, but somehow she was certain it was long past the time they had agreed would be her turn for watching the fire. The flames were still strong and fresh and were just now beginning to wrap themselves hungrily around some unburned sticks. The fire had apparently been fed sometime in the last few minutes.

She scrambled out from under the protecting limbs of the tree and stood upright in the white darkness. Before she could take even one step or call out, she was caught by a strongly hissed, "Stand still."

The command was Able's and it came from only a few feet away. She turned her head and as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could see him kneeling nearby. Next to him was Wink, both were listening and apparently watching someone or something out in the surrounding night.

Jane eased herself closer to them and knelt down. After a few long moments of silence she whispered, "What is it, Able?"

"Don't know if it's anything," he answered softly, "but Mister Eye Snapper here's sure there's somethin' prowlin' around."

She could feel the tenseness in Wink's body as she laid her hand on the big dog's shoulders. Jane knew that something had captured his attention and whatever it was the dog didn't like it.

The silence was cracked by the sharp, penetrating click of metal. It was the hammer of a revolver being thumbed back into a deadly hair trigger position.

"Don't any of yuh move and that goes double fer yuhr mangy hound," intoned Jake Ritter. To reinforce his command he added, "It's too dark to take good aim, but if I start pumpin' lead at yuh, some of it's goin' to find skin and bone."

"Well, it sounds like our old friend Jake Ritter," said Able scornfully.

"Don't get no notions," warned Ritter. "I ain't alone. Now I know about that big greener yuh tote around. Jest hand it to my man, Wilts, and do it nice and easy. Yuh wouldn't want the little lady there to get hurt."

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Wilts cautiously slid up to them from the opposite side, but hesitated as Wink growled menacingly. "Quiet, Wink," said Jane, patting his neck.

"If that mutt moves a hair, I'll blast 'im," threatened Ritter. "Now go ahead, Wilts. Take that scatter gun."

Wilts did as he was told and quickly withdrew. Ritter began to feel more secure and in control. "Let's all move down to the road. Wilts and me got our own fire there and it's out in the open, not under some damn tree."

As he had announced, Ritter had a fire blazing in the middle of the pulloff area alongside the road. In the midst of the flames there was even a small pot of coffee bubbling and blasting steam into the cold air through its little enamel spout. Nearby, stood the horses of the two men, heads hanging low from exhaustion.

"If I hadn't been out gatherin' wood, I might've missed seein' yuh altogether," said Ritter as though he had done them a favor. "Now let's get one thing straight. We don't mean yuh any harm and as long as yuh stay peaceful there ain't no one that's goin' to get hurt." Casting a hateful eye on Wink, who stood obediently at Jane's side and who was watching Ritter's every move, he added, "'Ceptin' that mongrel. I got a score or two to settle with him."

"Jake, I don't think we ought to be doin' this," complained Wilts. "Right after Bannack left the saloon, yuh said we ought to flat ear stretch fer Denver. Yuh even said we shouldn't even wait fer mornin'. Now we've gone and started somethin' against these folks again. I jest don't like it."

"Yuh best listen to yuhr pard, Ritter. Amos is bound to be comin' along this road before long, and if yuh been talkin' to Owen Bannack, he'll likely make it two. I don't know Dolor very well, but I'd bet a plug of sweet brown tobacco that he'll make it three. Yuh got a bigger load than yuh can pull, Mister."

Wilts looked anxiously at Ritter. "I think he's right, Jake. Let's drop it now before we do anything that'd rouse them three."

Ritter exploded at him. "Listen to me yuh eye-poppin' sky bird. I said we'd come out of these mountains with a poke of gold dust. This is our chance to do that. These folks is worth somethin' to Carpenter and I aim to find out jest how much."

"Pa hasn't got any money at all." Jane's words were a flat assertion, not an argument, and they set up a wall against Ritter's plan for ransom.

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Ritter imagined himself to be a leader, and any time he was out of the threat of imminent danger, he imagined himself to be bold. The reality was that he was a bit slow to formulate plans and the ones he did build were usually lacking in imagination. In carrying them out he was a stalwart only as long as things did not go astray.

The fact the Amos Carpenter simply did not have a fat poke of gold dust with which to buy his daughter out of captivity had not occurred to Ritter. However it was his way to try to brazen out his original plan. Certainly he was not disposed to let his confusion show nor to let himself be headed off his announced course of action by an inconvenient fact.

"So yuh say," Ritter answered Jane's point. "So yuh say, but I'd guess them wagon's of his would bring a pretty penny and them nags of his would bring plenty."

Wilts, whose mind was admittedly bewildered by even ordinary events, was not convinced. "That Bannack feller can't be more than a little bit behind us. We jest don't have the time to be workin' all this out."

Again Ritter flared at his reluctant companion. "Stop yuhr damned whinin', Wilts. If yuh remember, Bannack talked to them prospectors and found out that Serill was headed fer that minin' claim. Well, I know that big shaker. He'll go fer Serill like a hawk divin' fer a mouse. He sure ain't a goin' to be worryin' about these two."

"Yeah, but we ain't got any horses to put 'em on and there ain't no place to hole up around here." Wilts had again managed to point out two serious difficulties in Ritter's plan.

To give himself time to think, Ritter moved to the fire and, using a large red bandana, lifted the coffeepot and set it on the ground. From the provisions sack sitting nearby, he took two battered tin cups, neither of which looked as though they would hold much, if any, liquid. He carefully poured some coffee into them and looked around, first at Wilts then at Able and Jane.

"I've got an extra cup here. Anyone care to join me?"

Wilts' answer was to further bemoan the situation. "It's yuhr coffee that got this started. If we hadn't stopped to let the horses blow and to heat up some coffee, we wouldn't have found them."

"Well, we did," shot back Ritter "and now we've got to figure a way to make some runnin' money on 'em. I still say this is like a nugget, and I aim to pick it up, not jest run away fer fear of somethin' that I can't see."

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Ritter stood blowing and sipping at his hot coffee for a time trying to put together a workable plan. He realized that Wilts was correct in his observations and that pulling off an exchange of his prisoners for money or gold would be difficult. Still, Ritter was dogged in his determination to make the best of his misadventures.

He had failed in his attempt to withdraw the funds from Serill's account in the Miners Federated Bank in Denver. Coming to Gold Hill had proven to be a disaster. Gulder had sent them off to steal the Carpenter's wagon and that too had been a failure. He and Wilts had then agreed with Gulder to intercept Amos Carpenter as he and Dolor returned from a run to Boulder. That latest failure still stung, and he felt he had been wronged by Gulder. The storeowner had promised to pay them a hefty poke of dust if they would dispose of Carpenter and Dolor and bring the wagon and horses to his saloon. As he and Wilts had ridden down the canyon, they had overtaken Jane and Able. Before being seen, Ritter and Wilts had ridden up off the road and watched as the old man and girl took cover below them. Slipping down and leading away the team had been the work of only a few minutes.

Ritter had abandoned the plan to waylay Amos and had triumphantly taken the horses back up to Gold Hill. Gulder had cursed him for being a fool and refused to pay saying that unless Carpenter was dead, the horses were only a lot of trouble to him. That was the meeting that Bannack had interrupted.

Karp's almost incoherent story told him that Serill was on the run and that no further possibility existed of getting money from that quarter. Cutting for Denver and giving up on Gold Hill had seemed to be the thing to do. With the thought of Bannack's treatment of Gulder fresh in his mind, Ritter had decided to leave immediately. Now suddenly he found himself confronted with another opportunity, but he needed to find a way to take advantage of it.

As he looked at his captives over the edge of his leaking tin cup, Ritter saw the dog look away from him and down the road. Both Jane and Able also glanced down at Wink as he pointed his ears at the darkness.

"Maybe it's a good thing I didn't shoot that mutt after all," said Ritter as he dashed the contents of his cup onto the fire. "We're gonna have company, Wilts. Douse that fire."

Wilts, the dissenting partner, realized that for the moment there was not going to be any further debate on the prudence of what they were doing. He began to kick snow on the flames and to scatter the

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burning wood in all directions. The embers sizzled and steamed in the snow, and as the heart of the fire was broken by Wilt's attack, the bright flames began dying and their flickering light disappeared.

Ritter kicked over the little coffeepot and rolled it in the snow until it was empty and cool enough to throw into his canvas tote sack. With that done, the camp was closed. Remembering the fire of his prisoners Ritter commanded Wilts to dash up the hill and quench it.

"We're goin' up that hill," Ritter said to them. "I don't want to warn our visitors with a shot, but if that dog lets out a sound or makes a move toward me, I won't hold back."

With Able's long Paterson Colt shotgun in one hand and the reins of the two horses in the other, Ritter marched the wagon driver and Jane up the hill. Wilts joined them and soon they were concealed behind a large, bushy tree that gave them a view of the clearing and the road below.

It had not been noticeable while they had been gathered around the fire, but now the first gray light of morning began pressing the darkness away. The snow had stopped falling and the air was cold and clear. The trees on the hillside around them stood like giant white sentinels whose duty it was to hold the snow which had accumulated on their branches while they watched the events develop at Netter's Flat.

The next scene was not long in unfolding. Three riders trotted around the bend and pulled up. They surveyed the clearing, conversed for a time, and finally rode on down the road at a brisk pace. Again the scene below was vacant and the Netters Flats Theater was silent.

Ritter began breathing again as he holstered the six shooter he had been holding as a threat to Jane and Able and as a guarantee of silence. "I was wrong about one thing, Wilts," he admitted. "Bannack, didn't head fer the Rusty Dime like I thought he would. It appears he cares more about these two than he does about Pane Serill."

"It was Bannack sure enough," agreed Wilts. "The other two must have been Carpenter and that Dolor fella."

Jane's heart leaped at the sight of the riders. She knew that it was her father and Milt Dolor on Ned and Zack. She also recognized the tall man and the big horse Cocoa. As the three sat within easy hollering distance, Jane kept her hand on Wink's head fearing that he might bring destruction to himself by barking or growling.

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The cold of their surroundings clutched at her as the three rode away. Yet there was a new warmth within her as she listened to Ritter's theory on why Owen was with her father.

Able shuffled and stirred near her. He, too, had mixed feelings as he saw his friends so close and yet so far away. The sight of Owen Bannack, however, gave his spirits a great lift and he began to feel that their fortunes were taking a decided turn for the better.

The feeling of encouragement that Jane and Able felt was dampened by Ritter who began to see an answer to his problem. What to do with his captives, how to capitalize on them, and which way to ride were the questions he had to deal with. They were all answered by one realization.

"Yuh know, Wilts. I was jest aimin' in the wrong direction. These two can be sold after all. I jest had my head set on the wrong buyer."

"I don't follow yuh, Jake," said Wilts his eyes blinking at the difficulty of trying to follow the devious track of Ritter's mind.

"Listen, yuh pore damn pine cone. Bannack didn't go huntin' fer Serill after all. He came a trottin' down here lookin' fer Carpenter's girl and the old man, but I'd say mostly the girl. At the same time we know that the little dirt worm, Serill, is holin' up at the Rusty Dime. He's hidin' from Bannack and tryin' to find a way to get an edge on that damn vigilante. Wilt's, we got that edge and we can sell it to Serill."

"Yuh mean Serill'll pay fer these two," asked Wilts looking at Jane and Able.

"I'd bet my suspenders that he will," crowed Ritter triumphantly. "And he's got plenty to pay with. He's got all them mine properties and I think he's got some gold dust stashed away."

Wilts began to understand, at least partially. In any event, the promise of gold, as it had on other occasions, weighed down his apprehensions, and he began to catch some of Ritter's new enthusiasm. "It might work, Jake. It jest might work."

"If it's goin' to, we got to get back up that road before those three turn around and head back this way," replied Ritter.

It was Ritter's decision that Jane and Able would ride on Wilts' horse while he and Wilts doubled up on his. Once mounted, Ritter looked down at Wink then at Jane. "I don't want to risk a shot right now so I'll let yuhr mongrel live fer a little longer, but keep him close and keep him quiet."

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She nodded her understanding and at a word, Wink stayed close to her. At first the dog endeavored to position himself between the horses, thus staying between Jane and Ritter, but at Jane's insistence, he finally contented himself with trotting near her horse on the far side away from the scowling and malicious looks of the outlaw.

Their progress was slow. The heavy burdens on the horses, coupled with the fact that they had already been tired by Ritter and Wilts in the ride from Gold Hill made it necessary for them to stop and rest frequently. Yet every mile took them further away from the searchers in the canyon and closer to Serill at the Rusty Dime.

The gray sky threatened more snow and kept the morning light from gaining much strength. The stored heat in the ground was working its way to the surface and resisting the arrival of snow. The hardened road surface seemed more cold resistant than the mountainsides and the snow under the feet of the horses grew wet and became heavy.

Ritter threw frequent glances at Jane and Able, who from the beginning of the trek had remained silent. There had been no need or occasion for communication, and in any event, private talk was virtually impossible since the two horses were quite close together.

It was with such a sidelong look that Ritter noticed that Jane, who was sitting behind Able, had said something in a quick hurried whisper to the old man. Ritter gave them a suspicious look and called for a halt.

"I ain't gonna have any plannin' fer some fool move," he growled. "We're changin' ridin' partners."

They all dismounted but waited a few minutes for the horses to get their wind. In the instant that Ritter was occupied with climbing back into his saddle, Jane threw up her arm in the direction of the road behind them and in a sharp voice commanded, "Wink, go find pa. Go. Go find Pa.."

Obedient to a game that he had obviously played many times, the big dog whirled and sped away down the road. Ritter turned and pulled out his revolver. He leveled it at the dog, then dropped his arm without firing.

"As much as I'd like to plug that brute, I ain't even goin' to try," he said. "As a matter of fact I've been ridin' along here thinkin' of a way to let Bannack know where to look fer yuh. When I tell Serill that his vigilante friend is only an hour or so behind us, the little weasel'll be

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more willin' to cough up my price fer yuh. If yuh think that dog'll lead Bannack to us, so much the better."

The truth of what he said came home to her and it was with a heavy heart that she took Ritter's hand and swung up behind him. The one consolation was that Wink was now away and out of danger. The irony was that he would lead her father, Dolor, and Owen back into jeopardy. "Had the sky grown darker," she wondered, "or was it just her imagination?"



Owen, Amos, and Milt Dolor found themselves at Netters Flat just as the first, faint light of a new day began to visit the canyon. They pulled their horses to a halt and carefully surveyed the little plateau that sat above the rushing waters of Boulder Creek. The area was quiet and there were no signs which would have encouraged them to look further.

"This is where we saw the tracks," Amos said. "All we could tell was that they were headed up the road toward Gold Hill."

"According to Ritter it was about five miles on down where they took the horses," mused Owen. "He wasn't clear about where they got back to the road, but obviously it was somewhere along here. The question is, which way would Jane and Able have gone?"

"It don't seem likely that they went down the road toward Boulder," guessed Dolor. "If they had, we'd have met them."

"I agree with that," nodded Amos. "We have to guess that they stayed off the road for some reason. If I know my daughter and Able, they tried trackin' Ritter. Anyone who fools with them horses is in bad with her. The same is true of Able. Stealin' a team from him would mean war."

"We don't seem to have much choice. I think we have to go on down the road and try to pick up the trail and then follow them," suggested Owen.

The others nodded assent and they trotted away from Netters Flat. They scanned the mountainside and the bank that dropped off to the stream. The steep inclines made it unlikely and even impossible that anyone had left the road. After a few miles the gentler slope of the hillside made such a departure more possible so they slowed their pace and studied the terrain with great care. It was slow and painstaking and they were plagued with the thought that the trail they were looking for might very well be impossible to find.

After going the full five miles and a generous distance further, they stopped and agreed to turn back. They also decided to divide their efforts and to ride on the mountainside up off the road. It would take more time but there seemed to be little else they could do.

At one point, their hopes were raised when Dolor loudly called out that he had found a sign. Closer inspection persuaded them that it was an elk trail down to the water. Discouraged, they persisted

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until mid morning when they paused to discuss the approach they were using.

Amos was turned toward Ned adjusting his rigging when Dolor spoke, "Look at that lobo wolf."

Amos turned and casually asked, "Where?"

"Right there," answered Dolor. "By jingo, he looks like he's headed right toward us. Yuh don't suppose he's one of 'em that's got the disease and gone crazy. They say that when they foam at the mouth they'll attack people right out in the open. He sure looks like a mean one."

Amos and Owen followed Dolor's pointing arm and saw what he was referring to. It did resemble a big timber wolf, but as the animal sped toward them, Amos became instantly excited. "Yuh damn tootin' he's mean," he laughed. "Only he's the best kind of mean. That's Wink, Jane's dog. If he's here, she's somewhere close."

Wink flew through the snow and leaped up on Amos' chest. He spun on his heels and ran back the way he had come. Reversing himself he ran back to Amos and dashed completely around him in a circle. Again he shot back down the road and abruptly sat down a stone's throw away. With his tongue hanging out, he sat there looking at the three men as though waiting for them to come to him."

"I think he wants us to follow him," said Owen.

"I'm sure he does," agreed Amos quickly. "It's an old game. Jane taught him to fetch me when dinner was ready or whenever she wanted me to come to the cabin fer some reason or other."

They quickly mounted and rode toward the dog. He immediately was up and trotting out in front as though proud of the chance to lead the parade. When they slowed to descend the embankment to the roadbed, Wink raced back as if to remind them to keep up.

Upon reaching Netters Flat, they halted. The dog gave them a worried look and sat in the road ahead of them as before.

"Are yuh sure about that animal?" asked Dolor.

"Sure enough to follow him to wherever it is he's goin'," Amos assured him.

Owen, who had been studying the road, called their attention to the sign of horses. "It's hard to say, but I'd guess there are two horses somewhere out in front of us."

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"Horses?" Dolor's loud question emphasized the concern they shared and the sense of mystery this new element brought to the situation.

"I say we push along as fast as we can," suggested Amos, the tension evident in his voice.

No further words were spoken, nor were any necessary. They urged their horses forward and soon came to the road which branched off toward Gold Hill.

Mid-afternoon found them climbing the last long hill outside of Champa. Near the crest of the hill they found Able's Paterson shotgun standing on the shoulder of the road with its muzzle planted in the ground. Hanging over the stock like a crude cover was Ritter's provisions sack. Scrawled on the dirty, gray canvas in broken almost illegible letters were the words, "Rusty Dime."

The writer had found his ink in the dirty, caked insides of a coffeepot which lay near the strange signpost. As if to give emphasis and to insure that the message would not be missed a large red bandana was tied around the bag just below the crude letters.

Amos leaned over and pulled the shotgun from the ground. "If there was any question about bein' on the right trail, this puts it to rest." As he examined the bag he asked, "What's the meanin' of this, Owen? Any ideas?"

"Yes, Amos, I'm afraid I know what it means. It means that I've managed to involve all of you in my business. You've always known why I came to the mountains with you. I've been on the trail of a vicious killer name of Pane Serill. Yesterday I almost caught him, and I would have if I hadn't seen your horses outside of Gulder's saloon. Instead of going on after Serill, I took the detour to your place. I did learn that Serill had headed for the Rusty Dime to hole up. You know the rest."

"Serill's one of the worst," said Dolor in a somewhat subdued tone. "Could I ask why yuh're on his trail?"

"I won't trouble you with all the details," answered Owen, "but since you're in this you've got an explanation coming. The short of it is that I'm after him for some killings in Montana. When I get him, he's going back up there to face a vigilance committee. It'll hang him."

I don't know if it'll help any," Dolor said in even a more reduced tone of voice, "but I've sat on a citizen's committee. I even hoped to get one started here, but haven't found the right men fer it. Serill's been on the very top of my list fer a long time. Yuh got my hand in doin' anything necessary to nab the scum."

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"I appreciate that," said Owen. "It saves a lot of explaining."

"Fer whatever it's worth to yuh," put in Amos, "I'd ride with yuh even if Jane and Able weren't involved. When men won't stand up fer what they know is right a sickness sets in that muddles their minds. It's like fear in a herd of cattle. One runs and they all catch the sickness and start runnin'. Then the scavengers pick off the easiest ones and gain strength doin' it. Pretty soon they're able to attack even the strongest ones and finally the whole herd goes. I saw that in Wyomin' and made the mistake of not standin' up sooner. This time I'm facin' the buzzards no matter what the cost." He turned to Dolor. "Sign me up, Milt. I can't speak fer Able but I'm sure he'll want to be on the list, too." Then, with a broad smile that eased the tension that had been building within, Amos added, "Specially now seein' what they done to his greener."

Owen looked at them and nodded. "Milt, you know the Rusty Dime?"

"I do," answered the smiling Dolor, "and I think I might even know a bit of a shortcut."

Amos had managed to unplug the barrel of the shotgun and he snapped the cylinder out and squinted into the muzzle. Satisfied, he replaced the cylinder and noted with satisfaction, "They didn't even bother to unload it."

With Dolor pointing the way they were soon into the surrounding timber working their way through the closely standing trees. From there they crossed the long brow of a bare hill and entered into a tree-covered valley.

They rode down to the little creek that had, over the ages, cut its way through the earth and formed the gentle sides of the little basin. After riding parallel to the creek for a short distance, they climbed up the side of the low mountain. At the top they halted.

Before them lay a long downward slope which curled around and made a large three-sided bowl. It was uniformly tree covered except for a noticeable clearing almost in the center and up on the side of the bowl. From their vantage point they could see the outline of a small crude cabin marked by a thin column of smoke which pointed like an arrow at the chimney through which it climbed into the gray sky.

"That's the Rusty Dime shack yuh see in the clearin'," explained Dolor. "The claim runs uphill from there. At the upper

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boundary there's a glory hole, but I believe the whole property was abandoned some time back."

The history of the Rusty Dime was one of starts and stops. What gold it contained had been collected by a stream that in spring months plunged down the steep side of the bowl but was halted by an exposed rock shelf that jutted up near the bottom of the hill. The water would swirl around the ledge before spilling over it and gurgling on down the mountain to meet another larger creek.

Where the water foamed and splashed against the ledge of the fault line, it paused long enough for the heavy, fine grains of gold to settle. With it dirt and eroded rock also settled. The process went on for centuries and the little pocket grew steadily richer. Then the creek, for some reason known only to nature, changed its course and ran down the mountain in a new bed some distance away. Nonetheless in especially wet years some water carried topsoil down the little ravine and deposited it on the cache of gold. Layer upon layer and century upon century that went on until the gold pocket was many feet below the surface.

In the geologically recent past, a wise prospector, one of the first to ever visit the area, had imagined how the drainage of the mountain had, in earlier times, been arranged. He sifted through the dry debris around the worn and eroded rock ledge. Encouraged, he spaded into the upper reaches of the rocky soil. It was long, exhausting, and non-profitable work and was abandoned.

Later, another gold seeker, who perhaps had more energy than skill, invested considerable time in enlarging and deepening the glory hole. The angle of his almost vertical shaft was controlled by the slight tilt of the rock ledge. In fact, the rock uplift served as one wall of the mine and in that way was a benefit to the laborer. The rock gave a certain stability to the hole and reduced the need to shore up the sides with logs and braces.

As the glory hole went deeper, the opening at the top seemed to grow smaller. Day by day the sweep of blue mountain sky was reduced, for the miner working at the bottom of the shaft, to a patch framed by dark, coarse soil and rock. On a day when the sky was especially bright and clear and digging around the feet of the long ladder was intensely grim, the prospector came upon a layer of sand. He filled his crude bucket, scrambled up the ladder, seized the rope which was tied to the handle of the bucket, and pulled with greater zeal and determination than usual.

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For many months thereafter the glory hole yielded many hundreds of buckets of its gold bearing sand. Unfortunately the mining work had, for too long, taken priority over the maintenance of the shoring and, upon looking into the hole one morning, the owner found it thoroughly caved in. The mass of dirt, rock, and timbers was too discouraging to allow for a major cleaning out operation. The owner told himself that the pocket had been playing out anyhow and, he, like the first prospector, abandoned the site.

Years later, the mining population in the Gold Hill area swelled for a time and good diggings were hard to come by. Excluded from the more productive areas, a third prospector rediscovered the Rusty Dime. He built a cabin, cleared an area around it, and took to cleaning out the mine. His method was a bit more refined than those of his predecessors. He installed a crude winch over the hole. That made it possible to lift heavier and larger buckets of dirt. Occasionally he would enlist the help of a friend, but for the most part he worked alone.

Realizing the hazards presented by cave-ins, he was systematic and careful about his shoring. His long effort brought him some gold, but it also confirmed the suspicions of his predecessor. The gold bearing sands were playing out.

Discouraged, he began spending time in Sil Gulder's saloon. One evening after a day of much digging for little reward, he put himself into a poker game. Clumsy play and many drinks soon relieved him of his last reserve of gold dust. Angry, he called for a paper and on it scrawled a deed to the Rusty Dime. The act was commonplace and attracted little notice. Even Pane Serill, who won the deed and stuffed it in a coat pocket, thought little of his new property.

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Serill certainly never thought of the Rusty Dime as a hideout or a refuge. On the one or two occasions when he remembered winning the claim, he promised himself that one fine day he would ride up and look it over. The hightail ride he had made on a horse he found wandering loose near the turnoff to Pilfer's was not what he had in mind.

When he arrived in the dark, the cabin was cold and the only blanket he had been able to find was the home for a nest of mice. He roundly cursed them as they scuttled away when he took possession of it. The fireplace was the work of a prospector, not a stone mason, and the consequence of that unhappy combination of facts was that it vented almost as much smoke into the cabin as it did through the chimney.

The next morning his search of the rickety shelves yielded only a battered wash basin, a few tin plates, some candle stubs, and a porcelain mug minus its handle. The saddlebags off the horse he had found gave him a few twisted strips of jerked meat, and happily, a large handful of coffee grounds wrapped in heavy brown paper, along with two crumbled biscuits.

It never occurred to him that the saddlebags and the horse belonged to the man he had killed the day before. Even had that unimportant thought crossed his mind, it would have meant nothing to the hard and callused Serill.

Staring into the mug of coffee he had made in the wash basin, Serill tried to force himself to think systematically of his predicament. His mind seemed perverse and intent upon torturing itself. He would force himself to think of how he could escape from the area, but his mind would turn to the image of Owen Bannack riding by him in the snow. Serill would shake his head and try to examine ways of disposing of his mining claims, and Bannack would appear. With an effort he tried to conceive of a way to get the money out of the bank in Denver, but his mind would shift to a picture of Bannack standing in the street looking and looking for him.

With an oath, Serill leaped to his feet and sent the mug crashing into the fireplace. He seized the edge of the small table near him and with a sharp, vicious lift upended it and tumbled it against the log wall. The outburst relieved enough of the tension inside him that he realized such activity availed him nothing. He even cursed himself for the loss of the only drinking vessel in the cabin.

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He shoved the little three-legged stool over to the fireplace, seated himself on it and drew his cruel knife from its scabbard. Serill began honing the knife on a white quartz rock which offered a large jagged corner for that purpose. As always the top of his boot was pressed into service as a razor strap.

Serill cursed the men he had been dealing with. He cursed them for being fools and for being incompetent. His own hesitation at facing up to Bannack alone only intensified his disgust with the saloon crowd that he had hired to locate the vigilante. They served him as a shield to his own cowardice and as long as he could blame them, he could avoid blaming himself.

Ritter's loud call startled Serill. "Hello, the cabin." The voice was surprisingly loud coming as it did in the cold silence. Serill did not recognize the voice and, at first, thought it might be only a passing stranger.

"Hello, the cabin." The caller was a bit closer and the voice had a faint ring of familiarity. "Hello, Serill. Pane Serill."

This obviously was not a passing traveler. By now, Serill was standing and looking through a wide crack in the planks of the door. He could see nothing but trees, snow, and a low gray sky. Giving the door a sharp pull on the rope handle, Serill opened for himself a wider field of vision.

There, off to one side, stood Jake Ritter, staring at the log building. Ritter noticed the door being pulled inward a few inches and he renewed his greeting. "Serill, this is Jake Ritter. Ain't no one but me here."

The suggestion that Serill would be afraid to come out if someone other than Ritter were present angered the killer and he flung the cabin door fully open. Standing in the doorway he snarled at Ritter. "What the Hell's the matter with yuh? Of course I know yuh. What in blazes do yuh want here?"

"A little palaver," called Ritter, walking a bit closer.

Serill's mind was racing with questions of how Ritter knew where he was and with thoughts of how to turn Ritter's presence to his advantage. Serill knew that he needed information and he also knew that it wouldn't do to frighten the man. His answer was calculated to ease Ritter's guarded attitude and to loosen the man's tongue.

"I'm kinda surprised to see yuh, Ritter. Talk is cheap enough, why don't yuh step inside?"

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"Thanks, but I'll jest stand here." Looking around at the cabin and the clearing, Ritter continued, "So this is the Rusty Dime. Meanin' no offense, Serill, I'd say that's about all it looks to be worth."

"Naw, it ain't much," agreed Serill leaning against the doorjamb. "It's homey, though and comfortable enough."

"Oh, I can see that," agreed Ritter grinning broadly. "Why a man could settle in here and never want to leave."

"I might jest be doin' that," said Serill lazily. "Like yuh say, this is shore a quiet and peaceful place. That makes me wonder how yuh found it."

"That ain't important fer our business."

"It might be very important fer my business though."

"Let's jest say that word gets around. Some word gets around faster'n other word," drawled Ritter, trying to sound cunning and all knowing.

"I'm not sure I catch yuhr meanin'." Serill made it a question.

"What I mean, Pane, is that it don't make a spit of difference how I knew yuh was here. Yuh are here and we need to talk about that."

The conversation was not revealing and Serill's impatience welled up inside him, but he forced himself to play Ritter's game. He remembered it was Ritter who had tried to beat him to the money in Denver and who had come riding up to Gold Hill with two no account toughs at his side. Serill knew that Ritter had entertained some vague notion of getting money from him and that he had dragged Karp and Wilts along for that purpose.

The arrangement for Ritter and company to watch for Bannack had fallen apart almost as soon as it had been made. Ritter's plan for a quick payoff by stealing the horses and freight wagon had been a sure sign that he would be an unsteady ally against Bannack and a sure sign the heavy-bellied Ritter was undependable.

"We've had our differences, Pane. I don't deny that. I even remember the old days in Wyomin' Yuh always figured yuhrself to be smarter'n everyone else. Yuh had all that rustlin' money sent to Denver and yuh thought no one but yuhr pal, Mead, knew about it. Then that damn vigilante, Bannack, threaded a rope around Mead's neck and closed down yuhr business."

Ritter paused and surveyed his listener. He knew Serill was as quick as a cat and that reminding Serill of earlier times was dangerous,

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but Ritter intended to have his say. "I didn't get one cent from that operation," lied the incorrigible Ritter. "Not one red cent and I took most of the risk. Sure I tried fer that bank money. I had a claim to it by damn."

Serill was almost amused. Ritter appeared to believe his own made up story. Serill knew Ritter had been paid and paid more than some of the others for their efforts in rustling cattle. However, all that was far away and too long ago to be of importance now.

"That's water under the bridge, Jake, and it ain't the reason yuh came ridin' up here. What is?"

"To tell the truth, Pane, I came up here to save yuhr skin. The straight of it is, Bannack knows yuh're here. He's about an hour or so behind me and, I'd guess, comin' on fast."

Serill could not conceal his concern. His body stiffened and he took a quick step forward. It was only through the greatest effort that he contained himself and spoke in an even tone to Ritter.

"Is that yuhr doin', Jake."

Looking at the knife which dangled in Serill's hand, Ritter was quick to answer, "Naw. I didn't tell 'im. Some prospector in Gulder's place said he saw yuh ridin' hell fer leather this direction."

"That don't tell me how Bannack found out."

"He was there, in Gulder's. Matter of fact, Bannack was the one doin' the askin'."

"Passin' on that, what's yuhr game in comin' up here? Yuh expect me to pay yuh fer that information?"

"I think I got somethin' better'n information, Serill. Somethin' a whole heap better."

"Yuh better spill it. We're wastin' a lot of time with this damn jawin'"

"Yuh remember the wagon and horses we was talkin' about in Gulder's?"

"Sure I do. What's that got to do with anything?"

"Well, they belong to a freighter name of Carpenter. It jest happens that Bannack came all the way here from Wyomin' with Carpenter." Serill started to speak, but Ritter raised his hand and continued, "With Carpenter and with Carpenter's daughter. Now get this, Pane. Last night instead of comin' on up here after talkin' to that prospector, Bannack went off lookin' fer the Carpenter girl. That tells me that she's more important to him than anyone named Serill."

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Ritter let his word sink in and play on Serill's mind for a minute. The conclusion came quickly to the killer. "Yuh're goin' to tell me yuh got the girl?"

"Bullseye," sang out Ritter gleefully.

"And yuh plan on sellin' her to me," said Serill as the full plan became immediately apparent.

"Dead center, again," confirmed Ritter.

"What makes yuh think I'm buyin'?"

"She's yuhr only way out of here, Serill. It ain't jest Bannack that's ridin' up here. Her pap's comin', too, and I can tell yuh he's a mean one where that girl's concerned."

"How do I know this ain't all a dirty sandy, Ritter."

"I've got the girl and that's easy enough to prove. When yuh pay, I'll jest drag her up here. The line about Bannack and her papa ridin' this way will prove itself soon enough. I suppose the last round in the chamber, Serill, is that yuh got the whole story and there ain't no more to say. I'd suggest that yuh do yuhr decidin' purty quick like."

"What's yuhr price?"

"I want fair pay fer a lot of back debts and fair pay fer givin' yuh a chance to squirrel out of this thing. Give me a paper that says all the claims yuh own around here are mine. I also want two fat pokes of gold dust. I ain't a miner or any kind of gold expert, but I'll know a good sack of gold dust when I see it."

"Ritter, yuh forgot somethin'," said Serill cynically.

Ritter's face went momentarily blank at the sudden thought that some critical fact had escaped him. He wrinkled his brow as he looked at Serill and asked, "What?"

"The damn moon. Yuh might as well throw that in. I ain't got no gold on me."

"Serill, I know yuh too well. If yuh own gold, yuh got some of it on yuh. The way I see it, yuh might as well give it to me. If yuh don't, Bannack and Carpenter will get to pick it off yuhr carcass."

"I'll give yuh the claims. None of 'em's worth much anyway, but I'm tellin' yuh the truth about the gold, Jake."

The nub of the bargaining had been reached. Serill had made his offer and Ritter now had to decide whether to accept it or turn it back. No deal for Ritter meant that he would have bungled another attempt to profit by his trip to the mountains. No deal for Serill meant that he would either have to face Bannack and Carpenter alone or make a run for it.

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Ritter made a counter offer. "I still think yuh're bound to have some gold on yuh. I'll take what gold yuh got and the claims paper." As an afterthought, he added, "I didn't say before but I'm throwin' in Carpenter's old wagon driver. He seems to be a part of the family and he might come in handy to yuh somehow."

"If I had some gold, but I didn't have it with me," said Serill looking narrowly at Ritter, "would yuh consider throwin' in with me until we could get clear?"

Ritter started to give Serill a flat no, but he hesitated for a moment and finally asked, "Whatcha yuh got in mind?"

"Jest help me work my way outa this box. A few hours work, no more. Once we're clear, I'll go with yuh to my stash and split it with yuh. Jest between the two of us, Jake, that kitty of mine is fatter'n most folks think." Serill gave his story a further ring of truth and thereby gathered Ritter in by making it sound as though he had taken Ritter into his confidence. "Remember, Jake, that's jest between the two of us. Ain't no need to go cuttin' in that partner yuh got out there, but jest to keep him happy, I'll throw in a few pinches of dust I got with me."

The promise of instant riches was too great a temptation for Ritter and the vision of gold blinded his better judgment. "I'll get 'em up here, but mind yuhr tongue about yuhr main stash." Ritter gave no thought whatever to Wilts nor to the possibility that objections might be raised to the idea of joining Serill.

"Okay," agreed Serill, "but it'll take a minute or two fer me to manage that paper yuhr so worried about gettin'."

"Mind yuh, jest get it done," insisted Ritter.

"I'll figure somethin'," said Serill through his teeth.

"Yuh jest bought yuhrself outa here," said Ritter.

With that Serill turned and reentered the cabin and Ritter turned and, moving quickly, disappeared into the nearby timber. Each moved quickly and to his own purpose. The negotiators had been commanded by greed and by fear, but those impulses were soon to be displaced by others, more powerful and compelling.

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The most immediate need of the three men on the mountaintop was for additional information. They had to determine if Serill was still in the cabin, but of even greater moment, they needed to know if Jane and Able were there also.

A quick ride through some timber brought them closer to their goal. With something less than a mile to go, Owen pulled Cocoa to a halt. "I think we need to go at this one step at a time," he said. "We need to do some scouting around so that we don't tip our hand." Amos and Dolar both began to speak, but he cut them off with the wave of his hand. "This is my kind of game, I'll go."

They recognized that he was indeed the most logical candidate, and withheld their protests and offers to volunteer. They remained on their horses as Owen swung off the chestnut and slipped quietly into the trees.

As he walked his hand settled on the butt of the navy colt. He slid it out and checked the cylinder for loads and to insure that it was fully operational. Satisfied, he deftly returned it to its holster.

His approach became slower and more cautious as he drew near the clearing. As he stood behind a snow covered spruce, he heard a faint sound, an unnatural sound off to his left. Moving from one tree to another, Owen made his way in the direction of what he had heard.

The sound was repeated and Owen realized he was hearing male voices. They were rising and falling as if in anger or in a quarrel. More quick steps brought him within hearing range. A few more and he was able to see the source.

In a tiny clearing, which had been created by the fall of a giant tree, Owen could see Able and Jane sitting on the trunk of the fallen pine. They were facing him, but both were watching the men who occupied the clearing with them.

He recognized both Wilts and Ritter. Wilts had his back turned toward Owen and Ritter was out of sight, his face obscured by some hanging branches. The two men were having a disagreement and Ritter was speaking.

"I only said that I don't trust the little snake. I didn't say we wouldn't deal with 'im or give 'im a few minutes of our time."

"I still don't see how he's goin' to trade 'em over and how we're gonna be sure we get what he promised. Yuh jest said he didn't have

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anything to give except a piece of paper and a tiny pinch of gold fer the two of 'em. Yuh said yuhrself, Jake, there'd be some pouches of gold."

"We have to take what we can get," insisted Ritter. "I'll divide the claims with yuh even up."

Wilts were surprisingly determined and firm. "It seems to me my name oughta be on the paper same as yuhrs, Jake, and I still say he's gotta hand it over before we even take these folks out there."

Ritter was almost beside himself with anger. "Wilts, I'll bet yuh couldn't even read the paper if yuhr name was on it in big red letters. I think yuhr damn brain has froze up on yuh. Serill isn't goin' to give us anything until we deliver the old man and the girl. I'm tellin' yuh we'll get what's ours before we turn a hand to help him ride out of here."

"Paper first, then people," Wilts said flatly. "This helpin' out thing is all new and I ain't doin' it unless it's jest right, and it might never be right. Givin' these folks to Serill cuts against my grain and if we're bound to do a thing like this we ought to make certain sure the payin's done right." Then he added defiantly, "I can too read...some. Don't get tilty hat with me, Jake. Right's right. We need to read the paper to see that it ain't no trick."

Ritter had known Wilts for only a few weeks and had never encountered the man's stubborn streak before. His plan to pay Wilts with a tiny pinch of gold dust and a promise of sharing in the mining property would have to be compromised to get the man to go along with the proposal to stand with Serill and help him arrange terms with Bannack and Carpenter.

It was the challenge to his authority that angered Ritter. The idea of Wilts trying to stand equal with him was galling but even more frustrating was Wilts' attempt to tinker with the terms of payment. That came dangerously close to his secret deal with Serill and that avenue had to be closed off.

"Yuh damn busted stump, I oughta send yuh out there to deal with Serill by yuhrself. He'd slice yuh into little pieces as soon as look at yuh."

During the quiet that fell, Owen saw Able looking directly at him. Owen raised his hand to his lips, but the gesture was unnecessary. Able looked back at Wilts and Ritter. The old man's face remained such a blank that Owen wondered if Able had really even seen him.

Ritter broke the silence with an offer to compromise. "What say we do it this way. We'll take 'em up to the cabin, but I'll let yuh hang back with the old man until Serill gives us the paper and the gold. Once

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yuhr satisfied, we go ahead and hole up with Serill until Bannack shows up."

Wilts was a long time in answering. His response made it quite apparent that he had thought the exchange over carefully. "Sounds all right to me, Jake, but there's jest one thing."

"What's that?"

"When I take the old man to Serill, I'll keep the paper."

The unspoken challenge to Ritter's honesty and good faith and the hint that he would act less than honorably in the matter of the mining deed was more than his temper and vanity could bear. He apparently leveled his revolver at his partner since Wilts took a quick, surprised step backwards.

Owen could not see the gun, nor could he see Ritter's hand. He felt certain that if he moved to where he would have a better view, Ritter would be able to see him. Therefore, he had to be content to listen and guess.

Ritter's voice was rough and menacing. "Wilts, yuh rotten egg, I've a mind to ventilate yuhr damn shell. Yuh ain't done nuthin' but bring me grief since I first gave yuh a chance to do some chores fer me. Now yuh turn on me like a slitherin' sidewinder and talk like I was fixin' to cheat yuh. The only problem I've got is decidin' if yuhr worth the slug."

Able interrupted the exchange between the two and diverted the threat to Wilts by speaking out. "I'd say Ritter's idea might be the best way to do it, Wilts. If yuh're really worried, tear the paper in half. That'd be fair to both of yuh."

Ritter started to squelch the interruption, but hearing it go his way, he let Able finish. Since it added to his own arguments, he eagerly adopted it.

"There, Wilts, it's jest what I've been sayin'. I'll give yuh one last chance to stop yuhr bellyachin' and arguin'. What's it goin' to be?"

Reluctantly Wilts agreed to Ritter's plan. He did manage to extract further assurances that he would get to read the paper before turning Able over to Serill.

"Let's move over to the edge of the clearin' and wait fer Serill to show hisself," ordered Ritter. He added, "Remember, I got the hammer back on this pistol. It's a feather touch trigger, so don't get any notions about makin' a break."

As Jane and Able rose and began walking, Able threw one quick glance at Owen and gave an almost imperceptible nod of his head. Owen

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also saw Wilts draw his revolver and spin the cylinder as he walked behind his two captives.

Owen had the information he had been looking for. The immediate need was for the assistance and advice of Amos and Milt Dolor. Once safely out of hearing, he abandoned wariness for speed and began sprinting through the forest.

Owen found his companions anxiously awaiting his return. He quickly outlined the situation and added that they had very little time in which to act.

"Amos, just how well do you know Jake Ritter?" asked Owen.

"He was in with those rustlers in Wyomin' while I was tryin' to run a freight business. We didn't see much of each other, but I did have a few to do's with the man. Why do you ask, Owen"

"I've had a couple of run-ins with him, too. I think he's all talk and lots of puff. Back there just now he threatened to shoot his partner. I had the strong notion that he wouldn't have done it, not in a million years. Able offered him an out and he jumped on it."

"Yuh may be right, Owen. He was always strong on talk and short on doin'. His reputation for bein' a tough came mostly from the crowd he hung out with. Yep, lots of brag, lots of big talk, but quick to cut and run, pretty well describes Jake Ritter."

"I'm glad you agree because a lot depends on us being right."



Serill stepped back into the shack and stood for a while thinking over the sudden turn of events. If Ritter was telling the truth about the Carpenter girl, it could be the edge he had been looking for.

Yet he was suspicious. The story Ritter had spun about Bannack's concern for the girl didn't ring true. It ran against everything he knew about the vigilante. The man had spent months tracking down Serill's companions. In doing so he had shown himself to be absolutely committed to his mission. The vigilante had also shown himself to be brutally direct in dealing with outlaws. The story Serill had heard about the hangings in Wyoming proved that Bannack was decisive and that he didn't believe in detours.

Serill wanted to believe the boastful Ritter. He didn't believe that Ritter had the imagination to have concocted the whole story. There had to be a grain of truth in it, but Serill disliked risking his life on any such insubstantial fact. Still there was little choice left to him.

He sat upon the little stool and pulled his trouser legs up above the tops of his high boots. Inside them, tied to the wide pull loops by thick leather thongs, were two heavy leather sacks of gold dust. Serill pulled them both out, and untied the knots. From one bag he poured dust into the other. The glittering little golden stream poured like water and Serill's greedy eyes were transfixed by it.

When the pouch was almost empty, Serill stopped pouring. Carefully he retied the thick fat pouch and fitted it back down into the boot. The thin sack he tied loosely by its drawstring before tucking it under his cartridge belt. The trouser legs were pulled back down and Serill was half prepared for his payment to Ritter.

Serill had a mining deed in his coat pocket. The backside would serve for the agreed upon deed to Ritter, but search and look as he could, no pencil or anything that would substitute could be found. He finally tried using fireplace black and a splinter from a log. Setting the table back on its battered legs, Serill sat down on the stool and in a crude fashion he managed the words, "I deed all my claims around Gold Hill to J. Ritter. Signed, P. Serill."

Even the scrawled words had a finality about them and they sent a chill down his back. It sounded almost like the wills he had seen miners scratch out in the saloon when they felt themselves fall victim to the lung sickness that came in the dank and wet months of winter.

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Serill shook off the feeling and carefully folded the paper, trying not to blur it beyond legibility. As he did so, a grim smile crossed his lips as he thought of Ritter trying to preserve the deed long enough for it to have any effect. The smile was accentuated by his vow that if he managed to get out of the trap he was in, he would deal with Ritter later.

He brushed his hand across the mustache and the scar tissue that cut across his lip. Serill bared his stained and broken teeth and spat into the fire. "Yes, by damn. First escape, then I'll settle things. Ritter then Bannack."

Serill emphasized his thoughts by dragging his long knife across the tabletop. He was encouraged. If he could get his knife-edge against the throat of the Carpenter girl, he would be able to command the actions of Bannack and those with him. With luck he could get himself smoothly away from what he felt was a closing trap.

Thus prepared, Serill returned to the door, opened it carefully, and studied the clearing and surrounding trees. Not seeing anything to alarm him, Serill stepped through the door and looked around for sign of Ritter and the captives.

For a time there was only silence. Serill had a fleeting apprehension of betrayal. Then from the line of evergreens nearby he saw the little procession emerge. First was a slim figure that was probably the girl, close behind her was another wearing the characteristic hat of a wagon driver. They were followed immediately by Ritter and Wilts.

The group came a bit closer than halfway across the open space before it stopped. Then Ritter and the girl continued walking toward the cabin. The other half of the group stayed where it was and held a position a long stone toss away.

From what Serill could see, the girl was clearly frightened, but, despite that, her step was firm and there was no evidence to suggest she might become hysterical or faint. Her blonde hair strayed in all directions from under her scarf and her face was tinged with red from the cold air. She walked with her hands jammed into the side pockets of the too large mackinaw and seemed almost to ignore Ritter who was close behind.

She stopped a few paces away and looked at Serill with an intense, almost curious stare. Serill had the feeling he was being measured and weighed by some mysterious feminine standard. It made him uncomfortable and he avoided her eyes, looking instead at Ritter who had stepped up beside her.

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"What kinda game is this, Jake?" he asked suspiciously. "How come those two are holdin' back?"

"It's that damn Wilts. He's got some notion about not gettin' the paper yuh promised. I explained the deal to 'im, but he was all fidgety and startin' to backslide. He finally agreed to go ahead with it if he could see the deed first."

Serill's eyes narrowed as he looked from Ritter toward Wilts. "Yuh sure this ain't a saddle burr yuh dreamed up yuhrself?"

"Yuh got my word on it, Pane. The deal's set. He jest wants to look at the paper."

"How do I know I can count on 'im to back me if he's already startin' to make his own rules. I don't like changin' deals after they're made." Scanning the trees, he asked, "Where are yuhr horses?"

Ritter jerked his thumb toward the point where they had emerged from the cover of the timber. "Back there, jest a few steps past the first tree. Yuh want me to send Wilts back to bring 'em up?"

Serill was getting impatient. Standing in the open made him feel vulnerable, yet if he was to command the situation, it was necessary. "Hell, yes. We'll need 'em." He thrust the paper at Ritter and barked, "Here's the deed. It may not be perfect, but it's the only one yuhr goin' to get. Go back there and get the old man and send Wilts fer the horses."

As Ritter took the paper and walked quickly away, Serill turned his attention to Jane. "So yuh're Bannack's woman are yuh?"

"I'm nobody's woman," she answered curtly.

"Are Bannack and yuhr pa headed this way?" demanded Serill abruptly.

"I don't know where they are," said Jane staring at him coldly.

Serill bridled at her quiet strength and unspoken defiance. "Maybe Bannack never told yuh I got rid of one woman fer him. I wouldn't hold back on a repeat, so don't get saucy with me. If yuh give me square answers and don't throw any blocks in the road, yuh might live through this."

Jane did not speak and there was nothing in the steady gaze of her eyes, which would indicate she had been intimidated. She apparently felt her best course of action was to answer direct questions only.

"Ritter said yuh was Carpenter's girl. Is that true?"

"It's true."

"He also said that yuhr outfit jest pulled in from Wyomin' with Bannack ridin' along. Did he tell yuh he was a damn vigilante and that he's been goin' around hangin' men fer no good reason?"

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"I know about the hangings in Wyoming, if that's what you mean," replied Jane. "In both cases there was good reason. If being a vigilante means hanging killers that the law can't or won't hang, yes, I suppose he is a vigilante."

Instead of bursting out with a flood of threats, Serill only looked at her as a crooked smile creased his unshaven face and stretched his mustache. "Yuh're Bannack's woman all right. Ritter finally managed to get one thing straight. When we get shut of this place, I might jest take yuh down to Denver and show yuh the sights. Bannack would understand that."

Serill's laugh was cruel and without humor. His thought clearly was not abuse of Jane as much as it was of tormenting Owen Bannack. For the first time since seeing the killer, Jane shivered and felt her fear grow strong enough to control her mind and her actions.

"If you believe my pa and Owen will let you just walk away from here, you're mistaken, and if you think I'll go anywhere with you, you're wrong. If you were half as smart as folks say, you'd ride out of here now as fast as you can. Taking the rest of us with you would only slow you down."

"Fast ain't the game, missy," hissed Serill leaning close. "Blood is. If Bannack comes too fast or gets too close to me, I'll mark our trail with some Carpenter blood. Yuh see I've got all the red cards in the deck and Bannack knows it."

As he spoke, Able, at the end of Ritter's six gun, walked up and stood beside Jane. Serill paid him little heed and looked past the group toward Wilts.

"What's he doin' only bringin' two horses?" asked Serill sharply.

"Why, two's all we got," shrugged Ritter.

With a whisper of sliding metal, Serill's knife was in his hand and the point embedded under one of the buttons on Ritter's coat. The killer's eyes blazed with fury as he gave the knife a slight shove and sent the point slicing through the dirty wool, a shirt and long handled underwear to the skin.

Ritter's eye's widened and he gasped in surprise. The peril of the knife rooted him to the spot.

Serill seethed at him, "Yuh fool! Yuh damned fool! Did yuh think I was dealin' with yuh to walk out of here? All yuhr talk about having a sure ticket outa the mountains and about havin' the girl and not one damn word about havin' only two nags. I'm gonna slice out yuhr

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lyin' tongue. Then if I do the same for that pard of yuhr's, we'll have the group down to size."

Sensing that the man was angry enough and blood thirsty enough to do as he promised, Able diverted his attention.

"Ain't yuh fergettin' somethin', knife man?"

Serill hesitated and looked at the wagon driver. "Yuh want some of this steel too, old man?"

Able ignored the threat. "Yuh ferget them horses has been rid double most of the day. Havin' 'em is worse than walkin'. A man could spur 'em bloody and be lucky to get a decent plod fer a few miles. I'd say we're all afoot, and killin' Ritter ain't gonna help none."

Able's argument made an obvious point that was simply not open to dispute. It also forced Serill to realize the futility of killing Ritter. It would accomplish nothing but more important was the fact that it would deprive him of the man's gun hand.

As Wilts walked up leading the horses, Serill's cunning gave him a plan. It was thin and tentative, but it was worth a try. Remembering what Ritter had said about Wilts and his reluctant participation, Serill decided to put that fact to use.

Turning to Able, Serill said, "Climb up on that cayuse, mister. Wilts, I'm goin' to give yuh my poke, the whole thing. Yuh don't need to split it with Ritter. All yuh have to do is take off through the trees fer Gold Hill. It's all downhill and it ain't far."

Wilts' mind had fixed on the mining deed and his part of it. "What about them claims?"

"Yuh saw the paper didn't yuh?" demanded Serill.

"It only had Jake's name on it," replied the dogged Wilts.

"Where is the damn thing?" asked Serill heatedly.

"I got it here," admitted Ritter, hoping not to raise Serill's wrath again.

Snatching it from his hand, Serill handed it to Wilts. "It ain't worth nuthin' to Ritter if it's in yuhr pocket. Yuh can wait fer Ritter at the saloon and split the claims there. Satisfied?"

"Where's the gold?" asked Wilts suspiciously.

Serill yanked the pouch from behind his cartridge belt and tossed it to Wilts. The man's eyes popped as he clawed it open. Even the few thin pinches of gold captured his attention. Quickly he tied it tightly, and stuffed it up under his coat and into his trousers pocket.

Mounting his horse he asked, "What do I do with 'im when we get to the camp?"

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"Sell 'im to some gypsies. I don't care. Jest git goin'."

During the exchange, Able had not moved. He remained fixed where he had been standing. Serill turned on him. "Whatcha waitin' fer? Climb up on that horse."

"I reckon I'll jest stick around here," Able said matter-of-factly.

Serill turned on Able and raised his long gleaming knife. "If yuh stay here, it'll be in parts."

Jane seized Able's arm. "Able, please do as he says. If you were...well, if anything happened because of me, I'd never feel right again."

Serill lifted his knife to the side of Able's head. "In about three seconds, I'll start with the ears."

Ritter, almost as if repaying Able for the old man's words, which may have saved his life, said in a businesslike tone. "No need fer all that. Come on. Up with yuh on that horse." With that he grasped Able's elbow and forced him to the horse. Just as forcefully, Ritter shoved Able up onto the saddle.

"If yuh harm that girl," Able warned with all the fierceness at his command, "I'll hunt yuh down and split yuhr rims, yuh bloodthirsty leech."

Ritter finished hastily tying Able's hands to the saddle horn and stepped back. Serill ignored the threat and commanded Wilts, "Ride before I change my mind and take back that deed and my gold."

No other threat could have been as effective. Wilts grabbed the reins of Able's horse and lashed his own horse into motion. Reluctantly the abused animals began trotting across the far edge of the clearing.

Serill now directed his full attention to Jane and Ritter. "Quick," he rapped out, "bring her along."

With that, Serill ran toward the cabin. However instead of going in, he skirted around staying close to the side and stepping on the bare ground under the overhang of the roof. Over his shoulder he ordered Ritter, "Stay outa the snow along here."

Once around to the rear of the cabin, Serill retraced his own tracks leading from the corral. He deftly slipped through the poles of the little enclosure and moved across it. The uphill side was near the surrounding trees, and with a few steps the three disappeared into the cover of the forest.

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Owen and Amos were the first to arrive at the edge of the clearing. Milt Dolor was close behind leading the horses. The three men crouched there, studying the terrain and the cabin.

"Owen, I'm not sure," Amos was saying, "but I'd swear there were two of 'em. They were going behind those bushes at the end of the clearin', but I couldn't see who they were."

Dolor, who had a difficult time keeping his voice below its normal roar, noted, "They were headed fer Gold Hill if they went that way, and if yuh saw 'em, Amos, they can't have much of a lead on us."

"True enough," agreed Owen thoughtfully. "The problem is that if there were only two, we know they've split up. But what kind of a split?"

"What would Serill do in a case like this?" asked Amos. "Do yuh think he would make a break fer it or hole up?"

"There isn't any question about it." Owen answered. "He'd make a run, but only if he thought it was his best chance. "

"We're pretty sure he didn't know how close we were, so it's hard to know jest how he'd jump then," frowned Amos.

"I think we can be pretty sure that Ritter told him we were only a skip behind. We know that from seeing Able's greener planted with the sign on it. He'd make a point of our being on his trail to stampede Serill into paying his price. It's kinda funny though. From what I heard, Ritter's first plan was to just trade Jane and Able for a price, but the best I could make out, there had been a switch and he and Wilts were going to throw in with Serill."

"Then it wasn't Ritter and Wilts that I saw," concluded Amos. "Unless they went back to the original plan, made the switch and were headed out when I saw them."

"From what I know about Pane Serill, he'd want someone around to help with the shootin'," said Dolor.

"Then why the split up?" wondered Amos.

"That's what I can't figure," mused Owen. "One possibility is that because of the fact they were short on horses, Serill grabbed them for himself and one other and ran for it."

"Who'd he take," asked Amos.

They were silent for a moment. None of them wanted to recognize the obvious. It fell to Dolor, the most objective of the three, to

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put it into words. "I don't think there's any doubt about that. He'd take Jane."

"Then that's the way to go," declared Amos, rising to his feet.

"Amos, I only said that it was a possibility that it was Serill who was riding out. There are others," cautioned Owen. "This whole thing brings us to splitting up ourselves. We can't all go after those two horses and ignore the other three. At the same time we can't all stay here and forget about those horses. In the final toss of the hat, it comes down to a guess on how to do it."

"Someone's got to make the call." Amos' words did not offer an option. They were aimed directly at Owen.

The tall man accepted the responsibility without any hesitation. Looking at Amos he said, "I'd say that you and Milt, follow the horses. If one of them is carrying Serill, there ought to be two of you. On the other hand if Serill is still around here, I can keep a watch on the cabin until you get back. At the same time I can do some more scouting around and get a line on what might be a good approach to use."

"It might be slow goin'," Amos reminded him as he and Dolor climbed up on the big wagon horses. "This team's startin' to show the wear."

Owen looked at him quickly as if reminded of something. "Problem?" asked Amos noting the look.

"No," replied Owen. "Just a thought, but it doesn't change anything."

As the two rode off on the trail of Wilts and Able, Owen looked at the cabin and said to himself, "Two very tired horses or a cabin. On the horses you get caught and probably without much trouble. In the cabin you'd have a hostage, but you're still surrounded. I'm not sure that either one is a good choice. What's needed is some kind of diversion. Let the rabbit go, then run the other way."

The deep-set gray eyes narrowed and seemed to withdraw deeper from the high cheekbones. Owen Bannack's face tightened and became set with an inflexible determination. Everything in his character demanded direct action once a decision was made, and now as he knelt in the snow, he considered the facts and sorted through them. Amos' comment made him realize that the horses of Ritter and Wilts would be exhausted from carrying double loads. When Serill discovered that fact, he would reject the use of them for his own attempt to escape.

Owen was certain that Serill was still nearby. That meant Jane, too, was still somewhere near the Rusty Dime. As he looked at the cabin

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the thought crossed his mind that it would make a poor place to hold out against armed men. The most obvious disadvantage was the absence of an escape route. There simply was no place to go. A couple of determined and armed men could lay siege to the cabin indefinitely.

Complicating the whole thing was the captive. Serill would use the girl to hold off an attack and then would use her to impose conditions for his unchallenged escape. Trying to put himself in Serill's place, Owen asks himself how he would make use of the girl. Owen didn't like the thoughts which rose to haunt him. He remembered the inhumane handling of his wife by Serill and his gang during the time they held her before leaving her to die.

The vindictive nature of Serill might prompt him to repeat his actions. It would be in keeping with his character for Serill to punish Owen and try to get even for having been tracked down. The prospect of such a thing happening generated an intensity of purpose in him like none he had ever known before.

The stillness surrounding the cabin gave it a sort of serene and peaceful aspect. There was a faint and thin column of smoke rising from the chimney suggesting that the occupants were warm and snug. The side nearest Owen was an unbroken wall of logs, chinked with mud and offered no prospect for observation.

Moving from tree to tree to avoid being seen and to limit the possibility of becoming a target, Owen worked his way downhill in order to get a view of the side of the cabin which faced the long side of the clearing. Reaching a vantage point that gave him a full view of what was the front of the little hut, he immediately was struck by the fact that the door was ajar.

It was totally unexpected and at odds with the thought of the cabin serving as a sort of fortress. Owen could see a narrow portion of the inside of the cabin and he detected no sign of life. He quickly moved a bit further along the tree line to improve his view.

The cabin was empty! Owen was virtually certain of it. There was always the possibility it was some kind of ruse to draw him closer. There was also the chance that Serill was free from the confines of the little building and running. Running and forcing Jane to run with him.

Abandoning his position, Owen rose and returned quickly to his original place. He swung into the saddle with a graceful motion and headed Cocoa toward the cabin. Breaking out of the woods, he nudged the big chestnut into a full gallop and in an instant was at the cabin door.

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Cocoa slid to a stop showering snow across the front of the building. Before the horse came to a halt, Owen was out of the saddle and through the door. The navy colt leaped into his hand and his eyes swept the room. It was, as he had feared. Only a table and chair greeted him. The meager fire was almost burned out and its smoke drifted half in and half out of the chimney.

There were no clues to suggest whether or not anyone besides Serill had ever been in the room. Pieces of ceramic were scattered around the fireplace suggesting either carelessness or an act of random violence against a cup or a dish of some kind. The crude table listed to one side as though it too had been abused and then pressed back into service.

The vacant shack of the Rusty Dime claim was not snug and warm after all. It was cold, brooding and ominous. Its emptiness was filled with a call for action, but there was no direction in the call. "Where? Which way?" Owen asked the mute room. He swept the tall McKibbin hat off his head and ran his fingers through his unruly hair. The frustration he had felt in Denver when he narrowly missed Serill again tugged at his mind.

It was infinitely worse now because of Jane. He slapped the hat against his thigh as he blamed himself for letting Amos and the girl become a part of his life. If he hadn't ridden up to Gold Hill with them, if he hadn't ridden with them from Wyoming, none of this would have happened.

As he turned back toward the door, the answer to 'which way' sat looking at him. Jane's dog, Wink, had, at Amos' direction, stayed close throughout the approach to the Rusty Dime. The dog had slipped from his mind as he scouted the cabin and made his rush on it. Now Wink sat giving him a puzzled, lopheaded look as if asking, "Why the fuss?"

Owen jammed his hat back on, holstered the colt and joined the dog outside the door. "Don't waste time asking me what fool thing I'm doing beating myself with a hat, old boy. Right now you've got to find Jane for me."

Wink gave him something of a suspicious look, but the big dog seemed to understand. On the long trek from Wyoming he and the dog had become reasonably good friends, but there was never any question but what Wink was really a one person animal and the person was Jane.

Owen repeated his command, "Jane, Wink. Find Jane."

As if agreeing to obey the man for this one time, Wink stood and began circling the area around the front of the shack. After a minute, his attention centered on one spot. From there he ran, first in one direction,

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then another. Again it took some circling and running in different directions, but Wink settled on a track that took him back toward the cabin. It veered off and led the dog under the eaves of the building and to the corral.

A horse, presumably Serill's, stood in a corner, his head hanging low, his eyes listless and uninterested in the activity around him. It was here that Wink apparently lost the trail. The strong scents of the corral seemed to confuse the dog. Not being trained at tracking, he rushed about demonstrating that he had the right idea but a less than perfect skill.

It had been enough. Owen had the direction he so desperately needed. Calling on Wink to follow, he struck off up the hill toward the upper end of the Rusty Dime claim.

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Serill ran ahead of Ritter and Jane. They fell behind because Jane was less than cooperative and because Ritter, not accustomed to physical exertion, began to tire. The difficulty of the uphill scramble was accentuated by the increasing steepness of the slope.

As Serill progressed toward the unmarked uphill line of the Rusty Dime claim the only trail open to him was the dry creek bed which was cluttered with large snow covered rocks. After a time Serill came to the rock ledge which had been nature's spillway for the stream which had, in past ages, thrown itself down from the sides of the mountain. As he stood in the sandy creek bottom below the ledge, Serill could look up and see the spindle of the winch, which stood over the Rusty Dime glory hole.

With catlike agility, Serill scrambled up onto the shoulder high ledge. Perched there on the downslope wall of the glory hole he peered into the darkness trying to see the bottom. In the gray light it was difficult even to follow the sides very far. The wooden shoring simply disappeared and left it to the imagination to reflect on how far it extended.

Crawling along the ledge, Serill reached the side of the wide hole and jumped off the rock to further explore the old vertical mine shaft. He found it to be a good twenty feet across at its widest point. The constant climbing in and out, the hauling of buckets, the scraping of ladders, and the years of erosion had all combined to ream out the top of the shaft and make it the widest part. As with most digging efforts, it had a tendency to narrow as it descended.

Running directly across the mouth of the hole, were two logs, spaced about four feet apart and laid parallel like thick wooden rails. They were now gray from weather and a thin ridge of snow topped each. The bark on the logs had been worn off by the boots of the mine owner who placed them there to serve as the foundation for his bridge and work platform. The platform itself was nothing more than a few short planks laid over the logs. Thus constructed one could stand on it and lower and raise things into and from the mine while watching the progress of such efforts without being forced to work from the edge. It also had the desirable effect of avoiding the further erosion of the sides and the chunking of dirt into the works below.

As part of the logs and platform there was the winch. It consisted of inverted v braces whose legs were attached to the logs. The spindle, or

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rope take up, was also a log. The wooden crank was situated such that the winch could be cranked and operated from the platform. The thick rope which was wound around the shaft was frayed. Some of the strands had parted completely.

His inspection completed, Serill turned an impatient eye down the streambed and watched while a puffing Ritter followed the girl up to the ledge. "What kept yuh?" The answer was obvious and he didn't expect one. He spoke only to recognize their presence and to give vent to his anger at the situation he found himself in.

Neither Ritter nor Jane responded. They stood surveying the ledge and wondering how they were going to scale it. Before they could decide, Serill ordered them to move up out of the streambed and to work their way along the ledge to higher ground. They did as they were ordered and where the rock barrier met the hillside, found it but an easy step to the level of the top of the glory hole.

Serill commanded them to join him at the glory hole where he stood looking at the platform and the parallel logs. Ritter was standing a respectful distance from the edge looking at the crude mining rig with a noticeable skepticism.

Guessing Serill's general intent to employ the device in some way, Ritter announced, "None of that's my line of business, Pane. I ain't goin' near any hole in the ground while I'm alive."

"Nobody's askin' yuh to," said Serill. "First things first. Tie her hands behind her back."

"What'll I use fer rope?"

Serill's eyes swept the area and fastened on the winch and its rope. The previous owner, before leaving for a night at the saloon and its poker table, had wound the rope up on the spindle and left the hooked end hanging above the two logs. First scraping the ridge of snow off the logs, Serill proceeded to step out on them and then onto the platform. He seized the rope, pulled some more slack off the spindle, laid the metal hook on the platform and, with a sharp hard stroke of his knife, neatly severed the rope. He moved up the rope two feet, again the knife swept down and sliced through the thick hemp.

Rising, Serill tossed the rope section at Ritter's feet. "Unravel that. It'll do fine."

Ritter did as he was directed, and he soon had Jane's hands bound behind her back. "Now bring 'er over here," ordered Serill.

Reluctantly, Ritter guided Jane to the ends of the logs. She stood there looking into the glory hole, not moving.

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

"Come on out here," commanded Serill.

"I can't," she answered. "With my arms tied, I can't balance or hold on."

Exasperated, he grabbed the freshly cut end of the rope and pulled off more slack. Looking at Ritter, he called, "Here. Catch."

Ritter missed the toss, but the rope fell at his feet. As he picked it up Serill instructed him, "Turn her around and since she won't come out here, we'll jest let her set on the edge. Tie that end around her middle."

With the tying completed, Jane's hands were tied behind her back and the winch rope was tied around her waist. One quick turn of the handle would pull her over the edge and send her tumbling to the bottom of the glory hole.

Satisfied with the arrangement, Serill turned to Ritter. "Hunker down over there behind the wall and keep yuhr eyes peeled. If yuh see any of 'em before I do, sing out."

By kneeling, Serill himself was able to comfortably see over the smooth top of the ledge. He had a full view of the streambed and the approach to the mine. Jane, who was on the far side of the shaft behind him, was out of the line of sight of anyone coming up the hill.

After long minutes had passed, Serill called to Ritter, "Have yuh seen anything at all?"

"Nuthin' here," came the uneasy reply.

More long minutes passed and Ritter broke the silence. "Yuh suppose they took yuhr bait? They might all be in the saloon in Gold Hill by now." He added, aloud but to himself, "By damn, I wish I was with 'em. A little rot gut would feel mighty good."

Serill didn't answer but sat wondering if Ritter might be right. If his ruse had in fact pulled Bannack and the others off his trail, he was wasting valuable time sitting and waiting for them. He would be a fool to be rooted to one spot when he could be putting distance between himself and his pursuers.

His thoughts frustrated and angered him. He had sent the horses off because they were of no value, not because he really thought Bannack would fall for the poor trick. He threw a look over his shoulder at the girl who stood with her eyes looking down the trail as if she had no doubt that someone would come for her.

Serill turned back toward the ledge and his downhill view. "Bannack'll come all right," he intoned.

"Did yuh say somethin', Pane?" called Ritter anxiously.

"Naw, jest keep a sharp eye out. They'll be here."

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

Despite Serill's confident assurance, time began to weigh heavily and Ritter began to entertain doubts about the operation. He grew increasingly skeptical that Bannack or anyone else was going to come climbing up the creek bed. The tension of inactivity also caused him to have second thoughts about going along with Serill. The confidential promise of gold began to grow stale and Ritter cursed himself for letting himself be taken in by the hateful Serill.

Ritter's declining spirits matched the passing of the day. It was still full light and would be for another hour, but the late afternoon was darkening, as the clouds grew heavier. It began to snow. The warmth of the afternoon was too slight to be of any comfort to the inhabitants of the mountain world, but it was sufficient to affect the snowflakes. They were exceedingly large and very wet.

Soon the wet snow managed to soak the coats of the three people who occupied the area around the Rusty Dime glory hole. The snow melted almost as soon as it came into contact with Ritter's hat and trousers. He soon hated Serill more than ever before and hated his role in the little drama which seemed to have been stricken into inaction and silence.

Serill, too, felt his spirits lag. Since seeing Bannack in Denver, he had been on the run. The cabin at the Rusty Dime had seemed to be a prison. The hope of escape offered by Ritter and the captive girl was a thin one and now seemed even more fragile and false. There was an irony in his situation which appealed to his grim and sour mind. He was at the end of the Rusty Dime claim, sitting directly over a glory hole whose riches had all been removed. By some quirk of fate, ownership of the property had come to him, but only after it had been worked out.

It had been that way since he had first arrived in Gold Hill. The mining properties he had acquired all seemed to play out and become barren when he became the owner. The knowledgeable prospectors said that it was because he didn't know how to work the property. Serill couldn't help thinking that it was the story of his life. No matter what he got into, it eventually failed. Almost aloud he said to himself, "When yuh get right down to it, it don't make no real difference at all. If I squeeze out of this, I'll wind up gettin' into another losin' deal somewhere else."

Jane, like the two outlaws, was cold and wet. Since she and Able has been captured back in the canyon, her mind had never entertained any doubt about her father and Owen arriving sooner or later. Standing on the very edge of the dark mine shaft, she hoped it would be

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

soon, but as the minutes dragged on and the damp cold began biting at her, doubts began to grow. There were any number of ways Owen and Amos could have gone astray. They might have missed the sign that Ritter planted on Able's shotgun. It was possible they were still scouring the canyon where she had last seen them. Despite her fears, however, Jane felt within her a spark of confidence that would not die. Because she knew Amos and because of a feeling, not fully defined, she had about Owen, she knew they would persist and find her. Jane even took some hope from the fact that the outlaw, Serill, seemed certain his enemies were close on his heels.

Looking at the back of the killer as he knelt on the platform near the winch, Jane was mildly surprised. She had heard Amos and Able relate the man's crimes. She knew that Owen was driven to hunt him down and return him to Montana for hanging. Not having really thought about what the man would be like, Jane was not sure what she had expected. She had no doubt that he was capable of the most unspeakable acts of violence, yet he seemed at the moment to be a wretched and miserable figure, hardly worth contempt.

At a moment when the hopes or fears of the individuals in the little group were at the very lowest point, events began to move with sudden fury. The quiet attitude of watchfulness evaporated in an instant and with stunning surprise.

Owen Bannack had been a rancher before he was forced to become a vigilante, and it was the skill of one who works livestock on the open range that he summoned. Rising from the cover of a large boulder, which rested, above the yawning mouth of the glory hole and behind Jane and her captors, Owen whirled his arm once, twice and then cast the most important loop of his life.

As the eyes of Jane and her captors searched the downhill terrain, Owen's rope spun in a graceful arc, formed a wide circle in the air, and noiselessly settled down over Jane's shoulders and then to her waist. With a swift sure pull it was drawn tight.

Jane choked back a cry of surprise and fright. In a split second she realized that Owen had found her and that he had done so without being seen by Serill or Ritter. Her eyes watched for movement by either of her captors. There was none. She tensed her body, for what she was certain would follow. She could feel the rope tug at her then slack off and tug again. The signal was a strong and as clear as it would have been if Owen had spoken aloud.

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

She took a short step back from the edge of the pit. The rope around her waist leading to the winch tightened and the slack disappeared. Another step backward and the spindle began to turn, moving the handle next to Serill's elbow.

Serill's eyes picked up the motion of the handle. He whirled around to face her. As he did, Owen pulled on his rope. His long arms moved with lightning speed. Jane was propelled backwards onto the seat of her trousers and through the snow.

With a blur of speed the big colt leaped into his hand, while the other held the rope. The handle of the winch had been spinning as Jane's rapid movement away from the danger of the shaft wound off the glory hole rope. Serill's instinctive reaction was to reach for the handle to arrest its roll.

"You'll be dead before you can stop it," warned Owen.

Serill's arm dropped and he stood looking up the barrel of the revolver. The muzzle was rock steady and the gray eyes above it were as hard and cold as mountain granite. The months evaporated and Serill remembered thundering into the yard of Owen Bannack's ranch. He could see in vivid detail, the rancher's surprised face, as he stood unarmed and defenseless against the four cutthroat outlaws. Serill imagined he could even feel the recoil of the pistol as he triggered three slugs into the rancher's body. Serill's mind returned to the present and his first thought was that the gray eyes were the same as he remembered them. Now, however, the surprise was gone.

Without moving, Serill called on his backup. "Kill 'im Ritter. He can't hold that rope, keep me covered, and draw down on you all at the same time. He's a pot shot, Jake. Gun 'im down. He ain't got no friends or they'd have shown by now."

Ritter was standing, gun in hand, looking from Serill to Owen. His first reaction had been to level the gun at Owen, but something made him hesitate. Serill's order to shoot hammered at him, but he hesitated.

Owen spoke and the words were calm and easy. "Serill's right, Ritter. You got the gun and you're the swingman. I'll even go one step further and tell you that he's right about the others. They headed off after the horses Serill sent toward Gold Hill. There's only one thing you need to consider before you pull that trigger. Do you want to become a killer like Serill? I don't believe you've ever done anything more than brag a lot, tell a heap of lies, and cheat and steal some. Killing is different. It'll make a Serill out of you."

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

"Ain't nuthin' wrong with that, Jake," cried Serill. "Specially since I'm the one with the gold. Fact is I got a fat poke tied inside my boot. It's yuhr's the minute yuh drop 'im."

The lure of gold was no longer what it had been for Ritter. There was a frantic note in Serill's voice and Ritter read it to be the sound of another lie. The truth was in Owen's words. They honed in on a fact he had long been aware of, but had tried to ignore and conceal from others. He simply was not a killer and for some reason knew he never would be.

With a long look at Serill he holstered his revolver. His shoulders slumped with a great sigh and Ritter gave every sign of being a man who had faced himself honestly for a brief moment and was relieved for having done so. Then, without a word, he clambered over the ledge, which had been his hiding place and disappeared.

"Jane," said Owen, "pull yourself some more slack in the winch rope and see if it'll reach back here to me."

Quickly she scrambled to her feet and began climbing through the tangle of rocks and brush to where Owen stood. The rope was easily long enough and she was soon by his side. He dropped his own rope and, without taking his eyes off Serill, untied her hands.

With her hands free, it was the work of a second for Jane to throw off the mine rope and the lasso. In an instant she was in the protective circle of his arm.

Serill's taunting voice came at them from his platform. "It's like I said, yuhr Bannack's woman all right."

Owen's arm tightened around Jane's shoulders, before he released her. "Jane, it won't be long before Amos and Dolor find out they're chasing in the wrong direction. They'll be riding up to the cabin and wondering which way to go, and Amos'll be worried. I think it would be best if you went down there and waited for them."

She wanted to protest, but did not. Without looking at Serill, she did as Owen suggested and began working her way down the hill. Owen called out to her as she reached the ledge, "Wink's around here somewhere, you might whistle him up on your way." She nodded and, like Ritter, disappeared over the face of the rock outcropping.

Owen methodically coiled his lariat rope then carefully made his way down to the edge of the pit and stood where Jane had been forced to stand only minutes before. Serill glared at him, venom flashing from his eyes.

"What now, cowboy? Back to Montana so's them vigilante friends of yuhr's can have one of their hearin's and then string me up?"

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

"You sentenced yourself when you started killing innocent and defenseless people, Serill. The hearing is a formality."

"So yuh say, Bannack, but what ever happened to the law? Ain't I got the right to a regular trial?"

"When there isn't any law or when the law totally fails to do its job, then the only law left is the people themselves. That's the ultimate authority, Serill, the people acting together to protect the rights of individuals."

"Fine talk, Bannack, but it don't change the fact that I ain't had my right to a real judge and jury."

"Do you deny that you're guilty?"

"Are yuh askin' me if I deny killin' some folks?"

"Yes. That's my question."

"Hell, no. I ain't denyin' what I did. There are plenty of people around who know that I've sent a few over the divide. Besides I ain't crawlin' and snivelin' and tryin' to lie about what I done. I'm jest askin' about a trial."

"Serill," said Owen heavily, "if you insist on a trial, you can make that demand up in Montana where you did some of your killing. The result will be the same."

The outlaw studied Owen for a moment. Slowly and with great care he reached down and with the ends of two fingers drew his long knife from its scabbard. Staring at Owen he dropped the cruel instrument into the hole. With the same deliberate care, Serill repeated the act for his revolver. It banged against the platform at his feet and clattered against the shored walls of the hole before thudding into the sand below.

In a hateful, taunting voice Serill defied the vigilante. "Yuhr kind won't shoot an unarmed man. If yuh want me, Bannack, yuh'll have to come out on these logs and take me with yuhr hands."

Owen holstered his Colt as if preparing to accept the invitation. The coiled lariat rope then sprung to life. With a quick deft shake a loop was formed and before Serill could react, the loop shot across the narrow space that separated the men. The rope settled on his shoulders and even as his hands rose to throw it off, Serill felt the noose tighten around his throat.

Serill grabbed the rope and pulled, but his strength was no match for Owen's and his effort to ease the tension was useless. The steady pressure made it almost impossible for Serill to move. The gaping hole was at his feet and the rope brought him forward until his head and shoulders leaned over the darkness.

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

After a moment, Owen said, "I'll ease off on this rope, whenever you're ready to walk off that platform."

Serill was unyielding. "This don't change anything, Bannack. Yuh won't pull me off 'cause I'd go in the hole. If that happened, yuh'd have to haul me out by the neck and that'd be the kind of slow death yuhr kind can't stomach."

Keeping the tension on the rope, Owen walked around the edge of the glory hole until he was in line with the logs, which led to the platform. He began inching his way out. It would ordinarily be the distance of two long strides, but under these circumstances Owen had to slide his feet carefully forward, maintain his balance, and keep his eyes on Serill.

At the point where he was the most vulnerable, a full step away from firm ground and a step away from the platform, Owen saw Serill leap toward him. It was a malicious and maddened act calculated to carry them both into the mineshaft.

Owen lunged forward and the men crashed into each other at the edge of the little wooden stage. In his clawing frenzy, Serill abandoned the life saving sense of holding on to the winch or its framework. His only thought was to lock his hands onto Owen. When his feet slipped on the wet planks, Serill fell.

The lariat rope whirred over the edge of the platform. The knotted end, however, pinched and caught in the framework of the winch.

Serill's drop was perhaps the longest of any killer who received his justice at the end of a vigilante's rope. It is a fact of little note and no significance since the effect was the same.

Owen pulled at the rope and found it was stretched tight. Serill had clearly not reached the bottom of the hole. By lying on his stomach, Owen could see into the glory hole. Serill's lifeless body swayed from side to side like a grotesque pendulum marking the passing of life and the passage of time.

Rising, Owen looked about him for a minute at the mountain and the trees, which stood like mute witnesses. The barren glory hole, for the price of serving as a grave, would reclaim at least the gold in Serill's boot. Owen used his pocketknife and cut the rope. Serill fell the last few feet to the bottom and landed with hardly a sound. Later there would be time to enlist some help to fill in the hole and leave Serill in his deep and rich grave.

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

At the cabin, Owen found Jane stoking the fire while a red faced Ritter sat on the floor in a corner. In the middle of the room Wink sat with a triumphant look. Clearly he had Ritter where he wanted him and was not inclined to let him go.

"This is the way I found them," explained Jane. "I know you let him go, but I guess Wink doesn't agree."

Owen laughed and addressed Ritter. "It looks to me like the tables have turned. Every time I saw you before, you were making life uncomfortable for someone. I see that's changed now."

Ritter's eyes stayed on the dog as he exclaimed, "Vicious. By damn he's the most blood mean critter I ever saw. The other night he came near to tearin' my stomach out."

"Oh, that was the night you tried to steal my pa's wagon," Jane said, as if learning the fact for the first time.

"Miss Carpenter, we was jest funnin' yuh. Honest we were. No harm intended. I'd admit that we had a bit too much to drink, but like I say, no harm intended." All the time he spoke, Jake Ritter stared at Wink.

"Since we can't seem to get rid of you, the question is, what are we going to do with you?" Owen looked down at the frightened man with a half smile. Turning to Jane he asked, "Just how bad was that wagon broken?"

"It's pretty bad," she said shaking her head but picking up on Owen's thought. "I don't know what it'll take to set it right."

"Ritter," said Owen, "how long has it been since you put in an honest day's work?"

"Work?" sputtered Jake Ritter.

Owen and Jane burst out laughing. "By golly, Jane, it's just what I suspected. He's forgotten the word, or maybe his trouble is that he never learned what it meant. Do you think we ought to try to teach him a bit about it?"

She nodded her assent, "Sounds like a good idea to me."

Owen stood at Wink's shoulder and studied Ritter. In a somewhat more serious tone he said, "Look Jake, you're quite a scoundrel. I know that you've rustled cattle, and caused no end of misery for a lot of good folks. Your miserable hide belongs in a jail, but putting it there would mean going to a lot more trouble. Now I'm in the uncomfortable position of being beholden to you for my life. I'm ready to offer you a deal. If it's agreeable to Amos and to Able, we'll line up some wagon work for you. It'll mean working under Able's tender supervision with Wink here keeping an eye out to see that you don't

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stray. I don't propose to make a completely honest man of you, but maybe we can work out some of your worst kinks. What do you think?"

Ritter had listened but had kept his eyes on the dog. Finally, he looked up at Owen. It was out of character for Ritter. It was a straight, direct and honest look. "I ain't sayin' I like yuhr proposition, Bannack, but I'll take it on one condition."

"Let's hear it."

"It's that dog. Yuh got to promise me that yuh'll keep that vicious brute from attackin' me. He's table scrap mean yuh know. Them teeth of his is bigger'n a grizzly bear's."

"Jane," asked Owen, "can we give that kind of guarantee?"

"It's like I once said. Wink doesn't like guns and he doesn't like people trying to run away. If Mister Ritter doesn't carry a gun or make any sudden or quick moves, I'm sure Wink won't trouble him." She looked directly at Wink's captive. "Seriously, now. Do you agree to Owen's plan?"

Jane's pointed question seemed to rivet him to the wall for an instant. Then he nodded agreement, "Yes...I mean yes, ma'am."

With Ritter's rehabilitation thus underway, Jane ordered Wink to withdraw. "Wink, outside."

The dog instantly stood and walked out the door, which Owen held open for him. There was no way of knowing for certain, but it would be a fair guess that Wink had his doubts about such an enormous undertaking as reforming Jake Ritter, but he, like Jane and Owen, was willing to give it a try.

LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME



The bright morning sun was flooding the mountains from the continental divide, to the lower range, and across the foothills. The bright blue sky was cloudless and it provided a spectacular cover for the evergreen forest, which spread itself over the mountains. The early snow had melted from everywhere but the peaks above timberline where it still lay glistening in eye blinding glory.

The late Indian summer day offered an ideal temperature to all except those who found themselves engaged in heavy, demanding labor. Such was the lot of the men who struggled with the heavy and stubborn wagon box in the yard of the Carpenter Freight Company. They fitted thick pieces of wood in place, found them to need adjustment, withdrew them, carved on the wood, planed on it, surveyed it with squinted eyes and tried again to force the pieces into place. It was difficult and hard work, but the men put themselves to the task with a will.

Able was a hard taskmaster. "Ritter, if yuh don't keep yuhr fat belly outa the way, that swivel board'll slice if off."

"Like old Wink there did fer yuh once before," teased his fellow worker.

"Wilts, if I sock yuh with one of these loose spokes, maybe that'd keep yuhr eyes from rollin' around in them sockets," threatened a puffing and straining Ritter who was holding a large timber to the undercarriage of the wagon.

"The two of yuh are more air than work," snorted Able. "My guess'd be that it's gonna take yuh a long time to learn the wagon fixin' business. Ain't neither one of yuh got the hang of much besides eatin' and restin'. Ritter there eats enough at every sittin' to fill a spring wagon box and, Wilts, I think yuh're asleep even when yuh're awake."

Wilts accepted the comments of Able. He had begun to develop an affection for the old man, but his inclination to needle Ritter was as strong as ever. "Jake," teased Wilts, "maybe yuh ought to show Able here yuhr deed. A rich claims owner don't need to be out here sweatin' in the sun."

The reference to the deed given by Serill infuriated Ritter, as Wilts knew it would. When Ritter had snatched the deed from Wilts and handed it to Owen as the group had reunited at the Rusty Dime cabin on that climactic day a few weeks ago, the paper had been totally blank. Only a little pinch of black dust fell from its creases. Ritter felt he had

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

been robbed and that Wilts was the thief. Clearly it was a dispute which would never end.

"Wilts, yuh damn tailgate," stormed Ritter, "it's time that I drop yuh down and bolt yuh shut on this whole business."

Amos and Owen stood off to one side listening. Amos' broad face was filled with a smile, and he was at ease, enjoying a fresh pipe of tobacco. "It's been like that fer the past two weeks," said the freighter. "The funny thing is, Ritter and Wilts are really takin' to the whole thing. They're goin' to be all right. After a time, I might even start payin' 'em a little."

"You sound like a man whose business is going first rate," smiled Owen.

"Well, I can't complain," admitted Amos. "Dolor's needin' even more stuff than he thought he would since Gulder left the country. And with a few new mines planning on puttin' in machinery in the spring, we're busy enough." Changing the subject he asked, "Did yuh get things straightened out with the bank in Denver?"

"It'll probably take some time since the lawyers have gotten involved," answered Owen, "but the money will eventually go back to Wyoming to the ranchers whose cattle were stolen by Seerill's partner."

Suddenly they heard a warhoop from inside the cabin. Jane came dashing out. She flung herself at Owen and planted a great kiss on his cheek. Tucked under her arm was the bolt of scarlet wool she had admired in the Denver store window. Her action was impulsive and only when she realized her father was smiling at her in amazement did her cheeks flood bright red. Even her embarrassment did not deter her enthusiasm.

"Owen, how did you know?" she asked.

He merely shrugged and said nothing.

"It's beautiful and I've wished for it every day since I saw it."

As Jane held the deep scarlet cloth up to the bright mountain sun, she fairly glowed in exultation. She laid it across her shoulders like a shawl and leaned her cheek against its soft texture. "A pattern, I'll have to make a pattern," she exclaimed.

"Maybe you could get old Pilfer there to help you," chided Owen, his eyes fastening on the recluse who sat near the wagon watching the progress of the work.

"Between Pilfer and Wink that work crew of Able's is pretty well watched," chuckled Amos. Then in a more thoughtful tone he added, "That old man's quite a puzzle, Owen. Ever since yuh brought him down

## LONG DROP AT THE RUSTY DIME

off the mountain, he's hardly said more than a dozen words, but he stays close by, jest watchin' everything that goes on. He wears that ribbon yuh gave him in his lapel like a county fair prize."

Amos looked at the two and, realizing that they were not listening to his rambling talk muttered something about a wagon that needed attention. Without being noticed, he excused himself and walked away.

Owen and Jane began walking away from the cabin and past the wagon that was being repaired. Jane was saying, "Aren't the trees and mountains just beautiful."

From under the wagon where Able was working came a loud "Harrumph."



## DAISIES AROUND ME

The daisies around me  
The ones that surround me  
Are happy thoughts  
White and gold frown-me-nots  
My daisies and me

When my world turns dark and blue  
As all worlds sometimes want to do  
Then I may sigh a sigh or two  
Or even cry a cry or two

But the daisies around me  
The ones that surround me  
Touch my thoughts  
With white and gold please cry-me-nots  
My daisies and me

When words won't say the things I feel  
And won't my truest thoughts reveal  
Or the ones who are close and dear  
Cannot see my face and cannot hear

Then the daisies around me  
The ones that surround me  
Send a mile of thoughts  
With white and gold love-you-lts  
My daisies and me

I've read of places far and away  
And on a melancholy mellow day  
Thought I'd like to go and even stay  
But then I wonder if they know the joyous way

Of the daisies around me  
The ones that surround me

(continued next page)



I'll keep the world I've got  
Among the white and gold leave-me-nots  
My daisies and me

When melodies and fleeting sound  
Dance aimlessly and dizzily around  
And tease away tranquility  
Orderly themes and tones are returned to me

By the daisies around me  
The ones that surround me  
Where music floats  
Through the white and golden field-of-notes  
My daisies and me

The daisies around me  
The ones that surround me The frown-me-nots  
The cry-me-nots  
The love-you-lots  
The leave-me-nots  
The field-of-notes  
My daisies and me



## SPRING'S A PLACE

Spring's a place I want to be  
'Cause Spring's a thing that flowers see,

With sprightly eyes of many hues  
Nodding nods in ways the breezes choose,

They survey all, from leaves on swelling bough  
To browning ground turned by earthing plough.

Imparting a daytime dream; they share  
With those who pause and see them there,

Presiding over April, May and warming times  
In the merriest way by teasing rhyming rimes  
From poets trapped in temperate climes.



## SNOW IN THE CITY

Snow in the city doesn't belong there  
And on the streets most of all  
Where its salted, sanded and  
Mulched into mush  
By tires.

Nor on walks or drives  
Where its. tumbled and thrown  
High into heaps  
By shovels.

Neither-on buildings, ledges, and  
Especially not in crannies  
Where its melted into ice  
By the sun.

Yes, snow in the city is  
Abused, removed, and unheeded.  
I'd rather see it in the  
Country where its needed.



## WIND

Whether soothing a heavily settled summer day,  
Or plastering the world white with sodden snow,

Or an overpowering force  
Raging against men and  
Things, however fixed they may be,

But whether hurricane or breeze  
Whatever its velocity  
Its free.



## **THE MODERN METAL GORDIAN KNOT**

Consider the hangar,  
Alone it will languor  
Because it takes two to tangle



## **IDLE SUN**

The sun's white bright patch  
Is stitched to the floor by  
Whose needling silvery glints  
Set flame to golden dreams.

Yet the rolling globe  
Quick dancing beams  
Compresses the block to a strip  
To a finer ever thinner finer line,

And with the last beam's wink,  
Reality reappears to quench  
The remnant of a sunless dreary dream  
Which must await the sun's next spin of day.



## **THE KNOB**

A knob

Sorts out the frequency mob

And does a variable rotational job

Rheostating dimly through selection to perception

Extending electronically the execution

Of reflection's quickening solid state petrification.



## **A COLLAR**

A collar  
Makes it hard to swaller  
And impossible to hollar.

