

Loco or Love

by W.C. Tuttle



“IF YOU’D ’a’cooked them two eggs at the same time, ‘Magpie,’ mine wouldn’t ’a’ rolled off on the floor and busted,” says I, sad-like, looking at the remains.

Magpie Simpkins rises his full height, which is some elevation, and glares at me.

“Ike Harper,” says he, “tend to your own cooking. A person what is as ungrateful as you are can’t partake of my cooking, neither will I break bread with such as he.”

I got my boots on, cooks me some bacon, and eats as far from that hombre as the room allows. A house divided can’t ring with harmony, and love has put a breach as wide as the Grand Canon between me and Magpie. The little feller with the bow and arrer has rasped us raw.

Magpie is the sheriff of our county, and I’m his deputy. Me and that scantling-shaped hombre have been pardners ever since gold was discovered on bedrock, and this is the first rift in our lute. Of course there has been discords, but this is the first time that the strings have all been busted!

Love cometh at strange times. Me and

Magpie have been over in the Medicine Hills, sort of looking for an alleged rustler, and are coming out, when we sees a nester’s cabin with smoke coming out of the stovepipe. It’s an old place, and ain’t been occupied for some time, so we decides to investigate.

We’re a heap hungry, and when we gets in shooting range we smells fried onions and coffee. There’s an aroma of biscuits on the air, too, which don’t hurt our noses none.

We pilgrims into the yard, and as we slips off our broncs the door opens, and we sees our heart’s desire. She’s a cute little filly. She’s slender, got a lot of eighteen-carat hair, and blue eyes as big as the end of a shotgun shell.

She’s got a bowl full of dough in her hands, and she stares at us like we’re curiosities. Sudden-like she smiles.

“I’m Sheriff Simpkins,” states Magpie, removing his hat.

She gives a queer little squeak and drops her bowl on the ground.

“I ain’t done nothing!” says she, sort of vacant-like.

“Ma’am, the queen can do no wrong,”

states Magpie. “We smells the odors of Araby, so our noses brings us hither.”

“Onions,” says she. “Don’t they smell.”

“Perfume of the gods,” says I. “I’d wear one all the time if it wasn’t for the looks of the thing. I’m your obedient servant, Ike Harper. You living here alone?”

“Yes,” she nods. “A poor, defenseless woman. I hope there ain’t no objection to me using this cabin. I’ll take care of it.”

“She’s yours,” pronounces Magpie. “If anybody interferes with your habitation you send for me.”

“And in case he’s too busy I’ll come,” says I. “He’s a busy man. I’m sorry he was so quick to startle yuh, and make yuh bust your dough mug. He’s abrupt that-away.”

“No matter,” says she. “Won’t yuh come in?”

Just wouldn’t we? Say! Them onions was the greatest and the biscuits was the lightest yuh ever seen. Coffee? Nectar of the gods. There ain’t much furniture in the place, but what is in there looks homelike. She’s got a enlarged picture on the wall, the same of which seems familiar.

“Ma’am,” says Magpie, pointing at it, “would yuh mind telling me who the distinguished-looking gent is?”

“Was,” says she, sad-like. “He’s gone and—”

“Magpie,” says I, “don’t presume on short acquaintance to stir up sad memories. There don’t seem to be nothing sacred to him, ma’am.”

She smiles at us, sweet-like, and nods:

“Yes, he’s gone, but his memory lingers. He was a good man.”

“You dang well know he was,” agrees Magpie. “If he wasn’t his picture wouldn’t be on your walls. What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t say, Mister Simpkins: I am Lily Lester.”

“Some pretty name. Call me Magpie—pleased to meet yuh.”

“I might not decipher the call if yuh said Mister Harper,” says I. “Maw used to call me Honey, but Ike suits me fine.”

“Honey!” snorts Magpie. “Not comb-honey, Ike. You ain’t used—”

“Personalities are bad form, Magpie,” I reminds him. “Remember we’re before a lady. Ma’am, I’d love to drop in once in a while and see how you’re making it.”

“Do it,” says she. “I’d love to have yuh.”

“Yes’m,” says Magpie. “I will.”

She thanks us—I don’t know what for—and we rides away. We pilgrims off across the hills towards Piperock, and we takes looks at that cabin until we’re out of sight.

“Ike, Lily is a lulu,” states Magpie.

“If that’s an expression of admiration I remains torpid, but if that apellation of lulu reflects on the lady in any way I resents it a heap.”

“Get a dictionary, Ike,” he grins. “Lulu is a Latin word meaning ‘wonderful.’ Ain’t she a wonder? Biscuits! Onions! Ike, I wish you’d ask her for her recipe for cooking coffee. I sure admire coffee that I don’t have to chew and what won’t corrode my insides at each meal. I wonder’ If she contemplates future matrimony? She don’t need to live alone, Ike. Reckon I ain’t beyond matrimonial redemption myself. What do yuh think?”

“If yuh don’t like the way I cook coffee, Magpie, you can cook it yourself. And as far as matrimony and you are concerned, you’d be like a three-legged turtle trying to catch a scared wolf. There ain’t nothing about you to catch the female fancy.

“In the first place, you’re too long. No woman wants to look up a lodge-pole all her life. An occasional glance at your face ain’t going to hurt nobody, but as a steady diet—no!”

“Faces,” he states, “ain’t so much. Brains and companionship counts a heap more. You suffers a heap that-away, Ike. You’re pretty in the face—like a buffalo, and about as companionable as a porkypine, but when it comes to brains you ain’t got a trump. I’ll likely ride her way very soon.”

“Me, too. Likely tomorrow.”

“Yes, and likely yuh won’t, Ike!” he snorts. “You’re working for me. Sabe? You goes where I sends yuh.”

“If you think for a holy minute that I ain’t going to have no leisure time, Magpie, you think again. You get too cocky, old-timer, and I’ll quit or take a vacation. Sabe?”

“Don’t fly off the handle, Ike,” he advises. “Nobody ever said yuh couldn’t have no leisure time. You hops off half-cocked. Also you’re contrary. Did yuh ever hear about the dog what got in the manger? He couldn’t eat the hay, and he wouldn’t let the bronc eat it.”

“If you figures yourself as the bronc in that moral, Magpie, you lose. Your ears are too long, old-timer. Where do yuh get the idea that I can’t get the lady? I made a living before I met you. The only thing I ever done that I was ashamed of was the day I pinned your star on my bosom. You thinks just because you’re a sheriff you’re better than most folks. You didn’t grab any honors when you beat ‘Shep’ Allen for sheriff. He’s blind in one eye and string-halted in both legs. Just let me whisper something to you, Magpie: if you don’t grab some of these cow thieves—”

“Ike, you can desist. I’m doing all that a mortal man can do. If I had a deputy that was worth a cuss I’d—”

“THAT’S a sample of our conversation on the way home. Being pardners for so long, we hates to say hateful things to each other, but in a case like this the truth does seep out. We gets real personal before we gets to Piperock, and finds Zeb Abernathy and “Scenery” Sims

setting in front of our office, waiting for us.

Zeb looks just like you’d bet he would after hearing his name, but no name on earth could give an impression of Scenery. When I look at him I think thusly:

“The person what built you, Scenery, must ‘a’ run mighty short of material. They looks yuh over and says—‘It ain’t much of a man, but I’ll put a squeak in it so growed-up folks won’t step on it accidental-like.’”

They looks up at us as we rides in. Zeb almost unjoins his neck trying to expectorate across the street, crosses his legs and squints—

“Any news, Magpie?”

“Hello, Zeb,” says Magpie. “Nothing new. Heard anything?”

“Bank got robbed today,” squeaks Scenery. “Dog-gone thing got absolutely robbed. I been telling everybody that we ain’t got no protection around here. Whole sheriff’s office couldn’t find a ace in a new pack of cards. Ain’t yuh going to do nothing?”

“I know something I’d like to do,” states Magpie, looking down at Scenery. “You keep your squeak in your chest and let Zeb tells us about it. What happened, Zeb?”

“While you fellers are picking flowers over in the hills a feller rides into town, throws down on the cashier with a gun and lopes off with the treasure. He told the cashier to give you his regards. What yuh going to do, Magpie?”

“Cry a little,” says Magpie, tired-like. “I don’t reckon there is much else to do. Some of you folks gets the idea that just because I wears a star all I got to do is yell, ‘Come here, ye outlaws!’ and they’ll come a-running.”

“What I want to know is what are yuh going to do?” squeaks Scenery. “When we elects yuh sheriff—”

“They,” corrects Magpie. “You voted for Allen, Scenery.”

“Then I got something to be proud of. I’m glad that folks can’t hold me responsible

for you.”

Him and Zeb ambles off up-town, and we goes inside.

“There ain’t no joy in being a sheriff!” yelps Magpie, throwing his boots over in the corner. “Your duty sort of keeps yuh from pulling a gun and acting free-like. I’m going out tomorrow and get that bad, bad-man, Ike. You watch me.”

The next morning he shaves careful-like,” and greases his boots.

“Going to try and make a mash on him?” I asks. “You ought to have some perfume, Magpie. You look like a bridegroom.”

“Ike,” says he, ignoring the compliment, “I wants you to ride up to Sullivan Gulch, and see if anybody’s living there. We got to locate something or somebody pretty soon.”

“Where you going?” I asks.

“Into the breaks between here and the Circle-Cross.”

I rides out of Piperock with joy in my heart, ’cause I’m going in the general direction of my heart’s desire, and Magpie has gone the opposite. What do I care for outlaws? Duty to me is self-preservation.

Me and Magpie meets at the door. We nods like distant relatives, and each knocks on our side of the door. The lady makes us welcome, and we sets down.

“I’m so glad to see yuh,” says she, and Magpie walks plumb across the room to shake hands with her.

“I wish I’d ’a’ known yuh was coming today,” she states. “I’d ’a’ had yuh bring me some stuff from town.”

“Well, ma’am,” says Magpie, “if there’s anything yuh want I can send Ike after it. What’s the use of having hired men if yuh don’t use ’em. Tell me what your heart desires.”

“I ain’t got no time,” says I, “I’m headed for Sullivan Gulch. I’d love to do it,

ma’am, but I’m rushed. Magpie’s just loafing, so he’ll be glad to do it.”

Magpie glares at me and I glares right back at him.

“How lovely,” coos this here lady. “It will be lovely.”

“We’ll both go, Ike,” states Magpie. “I got a little job of work in Piperock that you can attend to while I’m bringing the stuff back. Write out your list, ma’am, and I’ll deliver it right to your door.”

Me and Magpie pilgrims back to Piperock in silence, buys the stuff for the lady, and goes down to the office.

We finds Buck Masterson on the steps.

“Howdy, Buck,” says Magpie. “What can I do for yuh?”

“Well, unless you improves your ways I don’t reckon yuh can do anything,” says Buck, sort of helpless-like. “I been robbed!”

“Pshaw!” says I. “How comes that, Buck?”

“Feller—same one what robbed the bank, I reckon—comes into my saloon this morning, sticks a gun in my face and annexes what I got in the safe. Said he knowed the sheriff was away. Say, Magpie, what in ——— are you doing? Sending out proclamations of your absence?”

I don’t care to listen to no such conversation, so I goes inside, and pretty soon Magpie and Buck pilgrims up-town. I takes that stuff, throws it on a hoss, and points for the lady of my dreams.

I GETS almost to her place, when Magpie overtakes me. We rides up, deposits the stuff and partakes of a light lunch.

“I’m a outlaw-hunter,” states Magpie, during the meal. “It’s a precarious existence, fraught with much danger, and takes a man of nerve.”

“Romantic,” says she. “And what does Mister Harper do?”

“He holds my bronc.”

“While you runs,” says I. “Magpie don’t want to be bothered with no bronc when he gets scared, ma’am. If I was the sheriff of this county I’d keep her swept clean of outlaws, believe me. It irks me some to take orders when I know they ain’t getting us no place.”

“Do you suppose I’m in any danger living here alone?” she asks.

“If I thought you was I couldn’t sleep,” orates Magpie. “You need the protection of a man. If you—”

“You hadn’t ought to be here alone,” I states. “Of course I’d love to stay here with you, but—there’s a preacher in Pipe-rock, ma’am.”

“Preachers ain’t no protection,” states Magpie. “Being sort of a legal guardian of this here county, I’d admire to—”

“Magpie, you ain’t got no time,” I reminds him. “You got to investigate that bank robbery and the one in Buck’s place. You’ve said yourself that I ain’t no help to you. Why don’t yuh appoint me to look after the weaker sex in this county?”

“Ike, after knowing you as long as I have, I’d hate to call ’em the weaker sex.”

“Oh, I’m not afraid,” she states. “As long as I’ve got two big strong men looking after me I feel safe- I do hope you can come often. Can’t you come tomorrow?”

“I can,” says Magpie. “Of course Ike will have to stay and tend to the office routine work. It ain’t much but it’s got to be done.”

“Routine work,” says I to Magpie, as we pilgrims back. “What routine, Magpie?”

“Seeing that nobody breaks into jail without showing a warrant,” he grins. Pretty soon he heaves a long sigh, and turns in his saddle—“Ike, it ain’t going to be long before you’ll be cooking grub for yourself alone.”

“It sure ain’t,” I agrees. “I begins tonight. Your feller-feelings are paralyzed, Magpie Simpkins, and no more do I cook for an ungrateful hombre like you. Dang your

slim soul! You ain’t noways good enough for that lady.”

“Ain’t it true,” he agrees. “But I’m getting better all the time, Ike. Didn’t yuh notice how the tears comes to her eyes, and how her breast heaved when I spoke about losing sleep? And then you—dang yuh! You has to cut in with that sky-pilot talk when I’m getting right down to business. If I had five minutes alone with her I’d have her hand.”

“I’ll bet yuh would,” I agrees. “A feller what can lie as fast as you can hadn’t ought to take that long.”

“You’re one of the kind what makes love by main strength and awkwardness, Ike. Your idea of a courtship is to take a damsel by the hair, drag her home, slam her into a corner, and then hammer her with a boot if she can’t cook. You say I’d lie to her. You got to, Ike. No woman was ever told the truth when she was proposed to. She don’t want the truth.”

“I never beat up no woman, Magpie,” I advises him. “Also I ain’t no second George Washington.”

That night we cooks separate meals, and I got all the best of it, ’cause Magpie can’t cook. The next morning he beats me to it. We’ve only got two eggs left, and of course he has to let mine roll off on the floor. Now we’re back where this tale began, with him orating about breaking bread with me.

“Old trailer,” says I, “if you baked the bread, we couldn’t break it.”

He don’t reply—just snorts, so we eats on opposite sides of the shack.

Some of Piperock’s prominent citizens come down to see Magpie, and their conversation leads us to believe that we’re incompetent. They hints around that they might ’a’ made a mistake when they elects Magpie. Magpie sighs deep-like, and tells them to not take snap judgment, ’cause he’s going out to get that feller right soon. Art Miller gets Magpie off to one side and speaks

to him in whispers. Magpie shakes his head, emphatic-like, and Art acts disgusted. After they're gone I asks Magpie what Art wanted.

"He's timid. Got some gold going out on the stage today and says he hates to take a chance. Said it was my duty to see that he got through safe-like. Safe ——!"

"He's right," says I. "It's your duty, Magpie. I'll go up and see if the lady needs anything. You can't shirk all your responsibility."

Magpie smokes a while and nods:

"I reckon you're right, Ike. The office has to protect them what needs it, so I'll send you. I was thinking of the pleasant time you and me was going to have up at that little cabin today, but since your oration about duty I reckon we'll have to help Art out. You just tell him I sent you for a guard. Who yuh writing to, Ike?"

"You," says I, looking up from my labor. "This is my resignation, Magpie."

"Coward!" says he, soft-Like.

The Harper tribe are a peacefully inclined lot of human beings, and forgiving to a startling degree, but that word means fight. I hits him in the neck with the ink-bottle, and then we tangles.

When we gets through I'm on the floor with the stove in my lap, while Magpie sets half-way out of the door with a chair hung around his neck. Just then Scenery Sims sticks his head in the window, and yelps:

"What's this? What's this?"

I takes one of the legs off that stove, and bounces it off his head and yells:

"A draw! You squeaky fool!"

We hears his boots just hitting the ground at intervals of three seconds, as he labors back up-town.

Magpie wipes some of the blood and ink off his forehead, and glares at me.

"You're too danged touchy!" he wails.

"We sure do look like making social calls, now don't we?"

"I wouldn't face her for a million," says he.

"Neither would I," says I.

I cleans my face the best I can, and walks over to the door. I takes off my star and tosses it on the table.

"Magpie," says I, "I'm all through. No more will I chase the festive outlaw. From now on I'm going to be a common citizen, and entitled to come down here and raise thunder with you for not tending to your duty. I'm wise to you, old-timer. Being a ordinary citizen and entitled to protection I hereby audibly objects to you frittering the county's time away making love. Remember, Magpie, I knows your secret. Sabe?"

I goes over to the barn and saddles up. I ain't in no shape to fawn over a lady, but the call of love is strong upon me and I unconsciously rides in her direction. I forgets time and distance, and all of a sudden I'm at her door and she's smiling at me."

"Ma'am," says I, "I know I looks repulsive, but my heart is in the right place. I been in a awful fight, and when a man's wounded he flies away to where his heart is."

"Where is the sheriff?" she asks.

The question hurts, but I conceals my grief.

"Why worry about that sandhill crane?" I replies. "I reckon he's forgot yuh already, ma'am. I quit him today, and I'm glad of it. I'm of age and fancy free, ma'am. I know I ain't much to look at. I'm a regular old pelican, and I ain't so pure as snow, but I'm getting better—thank yuh. When a woman comes into a man's life it sure cleans house with him. The minute I sees your face I says to myself: 'There she is, Ike. There's the one woman——'"

WE HEARS the rattle of a bronc's hoofs and then—

"Whoa!"

I hops to the window and sees Magpie

Simpkins, and then I ducks and yelps:

“Where can I hide? I don’t want to see him.”⁰

“Under the bed,” she whispers. “Hurry!”

I skids under the bunk. The blanket hangs almost to the floor, and hides me fine. She opens the door and lets Magpie in.

“Ma’am,” says he, “I’m sorry to come to see yuh looking like this, but I promised yuh I’d come, and I’d ’a’ done it if it took my last drop of blood. I had a awful fight with a outlaw. All I had was my bare hands and ability against his modern weapons, and of course I didn’t come through unscathed.”

“And the outlaw?” she asks, interested-like. “What of him?”

“Ma’am,” Magpie replies, weary-like, “he crawled away to die. Like a animile wounded unto death he crawled out of mortal sight to cash his chips.”

I hears Magpie sigh deep-like again, and then continues:

“Ma’am, I’m—a—a common old coot. I’ve lived alone so long that I can’t seem to release the words that clamors in my bosom to be spoke. Until I seen your face I ain’t given a thought to a double rig. I’m pure in mind and of a forgiving nature. I asks yuh—please don’t smile, ma’am. This is a serious chore with me. I come here for succor——”

“A, Magpie,” I corrects him, aloud. “A sucker.”⁰

There is silence for some time. I hears Magpie’s boots scrape nervous-like on the floor, and he clears his dry throat.

“Did—did you hear somebody speak?” he asks.

She must ’a’ shook her head, ’cause he shuffles his feet again and says:

“Reckon I’m getting jumpy. Well, ma’am, what do yuh think of the proposition?”

“Where is Mister Harper today?” she asks, ignoring his question.

I peeks out from under the bed and I sees Magpie’s feet real close to me. There’s a piece of rope laying between his heels and the chair leg. Magpie is scared of snakes, and it gives me an idea.

“Ma’am,” says he, “let’s not speak of that person. He done me dirt. Just when I needs him bad he up and quits me. For why? Because he’s scared. That feller ain’t got no nerve a-tall. So long as he can lay around and do nothing but wear a star he’s a hy-iu officer, but the minute he sees a little trouble showing up he quits cold. I hates a coward, ma’am. No man can ever say that a Simpkins flinched when danger came his——”

“Z-z-z-z-s-z-z-z!” says I, and begins drawing that rope past his heels.

He freezes to his chair for about three seconds, and then just hits the floor once before he exits through the door. I rolls out the side of the bed, slips the window open and drops out of the back of the cabin. I gets a glimpse of the lady’s face as I slides over the sill, and she’s got tears running down her face.

I figured that this here ain’t the proper time for me to make marriage proposals to the lady, and after taking one good look at her face, as I flopped over the window sill, I don’t figure that Magpie will stand much show of getting her to sign up for life.

My bronc has drifted around to the back, which is the reason Magpie never saw it, so I leads it away from there and laughs all the way home.

I rides up to Buck Masterson’s saloon, and meets Pete Gonyer and a stranger. They immediate and soon surrounds me.

“Ike, this is Mister Brand,” states Pete, and I shakes the hand of this stranger person. “Mister Brand would talk with somebody from the sheriff’s office, Ike, so I turns him loose on you.”

Pete wanders away and me and Mister Brand sets down on the sidewalk. He pulls out a couple of photygrafts and hands ’em to me.

“Look at them and see if yuh recognize either one,” says he.

There’s something familiar about one of them but the other one is a complete stranger. I can’t place the other one, but there’s a trace some place.

“That’s ‘Kid’ Corcy,” says he. “Th’ other one is ‘Blazer’ Bailey. They’re a clever pair. Artists in the hold-up line. I’m a Federal officer. They been grabbing off a lot of registered mail lately, and the last stunt they pulls off was over on the main line. The Kid got hit, but somehow they both got away and headed across the divide in this direction. You been having so much trouble over here that I decides to look into it. It may not be them—don’t look like their work, ’cause your cases have all been one man.

“Blazer is a big husky, but Corey wouldn’t cause yuh to look twice. He used to be a sort of a actor, I believe.”

“Well, I can’t help yuh much,” says I. “Yuh see I ain’t connected with the sheriff’s office no more. Maybe the sheriff can give yuh some information, but I doubt it. I know everything he does and all that I naturally knows myself, but I can’t help yuh none.”

“I’ve heard some uncomplimentary things about the office,” he admits. “Folks around here seems to bare their feelings. Much obliged anyway, Mister Harper.”

I goes down to the office to get my effects, when Magpie comes in. He sets down and pretends to read a paper.

“Where yuh been?” I asks.

He yawns and folds up the paper.

“Hunting around a little.”

I sets down on the table and rolls a smoke.

“Magpie,” says I, “what do yuh know about snakes?”

He drops the paper and sets up straight in his chair. He’s got sort of a foolish look about his face, and he sort of gawps at me:

“Uh-uh—snakes? I—I don’t sabe,

Ike?”

“I didn’t think yuh did. A man’s a sucker to ask questions of folks he knows can’t answer ’em.”

He uncoils from his chair, slides his gun around to the front and faces me.

“Ike, I got a question to ask you. Were you——”

Just then the door bangs open, and in comes Art Miller, all out of wind. He flops in a chair and pants:

“I—I told yuh! The—uh—uh—stage was huh-held up. About fuf-five miles down the road. Took all I had—dang the luck!”

“Mail, too?” I asks, and he nods. “Everything, I told yuh!”

“Well, well!” says I. “That must ’a’ been Kid Corey or Blazer Bailey. Worthy of your steel, Magpie.”

“Well, ain’t yuh going to move?” yelps Art. “Going to let ’em get plumb away as usual?”

“Which way did they go?”

“Towards Paradise. Yuh never can tell which way he went after he got out of sight.”

“Any danged fool knows that,” agrees Magpie. “I reckon I better go after him.”

“I reckon yuh better had,” pants Art, and then lopes back up-town.

Magpie fusses around getting ready, oiling his guns and fixing a cinch on his saddle.

“You sure do go right after ’em, Magpie,” says I. “You ought to be called ‘Sudden’ Simpkins. Don’t let me hurry yuh. I’ll go away so yuh can oil your boots and shave. Haste makes waste, Magpie.”

I GOES up-town, and she’s boiling. They’re organizing a posse to work independent of the sheriff’s office, but I don’t join. I got sweeter things to think of than killing or incarcerating my feller men. The little feller without no pants on, carrying a bow and arrer seems to beckon me.

I forks my bronc and rides north, lingering along, building air-castles and so forth. My bronc ain't none too energetic, and we consumes plenty of time.

I dips into a canon and rides up a cow trail, when a man with a pack-animile cuts my path, and I recognizes Magpie Simpkins. I keeps behind him, and pretty soon he gets off his bronc and seems to be picking up something off the ground. I rides up slow behind him, and rolls a smoke. The son-of-a-gun is so busy he don't hear me until I clears my throat and then he whirls around with his hands full of flowers.

We looks at each other for half a minute, and then he grins, sort of foolish-like and holds out his hands:

"Daisies," says he. "Daisies."

"Not today, little girl," says I. "I ain't got no water to put 'em in."

"Dang fool," he snorts.

"That's what I thought when I rode up," I agrees. "From the looks of your pack I'd say you was on a protracted trip. I thought Art said the robber went south."

"Uh-huh," he nods, smelling his bouquet. "I got to deliver this load before I'm free to hunt outlaws, Ike."

"For her?" I asks, and he nods.

"She's paying for it, ain't she?"

"Do you think I'd let her?" he snaps. "A feller's got to do something for his sweetheart, ain't he? I paid for that other load, too."

"I'm going down and kill that storekeeper," says I. "I did, too."

"Haw!" says Magpie, when I begins to laugh.

He hauls out a roll of bills, and spits on his thumb.

"How much did yuh pay, Mister Harper?"

"Seventeen-fifty," says I, and he counts it out and hands it to me. "That squares it. I don't want her under obligations to no

other man. Sabe?"

"You think for a minute that you can buy me off?" says I. "You think my heart's love is for sale—for seventeen-fifty? When did you get a mortgage on the lady, Mister Simpkins?"

"We've come to an understanding," he states. "She accepts my protection, exclusive. Well, I must be going on. Adios."

He moves on and I rides with him. It sort of irritates him, and he swings around in his saddle.

"Harper," says he—that's the first time he ever called me just Harper—"Harper, you've heard that old saying, 'Three is a crowd? Well, I don't like crowds. Sabe?"

"The back-trail is open," says I. "You can't give me orders."

"Dang you, Ike!" he wails. "Ain't you got no finer feelings?"

"Not since I lived with you, Magpie. You'd blunt a piledriver."

We sets there and glares at each other for a spell. I rolls a smoke, and he follers suit.

"No bowels of compassion?" he asks, sad-like.

"Not a gut."

"Ike," says he, after a while, "will you do me a favor? Just for old times' sake, Ike?"

"Shoot," says I.

"Well, Ike, I—I—I sort of got—well, she's beginning to see things my way, and all I asks is ten minutes alone with her. You stay away for ten minutes after I goes inside, and then you can come in and congratulate the happy couple. Will yuh do it, Ike?"

"That's a mighty big favor, Magpie," I observes after sufficient thought. "You and me been more or less friendly for years and years, Magpie, and—well I'll do it. I'll give yuh ten minutes start of me. Cut your wolf loose and go a-howling."

"Ike," says he, with tears in his voice, "you'll never regret it. As soon as we're married I'll have you up to supper."

“If you can propose in ten minutes, Magpie, I’ll cook for you all the rest of your life for nothing. Propose in ten minutes! Why, you can’t spit inside of fifteen. Go ahead and have it over with.”

We pilgrims on until we tops a hill above her cabin. I stops there and lets Magpie go on down. I’m to stick there until I figures that I can make the cabin ten minutes after he goes inside.

I rolls a smoke and watches him take his animile around to the back, and then open the door and walk right inside.

“Getting danged familiar,” says I to my bronc. “Going in without knocking.”

I’m glancing around the landscape, when I sees two men on hosses cut across behind me not a quarter of a mile away. Sudden-like I sees some more off to my left. They’re acting queer, so I spurs my bronc for a better place to see.

Zow-w-w-w. Flup-p-p-p.

A bullet goes past my ear, and another sticks into the ground a few feet short and fills my bronc’s eyes full of sand.

“Bronc,” says I, “somebody desires our demise. Let’s away.”

I sticks the spurs in his ribs, and races down the hill. That cabin is the best cover in sight and, while I may be a little ahead of time, I feels that Magpie will forgive me.

I hits that door just ahead of a handful of lead and sort of busts up the courtship. The lady looks sort of sick, and when I busts in Magpie pulls his guns.

“Everybody get down low!” I yelps.

“Who and what is it, Ike?” asks Magpie, ducking when a bullet dusts some of the mud from between the logs near his face.

“Danged if I know! They smokes me up and chases me here.”

“Save me!” yelps the lady, sprawling on the bunk. “I’m sick as ——!”

Such language makes me glance up, but I glues my eyes back to that crack again,

where I got some chinking pushed out. I sees a bronc’s legs, so I elevates the muzzle of my gun and salutes him.

A COUPLE of bullets whispers through the logs, so I rolls over past the bed. My elbow bumps on something, and I glances down.

“Come here!” I yells. “Here’s a cellar!” and I begins tugging at the carpet what covers the door. If the carpet hadn’t been ripped I’d ’a’ never found it. Magpie skids over to me on his hands and knees, and begins heaving on the handle.

“Don’t!” yelps the lady. “Don’t go down there! There’s a—a—snake down there!”

“Preferable to hot lead,” I yells, and slips over the square hole in the floor.

Magpie don’t wait to crawl down—he hopped. *Bang.* A gun explodes right at my lower extremity, and I feels that I got to buy a new pair of suspenders. It sure was close. I lets loose and drops about seven feet. The door drops back and we’re in darkness.

“Did I fall on yuh, Ike?” asks Magpie.

“You did not,” says I, groping around.

“Well, I fell on somebody,” he proclaims. “Got a match handy?”

I lights a match and sees Magpie setting on a man’s stummick. The feller looks sort of yaller in the face, and I don’t think he’s got much fight left in his carcass. He’s still got a gun in his hand, the same of which we removes. Magpie looks him over and snaps some bracelets on his wrists.

“Safety first, Ike,” says he. Another match shows a rifle against the wall. Sudden-like Magpie remembers.

“Gosh, Ike! We’ve forgot the lady!”

There’s a box down there, which we hauls over under the door. Magpie climbs up and lifts the trap so we can see, and it sure is some tableau.

The door is open. There stands that feller Brand, with a grin on his face, and

behind him is all the Piperock population that can crowd in. The lady is standing there against the wall, and all to once she drops her hand.

Bang. This Brand person's gun comes up and explodes, and the lady falls on her face. Magpie moves some quick. He flops out of that cellar, whirls on the crowd with a gun in each hand.

"You danged coward!" he yelps at Brand. "Shoot a defenseless woman, will yuh! Drop your guns!"

Every gun in sight hit the ground, and the lady staggers to her feet.

"Give me a gun," she pants at Magpie, but Magpie just stares at her.

I takes a look and stares a few lines myself. Her hair is on her shoulder—plumb off her head, and the hair of her head is brown and parted on the side.

"Uh—uh—" stutters Magpie.

Brand steps over and takes the guns out of Magpie's unresisting hands. Brand turns to the partly scalped person:

"Better set down, Kid. You got plenty of nerve, but we seem to have got you this time, eh? Little pale around the gills."

"Pale around the gills, eh?" snarls the person. "Dang you, Brand, you would be too. That blasted fresh sheriff busted in a while ago without knocking and I had to swaller my chew. I been too sick to fight."

"Where's Blazer?"

"In the cellar with irons on," says I. "We'd 'a' had this Kid Corey, too, if yuh hadn't been so blasted previous. Any time yuh don't think this sheriff's office is on the job yuh got another think coming."

"I suppose that's why Simpkins threw a gun down on me when I shot at the Kid," laughs Brand. "Did I hit yuh, Kid?"

"No, dang yuh! It burnt my ribs, so I drops safe. I'm just getting over one chunk of lead in the shoulder. That's why I had to let my hand down, Brand. It hurt like thunder. I

told that fool of a Blazer to lay low with me, but he thought we had some easy pickings around here. I kept cases on the sheriff's office, that's about all I was able to do. Didn't I make a good female?"

"Magpie ain't to blame," says I. "I'd 'a' likely fell, too, if I'd 'a' been as susceptible as Magpie. He was wise to Blazer, but not to the Kid. I reckon the money is in that box in the cellar, ain't it. Kid?"

"There ain't no use lying about it—it is," he states.

"What I'd like to know is this," states Ricky Henderson, "who was we shooting at? Was it Blazer or the Kid?"

"Neither one," says I. "You was shooting at me. Danged fools try to take the law in their own hands and mess things up. Think the sheriff don't know his business, and—gosh, I sure do hate a posse."

We deposits the Kid and Blazer in jail, and then me and Magpie goes back to our shack. I puts on some water for coffee, and then turns to Magpie.

"Shall I make coffee like she did?" I asks.

Magpie lays his hat on the table.

"Ike, you make it according to the old formula. I'm sick for a cup of real coffee."

He smokes for a while and then—

"Ike, old-timer, we been a pair of fools."

"Have been," I agrees. "Lucky fools, Magpie. Luck in finding that trap-door: lucky that I didn't give you ten whole minutes alone with her—him. You might 'a' proposed, Magpie. Aw, yes, you would, old-timer, 'cause you was loco with love. Did yuh kiss her—him. Magpie?"

"No-o-o. I was going to, Ike—honest to gosh! But I sudden-like recognized that picture, which we deciphers to be her dear departed, and then I didn't. Sabe?"

"Oh, ho! So you lost heart when yuh recognized him, eh? Who was he?"

“Well, Ike, she didn’t lie about it—
now, did she? She only said he was a good
man. He sure was, Ike. Best they ever made.”

“I’ll bite, Magpie. Who was he?”
“Abraham Lincoln.”