



“TELL you, Clay Warne, a crook’s a crook, an’ it don’t make no odds whether he’s a pickpocket in New York or Chicago, or jest a sneakin’ ornery hold-up here in Arizona. He’s pizen from hocks to ears, anyhow.”

Two young men, in the rough garments of miners—the blood of the soil from which they had squeezed the virgin gold through many a cruel day of sweaty toil, staining orange-red their flannel shirts and patched trousers—sat on opposite sides of a pine table, where lay a heap of gold-dust on an open newspaper. A repeating-rifle leaned against the wall by the side of the table.

The man who had spoken cut through the pile of dust with a clasp-knife and regarded the two heaps thoughtfully, as he added, with conviction:

“All this talk you hears about reformin’ them kind o’ galoots makes me sick. These here ‘welfare leagues’ and ‘honor rolls’ they has in prisons ain’t nothin’ but bluffs. Of

course, the guys behind the bars plays ’em to the limit, so as to get privileges. An’ as soon as they are outside they’re plannin’ another job. What’s more, if they can make a hundred dollars by killin’ the warden who’s been their friend, they’ll down him as quick as if he was a stranger. Pity we ain’t got no scales. Clay. But you can take which of these piles of dust you like.”

“That’s all right. Steve. You’ve cut it as square in half as any one could. I’ll take either one. But I don’t hold with what you say about there being no good at all in a bad man. Lots of ’em would be straight if they could, and I never heard of a man who had been half-way decent in a pen killing the warden when he got out. The decency’s still there.

“It’s like it used to be when you and me were kids together in Ohio. There was a fellow who stole my skates in school, and I had to lick him before he’d give them up. Yet that very same afternoon I broke through the ice in the lake, and he came in after me, with

the ice cracking and giving way under him. He came near having pneumonia, too. That showed there was good in him—saving me after I'd licked him—didn't it? And I'd soaked him good and hard, too."

Craig put away his knife and laughed.

"That was long ago, eh? But I remember. It warn't no credit to me that I dragged you out of the lake. I'd have done the same thing for a yaller hound-dog—not that I'd care a whoop about the dog, but jest to show as I wasn't skeered. I reckon I was a bluff, like any other kid—well, I guess we might as well turn in. This will be our last night in the old place. I'm glad we've sold out."

"Satisfied, are you Steve?"

"Sure! I wouldn't have had anything if you hadn't given me a piece of the claim jest when it was beginnin' to pan out well. It was white of you, Clay."

"Shucks! We were schoolboys together. Besides, I couldn't work it by myself, and I only gave you a quarter share. I'd have forgiven you about those skates. You know you stole 'em again, an' kept 'em the second time. Now we're pals."

"Sure! You wouldn't have given this much to everybody, an' I'm duly grateful. Why, with the twenty-five thousand in bills, and my half of the dust that you make me take, I've more than I ever thought I'd get on this earth. Of course, you have seventy-five thousand, which is better than twenty-five. But you bet I'm satisfied. Why shouldn't I—ah!"

The sharp interjection cut off Steve Craig's habitual drawl, as he snatched up the rifle and pointed it over Clay Warne's shoulder at the window behind him.

Involuntarily Clay clapped his outspread left hand over the two heaps of gold-dust on the table, while his right slipped down to his loose-hanging belt.

"What is it, Steve?"

"Nothing much. Don't pull your gun. I have him covered."

Steve Craig kicked away the stool he had been sitting on and moved slowly forward, the rifle pointed straight between the eyes of a grimy face pressed against the window.

He had taken only a step when two pleading hands went up on either side of the face.

"All right, Clay! Go and bring him in."

Clay Warne swung round, understood the situation in one glance at the window, and walked to the door. Turning the key which had been left in the lock, he shot back the bolt and vanished.

A moment later the face they had seen at the window appeared in the doorway. It belonged to a rather emaciated-looking individual, with dark eyes restless under heavy brows, and the square, bearded jaw clamped tightly, as if he were prepared for anything that might come. Clay Warne, behind, prodded him between the shoulder-blades with the muzzle of a revolver.

The stranger's eyes glistened as they fell upon the gold-dust on the table. Then he looked questioningly at Steve.

"Sit down with your face to the wall," was the abrupt command. "On that Stool!"

The order was obeyed with the docility of one who appreciated the possibilities of a nervous finger on a trigger, and Steve let the butt of his rifle thump to the floor.

When the man took his seat he faced a handbill on the wall in which two lines in heavy type stood out boldly from the rest of the smaller printed matter. One of these lines was "\$1,000 REWARD," and the other "MURDER." The bill interested him so much that he did not seem to notice that Steve Craig took an automatic pistol from his hip-pocket and passed it to Clay.

"Reading that bill, eh?" remarked Steve, easily. "A thousand dollars reward for

the capture of Selkirk James, alias Silky Jim, dead or alive.' Know anything about it?"

"No."

"Know Silky Jim?"

"I've heard of him. Everybody in this section has. Pretty slick citizen. Somebody told me he'd held up the Mazatzal Stage over on the Rio Verde. But I didn't believe it. Folks is allers knockin' him. I'd bet a saddle he ain't nothin' like as bad as people say. As for this stage job, I guess there warn't nothin' in that story."

"You're wrong there, friend," contradicted Steve. "If you don't know the perticklers, I'll give 'em to yer. This here Silky Jim an' two pardners stopped the stage an' they got away with the Wells-Fargo box. Besides what the two women passengers had. It was a mighty easy job. That's why there don't seem to have been no call to kill old Jerry Bowden."

"Who's Jerry Bowden?"

"He ain't no one now. He's dead. But he was drivin' the stage. When these holdup gents stopped him, he jest sat there, with his hands up an' the reins dropped on his knees, cussin' 'em out—same as any stage-driver has a right to do when strangers are takin' his treasure-box an' disarrangin' his time schedule—an' one of 'em plugged him through the neck."

"Yes?"

"That was four days ago. Two of the three are in jail in Phoenix. Silky got away into the hills. The other two say he's the one that bumped off Jerry—with a sawed-off rifle. Is that true—Silky?"

The stranger shrugged his bony shoulders.

"You know me? Well, that don't show yer smartness. You knowed I was somewhere in the hills hereabouts, an' you can see I'm hungry, an' that I've been traveling afoot a heap. It ain't hard to tell when a man's been hidin' an' has got to the p'int when he'd rather

have a square meal than his life. That's me. 'Cordin' to this here bill, I'm worth a thousand dollars to you. You can spare two bits' worth o' grub out of it, I reckon, jest so's you kin hand me over alive."

"Why?" was the cynical rejoinder, "You'll bring jest as much dead."

"Swing around to the table," put in Clay.

Silky Jim obeyed without rising. He saw that the gold-dust had been removed, and that there was half a loaf of bread and an open can of corned-beef there instead. Without a word, he began to eat with the wolfishness that might have been expected.

"You'll want something to drink," remarked Clay. "An' the water-pail is empty. I'll go out to the spring—watch him. Steve."

As the door closed behind Clay Warne, his partner snapped at Silky Jim:

"How long were you at that window?"

"Only about ten seconds. I was wonderin' whether it would be safe to knock at the glass, when you looked up. I knowed who you was. I was in a place last night where I heard Clay Warne had sold out this here claim to the Prescott Gold Refinin' Company for a hundred thousand plunks. Purty good price, considerin' you've took out all the surface gold, an' left only what'll call for half a million dollars' worth o' machinery an' a big gang o' men if it's ever to be got out. They give it to you in banknotes, I heard. Clay wanted it that way 'cause it would be easier to pack. Then there's that dust you was halvin' jest now."

"Look here!" marled Steve. "You know a whole lot too much about other people's business. But an ol'-timer like you ought to have been too foxy to stare in a window where you might ha' knowed I'd see yer."

"I wanted yer to see me," replied Silky Jim, in a tone of weary patience. "I was takin' a chance you'd help me. When a man's hunted

down and all in, he has to sort o' rely on other folks. As for the gold-dust and bills you an' yer pardner has, what c'd a poor starved, weakened cuss do ag'in' a couple o' huskies like you an' Clay Warne?"

There was silence for a while, during which Silky Jim tore at the bread with his fingers and stuffed it into his mouth, alternating with slabs of beef dug from the can with a two-pronged fork that had been left on the table. Then the door opened and Clay Warne returned with a pail of water.

A momentary softening of the deep-set eyes of the fugitive, as Clay dipped out a mugful and handed it to him, was not noticed by either of the partners.

"Well, Clay, I s'pose we'll have to keep this bird till mornin', an' then take him over to Prescott an' collect the thousand," observed Steve, in a matter-of-fact way. "He'll be safe in our cellar. Now that we're quittin', we don't need to care about people knowin' it's there. We ain't goin' to use it to keep our dust in no more."

He turned back an old carpet that lay on the rough floor and pulled up a couple of loose boards, revealing an irregular pit in the red earth, three or four feet deep, extending over about half the space on which the shack stood. In days gone by the partners had found there a deposit of ore that had been well worth working.

Silky Jim looked on apathetically.

"Can you lend me a blanket to sleep in?" he asked.

Clay strode over to one of the two bunks in the room, took off a blanket and handed it to him.

"Now get down there." ordered Steve. "An' don't try any monkey business till we let you out. We'll put the table over these boards. It's purty heavy, an' it'll hold you down all right."

Two minutes later Silky Jim was lying under the floor, with the boards and carpet

replaced, and the heavy table over the trap. The partners were sitting on their bunks on opposite sides of the room.

"Do you think we need that thousand dollars, Steve?" asked Clay, as he pulled off his high laced boots. "Seems to me we could let the poor cuss go. We ain't sheriff's deputies, an' it ain't none of our business who held up that stage."

Steve Craig frowned.

"You have seventy-five thousand dollars, an' of course a thousand extra ain't so much to you as it is to me. If we'd divided even, maybe I wouldn't ha' been so set on gittin' this reward. If you don't want none of it, I'll take him to Prescott myself."

"I thought you were satisfied with your twenty-five thousand." returned Clay, after a pause. "You said—"

"Of course I'm satisfied," interrupted Steve. "It was your claim—not mine, an' you wouldn't have needed to give me anything. Only—well, there's a big difference between, seventy-five and twenty-five, an' I reckon I'll go after that thousand—hello! you're in bed? All right! Go to sleep. I'll turn out the lamp. I wouldn't ha' give that murderer one o' my blankets. You may need it afore mornin',"

It was black dark when Clay Warne suddenly found himself awake. He had been in the deep sleep that comes to men who work hard in the open air, but he didn't know for how long.

"What woke me up. I wonder?" he murmured, as he tried to penetrate the opaque gloom. Then, aloud: "Steve!"

There was no reply, and, puzzled, he swung off the cot—only to come into smart contact with the overturned table.

"Steve!"

He struck a match. The table was on its side, the carpet turned up. and the loose boards in the floor spread apart, revealing the hole empty. The blankets from Steve Craig's cot were on the floor, indicating that he had

got up in a hurry.

To a man as quick at reading signs as Clay Warne it was all clear. Silky Jim had pushed his way out of the hole, upsetting the table; and run away. The noise of the falling table had been deadened by its falling on Clay's boots. But Steve must have woke up soon afterward and rushed out of the shack in pursuit.

The match burned out, and Clay was fumbling in a pocket for another, when a sudden thought made him dash for his cot and feel under the mattress. A dismayed ejaculation, decidedly profane, burst from him. His seventy-five thousand dollars in bills, as well as his bag of gold-dust, were gone!

He blundered across the room in the darkness and felt in Steve Craig's bed, where Clay knew had been hidden his partner's share of the dust and proceeds of the sale. Nothing there!

It was a plain case. Silky Jim—a practised thief, light-fingered, resourceful, and desperate—had made a complete clean-up. Evidently Steve had not been disturbed until Silky was leaving the cabin.

Clay dragged his boots from where they were wedged under the table, and in a few moments was outside, listening intently. He could not see anything around him. There was no moon, and only the multitude of brilliant stars, which help to make Arizona nights among the most beautiful and romantic in the world, enabled him to distinguish the rim of the canon in the bottom of which the shanty stood.

The darkness down in the canon was impenetrable. Clay knew that the rickety trestled chute and other mining paraphernalia with which he and Steve Craig had labored for three years, and which now was the property of the Prescott Gold Refining Company, was within five hundred yards of where he stood. But nothing of it could he make out. It was buried in the black mystery with which the

shadow of the mountain enveloped everything around him.

For more than a minute he stood listening. Not a sound came to him, except at intervals the distant howling of a coyote, responded to occasionally by the deep note of a gray wolf somewhere, who resented the presumption.

Clay was trying to make up his mind which way he should go to trail Silky Jim and give assistance, if it should be needed, to Steve Craig. The ravine led into the open at either end, and if he went one way, there was the strong possibility of Silky Jim, with Steve in pursuit, having gone the other.

In his perplexity, Clay raised his eyes again to the top of the cliff, outlined against the starlit heavens. At that instant there suddenly loomed up there the form of a man, hatless, who held from him a large bundle of some kind.

For only a moment or two did the figure show itself. Then, as it bent forward, Clay Warne knew that the man, with his plainly-seen bundle, was about to come down a winding path along the face of the bluff that would bring him into the canon half a mile to the south of the shanty.

Clay Warne's thoughts worked swiftly. Silky Jim had no hat, and the bundle he carried doubtless was the two bags of gold-dust. He could have gained the summit of the mountain by climbing a path to the north. Then probably he had doubled to the south to throw off Steve Craig, who was tracking him.

Whether Steve had been fooled and was going north, while Silky worked south, Clay could not tell. Anyway, it would not much matter, so long as he intercepted the rascal at the pass down which he was by this time making his way. Steve would be back in the course of an hour or so, and when he found that his twenty-five thousand dollars and gold-dust were recovered, he would not care for much else. Then Steve could take

Silky Jim to Prescott. Clay would not criticize his partner at all now for making a thousand dollars in that way.

Then Clay set about the immediate business in hand. He placed himself in a recess some distance up the winding pass, where the man he was after would have no intimation of his presence beforehand. The pitchy darkness of course helped the ambush. It was a trap that Silky Jim could not avoid.

For ten minutes Clay leaned against the rocky wall, listening. His eyes were absolutely useless.

Ah! What was that? The dribbling of loose stones down the face of the cliff told of the approach of his man some moments before his footfalls were audible. There was a shuffling of feet on the gravelly path, and as they sounded immediately in front of Clay, he lunged forward and caught the groping man around the arms, causing him to drop the two bags of gold-dust as he fought against capture.

Neither man spoke. Each needed his breath for the fierce struggle. Clay found it much harder than he had expected. Though he knew Silky Jim had the reputation of possessing more strength than most men, and of being, besides, one of the trickiest of fighters—with any kind of weapon or with none—in the whole Southwest, his weakened state when he came to the cabin made his vigorous resistance now rather surprising.

But Clay realized that the man was desperate—that he was battling not only for his life, but for booty which was probably larger than he would have gained from the stage robbery if it had not failed. Under such conditions he might well call up a reserve of power that would give him victory—if it lasted. On the other hand, the chances were that he would have “shot his bolt” in a few minutes, and then it would be easy to overcome him.

But this hope was abruptly crushed. With a vicious twist, his foe suddenly tore

himself loose, and simultaneously lifted Clay Warne bodily from his feet, to hurl him headlong over the fifty-foot precipice.

For a few moments, by dint of superhuman struggles, Clay kept himself teetering on the edge of the narrow path. He was resolved that if he did go over, his antagonist should go with him.

It seemed as if the critical moment had arrived, when both would go down together. Then another lithe figure came bounding down the mountain from above, and dropped squarely on top of the nearly exhausted duelists.

In Clay’s ear the voice of Steve Craig spat out an angry oath. Then, with the roar of a heavy revolver, the hand that had been clutching at his throat, while another gripped his belt, relaxed as if it were paralyzed. Clay shook himself loose, and, as he sank gasping to the ground, he made out dimly that his enemy had plunged over, the precipice. Clay fought for breath. He had had a close call.

“Thanks, Steve!” were his first coherent words. “You came just in time. That fellow had me going. He wasn’t as much all in as we thought.”

“Got a match?” was the somewhat irrelevant reply.

The tone was gruff, not much more than a wheezy whisper.

“That’s so, Steve,” returned Clay, as he fumbled for the match-case in his shirt-pocket. “He dropped the two bags right here. The bank-notes are on him, of course.”

He struck a match. As it flared up full in the face of the other man, Clay’s mouth and eyes opened wide, and he faltered:

“Why—why—what’s this?”

The other man smiled—and the light of the match seemed somehow to smooth out most of the deep lines in the hard face.

“Yes, Clay! I’m Silky Jim all right. An’ I’m a crook, a stage-robber, an’ a hoss-thief. But, by God, when a man uses me *like* a

man, an' when I see that that man ain't gittin' a squar' deal from the guy he has a right to expect it from—his own partner—I'm goin' to sit into the game an' play my hand to the limit to beat this pardner who's a dirtier crook than I am."

The match burned out, and they were in darkness for a few seconds, till Clay, with, nervous fingers, could light another match. Then, as it burned up, he drew a deep breath and took Silky Jim's reluctant hand.

"I got on to him even before he let me out of that cellar, and told me to beat it," went on Silky. "Men in my line soon size up a mug who's only waitin' for a good stake to make it worth its while to pull off a job. I'll bet this here Steve was mean as a boy. He might have made you believe I'd grabbed off your dinero, and that he was chasin' after me, if I'd fallen for his game. But you'd been kind to me when

you didn't have to be, an'—an'—well, there's some good in the worst of us, I reckon—gratitude, anyhow. You'd better go down an' git the bank-bills out o' this here Steve's pockets. He won't need any of 'em. I plugged him right through the chest—with his own gun." he added grimly.

"I can hardly understand," murmured Clay. "I never thought Steve Craig would—"

"Of course you didn't. It only shows that it's hard to know who to trust—well, say a good word for me when you can. So long! The posse is right close on my trail. They'll hang me in Phoenix, I guess. I did kill Jerry Bowden. I'm jest a low-down, dirty murderer an' thief. But—well, I'm glad you let me shake your hand."

And Silky Jim vanished in the blackness.