The Legacy

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Abstract

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"Right," said Stefansson. "I fold." He laid his cards on the table and began to pack his pipe, slowly and methodically. "Ain't nobody wants to get it like McCoy did."
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"Right," said Stefansson. "I fold." He laid his cards on the table and began to pack his pipe, slowly and methodically. "Ain't nobody wants to get it like McCoy did."

"Two," said the Polack.

"Jeez," said the kid. In the lamplight his face was distant. "You've got McCoy practically buried."

"What's your bet, kid?" said the Polack.

"Oh, yeah," said the kid. He laid his hand on the table. "I fold." He looked at Henley. "He isn't hurt that bad, is he? I mean, he won't die, will he?"

"Probably not," said Henley. "Not if the Bull can get him into Klamath before he bleeds to death. That's why I say I want mine all at once."

"Like a fella I remember," said Stefansson, pausing with a match flaring over the bowl of his pipe. "I was working for Sugar Pine Lumber, down in Tuolumne, couple years back. This fella—name of Kelly, I think—was standin' right by a cable when she parted, and the loose end just laid him open, right across. He was dead 'fore anybody reached him."
“Oh, fa chrissake,” said the Polack. “Isn’t anybody playing?”

“Take it,” said Henley. The Polack grunted, swept the half-dozen dimes into his hand, and stood up. “I quit,” he said belligerently. “You guys play rotten poker.” He shrugged into his mackinaw and paused with his hand on the door latch. “You guys learn how to play cards, you know where I am.” The door banged behind him. A sweep of cool air swirled the layers of tobacco smoke in the lamplight and mingled the smell of pine and wet earth with the heavy odor of damp wool and sweat.

“What you were saying, Stefansson,” said Henley. “That’s the way to go. ’Course, if I had my choice, I’d just as soon not get tore up, but . . . .”

“Well, Christ,” said the kid. “You sound like you want McCoy to die. What have you got against him, anyway?”

“Nothing,” said Henley shortly, squaring the deck with his heavy, blunt fingers. “Look at it this way, kid. He can’t go logging again, not on one leg, and he’s too old to learn anything else.”

“He’ll lose the leg, then?” said the kid.

“Well, you were there. What do you think?” There was a silence in which each man heard again the warning yell from the donkey puncher, the chokers slipping in a hail of bark and splinters, the donkey engine racing, and over it the single high shriek, like a gunned rabbit. The kid was silent. “After all,” said Henley, “You get a thirty-foot hunk of thirty-six inch pine butt in the thigh, what can you expect?” He paused. “Now if he does come back, what can he do? He can’t swing an axe again. He can’t cipher good enough to be a woods clerk. Sure, the Bull will get him something—he looks out for his boys—but what? About all he’d be good for is a bullcook like that old pegleg down at Camp Three.”

“Well,” said the kid, “he doesn’t have to stay here.”

“Where can he go?” said Henley. He began to lay out a solitaire game, placing the cards with exaggerated precision. “He doesn’t know anything else. He’s been a logger all his life—started at fourteen, whistle punking for Bender. Been everything at least once—feller, bucker, high rigger, bull of
the woods for the Nicholson outfit before it folded. Was in the Spruce Battalion during the war, though he was way over draft age. But"—he looked sharply at the kid—"every one of those jobs takes a whole man, and some take more." He paused. "Ever been down Skid Road in Portland, kid?"

"No."

"Try it sometime. It's pretty bad. Used to be a good place to blow a Saturday night, but there's not much left now. Bunch of gin mills and rats and old stove-up loggers, sittin' around seein' if they can't kill themselves with rotgut before they starve to death. That's why I say I hope McCoy doesn't make it."

"Amen," said Stefansson. He rapped the pipe smartly on his boot heel and stood up. "I'm going to bed. Stayin' up isn't going to help McCoy, either way."

"Yeah," said Henley. He swept the cards into a heap, then stopped, listening.

"What is it?" said Stefansson.

"Whistle," said Henley. Then they could all hear it, high and plaintive above the swish of the rain in the pines. "It's old Jens and Number 12. The Bull of the Woods is coming back."

"Already?" said Stefansson. "He ain't been gone but nine–ten hours, and it's four hours into Klamath. He'd stay till he knew McCoy was okay."

"Or dead," said Henley. The beat of the locomotive could be heard now, the characteristic frenzied snorting of a Lima Shay. "Old Jens is really beatin' her over the back. I never heard him hit the grade that hard."

"You should have heard him leave this afternoon, then," said Stefansson. "He was just hittin' the high spots on the way down, and playin' crack-the-whip on the curves." The exhaust note softened; the engine rumbled past the window with the throttle closed, then subsided in a groan of brakes.

There was a long silence, in which each man turned unconsciously to face the door. The fire popped and settled in the stove; the scuff of corkboots sounded on the step outside. The door swung open, and the Bull of the Woods stood framed in the lamplight spilling into the dark.
"Hello, Bull," said Henley.
The Bull said nothing, shedding his mackinaw. The shoulders were dark and sodden with rain.
"Well?" said Henley.
The Bull threw his wet gloves at the stove. "Well what?" His tone was tired and belligerent.
"How's McCoy?"
The Bull made a small eloquent gesture. "Gone," he said flatly. "Dead." He turned wearily to Stefansson. "Get his things, Swede, see if we can find somebody to ship the body to."

Stefansson raked a grubby duffel bag from under a bunk and carefully emptied the contents on the table. They all stood silent for a moment, looking at the miserable little heap of possessions.
The Bull picked a carborundum stone from the pile and looked at it as if he had never seen it before. "Well," he said tentatively, and put it down again. Stefansson found a cut plug sack and handed it to the Bull wordlessly. The Bull opened it and spilled the little roll of bills and silver into his hand. The rest watched as he counted it carefully onto the able.

"Thirty-six dollars," he said finally. "Thirty-six dollars and eighty-five cents. He's been in the woods for twenty-eight years, and this is all." He looked down at the half-dozen pieces of silver on the scarred tabletop. "Thirty-six dollars and eighty-five cents." He glanced up again, at the solemn circle around the table. Stefansson tamped his pipe slowly, automatically. The kid's face was expressionless, waiting. "You know," he said softly, "it's a funny thing. They wouldn't even let me in the hospital with my boots on. Said it would tear up the tiles. So I took them off and waited outside the operating room in my socks." He looked down at his hands. "He was in there an awful long time. When they rolled him out, the doc told me he had a fifty-fifty chance. I asked if I could wait in McCoy's room, and he said sure, why not?"

He paused, then continued in the same quiet tone. "He wasn't out very long. I didn't even know he was awake till
he looked at me and said, just like you’d ask the time of day, ‘Bull, is my leg off?’ I—I said no, of course not, and he just said, ‘Bull, don’t lie to me,’ and closed his eyes. He died twenty minutes later. The doc said shock—shock and loss of blood.” The Bull looked back at the silver on the table. “Thirty-six dollars and eighty-five cents,” he said, almost inaudibly.

Dark Offering

by Ellen Feinberg

Special Student

Blood specked the soggy tips of the sagging branches, dripped onto the lower leaves and piled into pools, dried into clumps, on the matted roots.

A cat-fur fog clogged my throat, saturated the air and deadened the sound of dripping leaves.

(Street lights burn holes into the night, closet the darkness, singe the sky with clarities.)