

The Last Boast
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When the time came for them to die, Pete Gossard cursed and Knife Hilton cried, but Wolfer Joe Kennedy yawned in the face of the hangman.

What he wanted to do was spit, to show he was not afraid, because he knew men would talk about him later and describe the end he made. But even Wolfer Joe could not raise enough saliva for spitting when he had a noose around his neck. The yawn was the next best thing.

Barney Gallagher, the United States deputy marshal, finished adjusting the rope and asked half-admiringly, "Are we keeping you up?"

"Hanging me up, they told me," Wolfer Joe answered.

On a packing box between his companions, he stood glaring out at the crowd of miners, with his lips pulled back from his teeth in the grin that was his trademark. He had foreseen the hour of his death, but not the way of it. He had felt the jar of the bullet, heard the Cheyenne arrow whir, gone down screaming under a grizzly's claws—all these were probabilities for a man who had lived as he had lived, and a man had to die sometime.

But he had always seen himself fighting to the end. He had not dreamed of an end by hanging, helpless, with his hands tied behind him. He would not give his executioners the satisfaction of knowing he was astonished. They were going to get satisfaction enough without that.

Knife Hilton stopped crying and stood drooping on his packing box, snuffling like a baby. Pete Gossard stopped yelling curses, and thinking he had figured out a way to delay the performance, shouted earnestly, "I want a preacher! You wouldn't deny a man a preacher, would you?"

The Vigilanters had thought of that, too, and had a preacher there. They knew, by this time, about all the tricks a man could think of to make delay. Pete Gossard had nothing to say to the preacher, after all, except the frantic plea: "Tell 'em to give me a good drop."

"They will, Pete," the preacher promised. He shivered and added, "They always have. May God have mercy!"

There was still a lot of noise from the crowd of miners—the seven or eight hundred of them who had constituted the jury and had filed solemnly between two wagons to vote. Fourteen men had voted for acquittal, and after four hundred voted "guilty," the Vigilanters had stopped the farce of tallying. The noise was far out on the edge of the crowd, where those who could not see clearly were milling around, but in the center, at the hanging place, there was hardly any sound. Here death was, and the men who would beckon to it had nothing much to say.

The three packing boxes were sturdy; each had a rope tied to it by which it would be pulled away at the signal; the nooses were soundly wound. The Vigilanters, Wolfer Joe recollected, had had plenty of practice.

He felt a shudder coming over him, and to disguise it, he threw back his head and laughed. He had few illusions about himself. Once he had said, grinning, "Reckon I was born bad." More accurately, he might have said, "I was born outside the law, and mostly I've stayed outside it." He had kept moving westward to places where the law was not. And what caught up with him at last was not law but anger. The angry men at the diggings could not wait for the law to catch up; they set up the Vigilance Committee to enforce ruthless justice.

Barney Gallagher frowned at that laugh. He stepped down from the box, wiping his hands on his pants, and said reflectively, "I was wondering—did you ever do one good thing in your life?"

Wolfer Joe looked into his eyes and answered with his lips pulled back from his teeth, "Yeah. Once. I betrayed a woman."

At the hangman's signal, men pulled the ropes on the packing box.

The word love was in the language he used with women, but its meaning was not in his understanding when he met Annie. Even when he left her, he was not sure he knew the meaning, and after that he never had much chance to find out.

She stood with her arms outspread, her hands touching the barn wall, trembling, withdrawing not so much from Wolfer Joe as from life itself pressing toward her.

"You don't really like me," he insisted. "Bet you don't."

"Maybe I do," Annie answered, breathless. "I got to go in now." She could have ducked under his arm, but she only glanced up at him with a scared smile. She was seventeen years old. Wolfer Joe was twenty-nine.

"You go in now," he said, "and I'll know you don't love me." He said the word lightly; he had said it before. The shape of it was easy in his mouth.

She looked away desperately, and the color rose on her neck. "I do so I-love you," she said. "You could just as well stay here, instead of going on."

Oh, no, not at twenty-nine. He could not stay in the settlements for long at a time. The law was creeping westward too fast. He was not sure what the law was, but he knew that he and his like had better keep ahead of it.

"Nothing here to keep me," he said. The words hurt her as he had meant them to hurt, and she drew back. "I got to go on," he said. He added boldly, suddenly seeing a dream, "Going to move on and settle down somewheres. Where I'm going, a girl like you wouldn't go. You wouldn't go with me."

She was pressed tight against the barn wall. "Maybe I would, if I wanted to."

"Your pa wouldn't let you," he scoffed.

"Pa couldn't stop me. Now let me be-let me go!" She struggled against him, but his arms were an iron cage, and his heart pounded against hers.

"Tonight at the fork of the trail," he said when he let her go, when he loosed her arms from their clinging.

"Wait for me there.-But you won't come."

"I will!" she said. "Because I I-love you."

That was the last thing she ever said to him.

"I believe you mean it," he answered, and found his voice was hushed with wonder. "I guess you really do," he said, trying to laugh.

The wonder was still on him when he waited where the trail forked. But Doubt hovered there too, and roosting on his shoulder, Suspicion watched the trail with cold, yellow eyes.

If she came, he could take her west and build a soddy,(1) get a bunch of cattle started- he knew how to swing a long loop on someone else's beef. He had done it before, for pay.

"What makes you think she'll come?" hooted Doubt, circling over him.

"What reason would she have if she did?" croaked Suspicion, with claws sharp in his shoulder.

"There's no reward out for me around here," argued Wolfer Joe. "Supposing she does come, her reason's her own business. It's her I want, not her reasons. I'll settle down somewheres. If she comes."

He watched the trail from up above, belly-down on a flat rock. He jerked when he saw her ride to the meeting place and look anxiously around. She had a little bundle of clothing tied to the saddle. He saw her dismount and look around again. But she didn't call out or say a word. She simply sat down to wait. He was furious, with an unreasoning anger. "Damn little fool!" he whispered. "Running off with a man she don't hardly know! What she'll get is no more'n she's got coming."

He remembered that he himself was the man, and he lay there grinning at his own nonsense. He would wait a while. When she gave up, he would appear and accuse her: "I knowed it was just a notion. You never meant what you said. You start but you can't finish."

Then he would let her go home weeping-or on with him, to do her crying later, when she knew what a fool she was.

But she did not give up. When darkness came, she built a little fire to keep the night away. With his heart pounding, with his lips pulled back from his teeth, Wolfer Joe lay on the flat rock, watching her. She had come so far; she had been so faithful. How long would she wait there for him? How far could he trust her? Suspicion whispered, "There'll come a day when she'll go crying to the law and say, 'I know where Wolfer Joe is if you want him.'"

He answered, "You don't know my Annie."

He watched her head bend forward on her knees as she waited and dozed. He saw it snap up again when a night sound scared her. After a while the fire burned low, and he knew she was sleeping. She awoke and fed it, and it blazed. Then he knew he wasn't going down there. He saw not the girl but her patience. He saw not the red glow of the fire but faith abiding.

He saw love by the fire, and he could not endure looking for fear he might see it end, during that night or some year to come.

He crept back off the rock and slid silently into the darkness to where his horse was waiting. He lived for fourteen years after that. He was said to have seventeen notches on his gun, but that wasn't true. He never notched his gun butt for anything he did.

He was justly sentenced to hang for helping to murder two miners whom he and Pete Gossard and Knife Hilton had dry-gulched⁽²⁾ when the miners tried to take their gold out.

Wolfer Joe made an ending that earned him grim respect, and he left Barney Gallagher puzzling about how betraying a woman could be a thing a man might boast of with the last words he ever had a chance to speak.

1 soddy: a sod house

2 dry-gulched: killed from ambush