SELWOOD of SLEEPY CAT

by FRANK H. SPEARMAN

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A further history was held; Tracy at last pleaded to be taken back to

"What Do You Mean?"

Sleepy Cat, and, as everybody else was for it, Selwood gave in. It was arranged that Pardslow should ride with Selwood and Scott, and that Big Alpin should follow in the wagon with Tracy.

While Tracy's cut was hastily set back in the wagon and the horses were being got up, Selwood took the ammunition out from under the seat—a slender store, but, like a shower, a life-saver in a drought—and apportioned it into three parcels among Pardslow, Scott, and himself.

It lacked but little of daybreak when the three men reached the river again. Fording the stream, the horse men secreted their horses in the undergrowth below the river bench, and climbed up the nearest gully to the flats, that were being laid out for a railroad yard. Spreading out again, the three men circled the open space singly and without molestation, and came together on higher ground, where they could reconnoiter the town.

The free that had lighted the sky earlier in the night had died down—chiefly for lack of material for the flames. An important part of Sleepy Cat lay in ruins, though the extent of the destruction was hidden in the deep darkness. One quarter of the strag gling settlement had escaped the torch and the Vigilantes and the reprievals of the outlaws—this was the corner embracing the stage barns, Carpy's hotel, and the new railroad station.

From the hill where they had halted, Selwood and his companions, recovering their horses, made their way under cover as they could singly, to the stage barns.

Lefever met them. Selwood asked for the news. Lefever pointed to a pile of smoking ruins down the hill. "Some of them river rats have burned the bunk-house on us, John," said Lefever. "That's the way they keep their promises?"

"McAlpin told me nothing of that," exclaimed Selwood, looking angrily down the hill.

"Didn't know it was on fire when he started," returned Lefever. "But I'm telling you the teamsters are rarin' to go. They're only waiting for you."

"Just hold 'em till I get some bearings," was all Selwood replied.

Bull Page took the steaming horses back to their stalls, and Scott was sent out to scout. Lefever told Selwood and Pardslow what more he could of the situation; Starbuck, who had been missing for a time at the outset, had taken the gamblers' fight in hand at a moment when the Vigilantes were driving all before them, turned the tables on the clean-up men, and now held the survivors of their disorganized force at bay in the unfinished railroad station. Starbuck had sent word by messenger that he would give them an hour to get out of the station and out of the town—coupled with the threat that if they neglected it they would be burned out by daylight. Starbuck's men, Lefever added, held the only building left in the River Quarter, where most of the burning had been—Rusty Harlow's place down near the river; it had escaped the flames. In the upper town Carpy's hotel, which had been gutted, the gamblers had spared. He knew nothing about Christie.

Pardslow had been dispatched to the station with the ammunition. He came back with a long face, but a long face was nothing new for Pardslow. Carpy, wounded, was there treating the wounded, who lay on the floor in the freight room. There was only a pretense of a guard kept about the building; within it, disarmed Vigilantes nursed their grievances, railing elderly at one another, and in one corner, with nobody to command, owing to lack of ammunition, Old Gene ral Roper, though ill, was maintaining headquarters, with neither head, as Pardslow tartly put it, nor quarters. The only thing that prevented the refugees from running away was the fear of getting shot if they put their noses outside.

Selwood felt he must first of all see and learn what he could from Carpy. Directing his few companions to stick together and telling Lefever to throw out a stronger guard about the barn, Selwood started for the station.

By skirting the river bank and working from one to another of the breaks in the bench, he reached the rear door of the station without drawing any fire either from its defenders or its besiegers. He pushed open the door and entered the room without being opposed or observed. A glance being enough to reveal to Selwood's unsympathetic scrutiny the complete demoralization of the Vigilante element. It was almost by accident that Abe Cole, the bandaged but still fighting blacksmith, saw Selwood and running toward him, greeted him with a shout that drew attention to the long-hoped-for arrival of the partisan gambler. As men, wounded and unwounded, crowded about him, he eyed the sear-faced, blustful blacksmith coldly, giving no attention whatever to his effusive welcome.

"If you running this show, Abe?"

"Running it?" echoed Abe hoarsely. "I was running it—but they're running it. They wouldn't do a thing I told 'em to do," declared Cole, with a plentiful sprinkling of profanity; "now they're cornered, just as I told 'em they'd be if they didn't obey orders, and there's about as much fight in 'em now as there is in a bunch of jack-rabbits!"

Selwood, ignoring impatient interpolenders that raised their voices, came standing at the doorway out into the darkness, looked about the room. The fierce light that flickered around the lamps was not the only illumination that revealed to Selwood's experienced eye the complete demoralization of the Vigilante element.