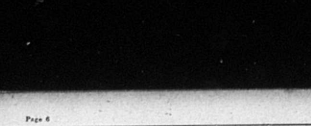

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SELWOOD of SLEEPY CAT
by FRANK H. SPEARMAN
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CHAPTER VII

An Early Morning Party

Filling in for one of his men, Sel wood not dealing at the large faro table near his desk. It was two hours since he had left Christie. In that interval she had had another visitor at the tent. Her father had already wakened, when Christie was called to the tent door by a voice and looking cautiously out, saw Starbuck standing in the moonlight.

"I didn't want you to think I went away with any hard feelings," he said, explaining himself calmly to Christie as throwing into his words that touch of sympathy and interest he was always able to summon. Christie listened with reluctance. But as her father was at no loss for words, he was soon heard by her father, who, raising his voice, called him, over Christie's protest, into the tent.

"There's the man," he said, "that can give us the help we need, Christie, if you'll treat him in the way you'd ought to."

Christie burst into tears. The cilitation of secrecy was on her—she thought she knew why, now; but she would not resist the satisfaction of a covert threat. "If Mr. Starbuck won't help us," she exclaimed, "we may find somebody in Sleepy Cat that will."

She was sorry the instant she had spoken, but it was too late to recall her words.

"Anybody that goes near the store without me," Starbuck said calmly, "will get riddled with buckshot—so," he added, looking first at Christie and then at her father, "don't make any mistake like that."

He marched with dignity out of the tent. Tyler kept up a weak fire of reproach. Christie was used to such things on more subjects than one, and only continued to listen silently. What thoughts were in her mind her father, least of all, could have surmised. She gave him an early refreshment presently, and he fell into an uneasy sleep. That moment seemed to rouse her from her lethargy and she sallied her resolve.

She rose cautiously but hurriedly, caught up a shawl that lay across her cot, crowded her little trunk, and stealthily drew out a scarf.

Passing, and loath at her father only long enough to be sure he slept, she carefully lowered the rear of the tent, threw open the door, and stepped with as little noise as possible to the tent door. Wrapping herself in her shawl, and winding her scarf about her head and neck, she pushed open the fly and stood alone out in the moonlight.

Once started, Christie did not hesitate. She walked up the slope of the street, hardly knowing which way to look in her quest, but determined to follow it. The only place where she hoped she might make a successful inquiry was at the big barn; and toward this she directed her steps.

She was being trailed, though she did not realize it. Believing herself unobserved and unseen, she pursued her course, and it was only when Bob Scott stepped out of a shadow in front of her that she was frightened.

"Were you looking for somebody, lady?" he asked.

Christie jumped, but Scott's hoofed fawlve manner reassured her. She had seen him in company with Selwood at the store, and some instinct told her he meant no harm.

"I am looking for some one."

"Who is it?"

"He's the superintendent of the freighting line."

"I guess I know who you mean. He was down to see your father tonight."

"Oh, she cried in confusion. "I don't mean Mr. Starbuck."

Scott was confident, I don't, either. You mean John Selwood. If you do want to see him, I think I can find him. But I'll have to be gone a few minutes. Now, here's the barn"—he pointed to the big structure close at hand. "If you'll walk down with me and wait a few minutes in the office, I'll have him here."

Still in fear and trembling, Christie accompanied her guide to the barn office. Two freighting teams had just rushed to the door as Scott opened it. Astonishing them, he turned with a quiet grin, a lighted lantern on the deck revealed the interior to Christie. "If you can sit here for five minutes," said Scott, "these dogs will guard you better than anybody in Sleepy Cat could do it. Just pet them a lit- ter." Christie made friends cautiously with the two dogs. "We call one Chloe," explained Scott, "and this is Sweetheart. They're Mr. Selwood's favorite wagon dogs—half bull and half mastiff—and if anybody tries to come into this office while I'm gone they'll eat 'em up. Are you willing to wait with them?"

Christie smiled rather mournfully. "I suppose I can't help it," she said uneasily. "Please hurry."

Scott lost no time in getting to Sel wood, whom he found at his desk. The Indian whispered to him. Sel wood seized his hat, followed Scott out the back door and the two, single and walking in different directions, joined Christie.

Chloe and Sweetheart, barking furiously, sprang up to be fondled when Selwood opened the door. Scott to be outside and Selwood turned to him. "Pete"—he was looking everywhere for you—and if I hadn't seen Mr. Scott, I never should have found you. Are you in business here, Mr. Selwood?"

"Why—yes."

"What is it, may I ask?"

He answered haltingly—glad it was dark. "Well, I'm mixed up in different kinds of business here—that's what got me into trouble with your father." He spoke with a laugh—or tried to. "I run this Russell and Wentworth freighting outfit," he continued, "I suppose if I called myself anything, it might be a mining man. What has happened?"

She was so confused and overcome now that she could hardly summon the words she wanted. "Nothing has happened, I feared what might happen—tonight. You didn't tell me," she ventured, "just what you were going to do about the store." Then she added, disconnectedly, "I want to go back came over again."

Selwood looked keenly at her "What did he want?"

"First he said," she began brokenly, "he wanted to turn the store back to father."

"Was that all?"

"No."

"What else?"

"I—"

"Eh?—what?"

"The same condition he named before."

"If you'd marry him, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, what did you say?"

"I said—what I said before. Then he made a threat. He said that anybody who went near the store without him would get killed."

"And you wanted to let me know?" She fingered the fring of her scarf, but looked steadily at him. "I'm afraid," she said low.

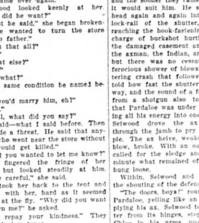
He took her back to the tent and parted with her, hard as it was, to do, at the fly. "Why did you want to warn me?" he asked.

"To repay your kindness," They spoke in low tones.

"Well," Selwood said' lightly, "I get hurt, you'll know it was while I was trying to follow your advice."

He was still laughing as she slipped quietly into the tent.

Shortly after three o'clock that morning two men with the barest of shifts for disguise, and followed by two dogs, whining and leaping at their heels left the stage barn. One



One Man Carried Three Common Axes.

man carried three common axes, of the heavy type used in the tie camps along the river; the other carried a sledge of a size and weight that would have rendered it useless in the hands of an ordinary man. But Pardalee, Scott, and their companion in the adventure were not ordinary men; the first was a giant in physique, the second dangerous in encounter, and the third fertile in resource.

As the two men neared Fort street, Selwood, stepping out of the shad ow of the building, joined them. He wore like the others a heavy jacket with little ceremony across his nose; a fat wagoner's hat shaded his eyes. "You brought the dogs?" asked Selwood, looking at them.

"I did," muttered Pardalee, as Chloe and her mate fawned themselves up between his legs. "Is if ary one of 'em gets killed, somebody's goin' to get dumped right down on the rock pile along with 'em."

Fort street was quiet as a graveyard—not a soul was stirring and the party reached the store unobserved. They halted in the shadow thrown on the north side of the building. Selwood tiptoed to the corner and inspected the front door—they looked substantial. The whole front could be exposed to the light of the moonlight, and it appeared like suicide to attempt a forcible entry. Every aperture, he well knew, was barred or nailed and would give only before a determined assault.

Selwood, approaching the high shuttered window on the north side of the building, felt carefully all around it. The two dogs crouched at Scott's feet. Selwood stidied the building a moment. Then he turned to his companions.

"There'll look for us first at the back door—that's the natural way to open this oyster. I'll smash this shutter, Bill, you go around to the south side and stom away at the other window. Bust it if you can, but, whatever you do, make plenty of noise. When I get through with shutter with an ax, Rob drops the dogs in here, one after the other, they won't get much room. Then you hear me yell, Bill, it will mean the dogs are in. Then you run to the back door with your ax, Rob, and chop at it. I'll take the sledge and ax around to the front door, Bill. When you hear the dogs inside, bust me at the front door and give it the sledge for all that's in you. You get to your place, Bill—when I hear your ax, I shout here—then out of range, best you can; there's at least one hard shooter in there."

Selwood started for the stout of Pardalee's ax against the hollow shutter and the sledge and ax of the burglars would have waked the dead, had there been any in Sleepy Cat proper. Timed at the expected signal, came the crash of Selwood's ax into the north shutter. A loud shout from within, followed by a shot, greeted the attack; Chloe and Sweetheart, savage with excitement, jelped and whined. A shotgun roared from the close inside the north shutter warned the attackers of danger. Then a buckshot glancing from the blade of Selwood's ax whizzed above the ears of Scott, crouching with the dogs. Selwood was nerved by the sound, the sense of danger, instant on reaching the back fastening. Again a charge of buckshot tore through the damaged casement and sprinkled the axman, the Indian, and the dogs, but there was no cessation in the ferocious shower of blows. The splintering crash that followed Pardalee told how fast the shutter was giving way, and the round of a fourth report from a shotgun also told Selwood that Pardalee was under fire. Throwing all his energy into one last swing, Selwood crashed the ax completely through the jamb to pry out the staple. The ax heave, weakened by the effort, broke. With an oath, Selwood called for the sledge and the next minute what remained of the shutter hung loose.

Pardalee, Selwood and Scott heard the shouting of the defenders.

"Now, Bill!" Selwood roared. Pardalee, yelling like an Indian, was plying his ax. Selwood heard the sledge