# SELWOOD of SLEEPY CAT

By FRANK H. SPEARMAN

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Selwood waited at a leisurely pace past the well-filled tables, listening to McAlpin, but with his eyes, keen and grayish blue, taking in the scene before him. He was slender, sweetly built, and carried himself very lightly—walking with much the springy step of a West Pointer. Two spots of color in his cheeks revealed the constitutional weakness that had brought him to the mountain country—a weakness now so well checked that at twenty-seven he looked fresh and boyish among men who, though born by older in years, seemed to have felt more heavily the hardships of frontier life. There was nothing ag gressive about his appearance; but his gray eyes chilled his manner when his face was in repose, and he was known to waste but few words in reaching a conclusion, and none in pursuing a vain dispute.

He heard patiently McAlpin's complaints as to the crowded condition of the barn, and only reminded him that the coming of the railroad would mean the cutting off of much freight and that there would soon be more room at the barn than business. "Make be shied, 'don't lose a chance to let go any mules you can sell to advantage."

So saying, Selwood tossed his hat on the desk and sat down. McAlpin hurried through the preliminaries of his story with every indication of nervousness, rubbing his cap at intervals over his fingers and hesitating at times for a word or phrase to estimate the effect on his hearer, who was looking at his interested, over a batch of reports Lefever, the wagon boss, had left on his desk.

But try as he would, McAlpin could gain no clue to the impression he was making. It was only after Selwood looked up at the close of the recital that McAlpin could even guess what he might expect; then Selwood shook his head as if annoyed and his free words doubled McAlpin's hopes.

"Why bring the night of a story to me?" he asked. He spoke without feeling, but as if his time were being favored on a matter not worth down there all the time. That's their business," he added, fixing his eyes again on the papers before him. "Go back to your camp and forget yourself."

"John," pleaded McAlpin, low and softly but persistently, "I want to tell you this is a hard case, a blamed hard case. It's Bunny Bartlett's work—he's the biggest all-round thief in Sleepy Cat. Starbuck's got an interest in that plow. Half the money—I'm asking half. Salvage—straight into Starbuck's pocket. It's a critical excitement McAlpin in half whispered demonstration, and that rank Starbuck is picking up money."

It would have required a full knowledge of the local situation to realize McAlpin's motive. Just appeal Selwood to know about Starbuck's love affair and that man in Sleepy Cat. Starbuck had acquaintance between the two men—no other affair. Selwood had no reason to think that it would succeed as much as it did, and he was thinking of nothing in particular when he said: "Starbuck's got an interest in that plow, has he? Well, I'll be damned!"

Yet the moment's surprise was gone left Selwood's face unmoved. He said that Starbuck was made, but Fuller—that was where the cross were won. McAlpin nodded that Selwood had come to with a new question: "Where's Starbuck?" he asked, but as he would like to step down to look it over.

This news had quite a different effect on Selwood's troubled grandeur. The boss, a present from Boy Wood-worth, was owned by one of the wealthy breeding company of which Selwood was the division superintendent. Starbuck's absence, therefore, was weak—for Selwood loved a horse, and the record of his early years in the saddle entitled him to judge one.

The sight of the boss grounded to an actual pallor did gratify Selwood. "If he's not in up to her brag she's all right," he said, as McAlpin swung the latter's away from the box stall. "I'll try her out later this evening."

Rounding her praises craftily, McAlpin steered his boss into the office where Mrs. McCracken and Moses sat in solemn silence. Selwood, paying no attention to them, drew a roll of bills and handed some to McAlpin. At that moment McAlpin, thanking him earnestly, jerked his head toward Mrs. McCracken to bid her rise. He hurriedly introduced her to Selwood and pointed to Moses dramatically as Bunny Bartlett's victim.

Moses arose, stood up, but despite McAlpin's insistent nodding the woman appeared unable to rise. She tried to, but could not find support for a cold eye on her McAlpin had not told her story. Fortunately for the unlucky woman she could not even do that. Moses, who had looked for a few hours had left her too exhausted even to speak. Moses, who had told the story out of his homeliest eyes. The sight softened Selwood's heart. His words would perhaps not have reached Mrs. McCracken's mind that was put into fairly clear language, but his voice, undoubtedly, got to Selwood. "Is that the way it was, him?" he turned suddenly to the gateway door. "You want this boy?"

Nodding out his front the woman, McAlpin left Selwood at the mercy of the direct appeal. The woman's galvanized into a sort of life by McAlpin's words, started, rose, sank back into McAlpin's chair, shaded and quivered to ask one unfortunate question: "Are you the sheriff, sir?"

A faint grin overspread Selwood's features—it was his only answer.

"Or the marshal, sir?" she ventured.

McAlpin, listening outside, decided she had killed every chance of help. He could not see Selwood's face but felt a heavy silence.

"Is this your mother?" McAlpin after a pause, heard Selwood ask the question of the boy and heard the boy's affirmative answer.

"What kind of specimen are you—?"

McAlpin hurried down the barn to get away from the tongue-lashing that he knew was to follow—for Selwood was credited with a frontier vocabulary not alone unlegacy forcible but also extremely biting.

The barn boss was brought back to the scene by a sharp call from Selwood, who bade him look after the woman. In the excitement—and much to Selwood's annoyance—she had fainted and fallen into Selwood's arms. When McAlpin had taken her in hand—and as a widower he knew how to hold a baby or a woman—Selwood spoke sharply to Moses and told him to come with him.

He had said no word as to his intentions, but McAlpin knew exactly what they were. Pushing the boy in impatiently ahead, Selwood stepped into the street and slammed the door he filed him.

Bartoe's place, in the River quarter, besides those periodically victimized within it, had a regular following of the characters that haunt the border-line between honest man and rogue—always a considerable one on the frontier—and a sympathetic following of the gamey moving in and out of Sleepy Cat; men who, like the habitues of Bartoe's, lived wholly by their wits.

It was ten o'clock at night when Selwood walked into this place with Moses McCracken in tow. Bartoe, soft-spoken and with all the words needed for a colloquy but few to waste on compliments, met Selwood with the doubtful grin of a man that can't farm out exactly what is coming. With his eyes roving apologetically from Selwood's words to Moses' solemn face, Bartoe listened attentively to all that was said. Moses meantime, following earlier explicit directions, was looking carefully at the few men standing in the room. As Selwood finished, Bartoe, resting his eyes on Moses, spoke mildly: "I never saw this fellow before, that I know of. We don't see six hundred dollars at once here in a month. This fellow's picked the wrong place that's all."

Selwood gave no credence what ever to the expected denial, but Moses, in addition to his terrible fear being so by pointing suddenly to a man sitting alone at a card table across the room, poring over an old and well-thumbed illustrated newspaper. "There's the man that brought me in here," he cried. "He looked Bartoe in the eye—is the man that was dealing the three-card trick—and he knows me. He insisted, quite unruffled, was mistaken—a thing that might happen to any man. 'I make mistakes, myself,' he said pleasantly to Moses, whose misbehaviors in repeating his accusation gave Bartoe no offense.

But Selwood showed immediate interest in the man with the newspaper. He was a liveryman who traded in stolen horses when he safely could and in short order—taking his team for a fence. Selwood had already suffered at his hands—or his employ-

He Walked Straight Toward Atkins.

ers, Bussell and Wentworth had—and his speech at times so "frosted him up proper," as Jim McAlpin would have expressed it.

"Come here," clipped his voice. "Atkins?" he said. "Look here a minute."

Atkins glanced sharply over at the three who stood with their eyes on him. "Come over here, Atkins," said Selwood again.

The expression of Atkins' face resembled a poor response to the eyes required. "I guess it's about as far from me over to you as it is from you over to me," he suggested, making no move to rise. Selwood waited no time. He walked straight toward Atkins who started up in alarm as Selwood hotly approached. "It may not be any further one way than the other," retorted Selwood, "but you've picked the expensive way. I was willing to let you keep part of your stealings—now—you and Bartoe hand out the six hundred dollars you robbed this lad of at once."

Men crowded up. Selwood knew every one of them. He knew about what each represented in the way of danger. But he abated nothing whatever of his aggressive insistence. Atkins, sullen and evasive, denying and threatening by turns, was for standing pat, as he had often done before Bartoe, with better judgment, realized the man they had to deal with. But Selwood gave little heed to the war of words kindled by his arbitrary attitude—the only sort of an effective one with the ruffians he was facing. When Atkins had wrestled himself with brave words, Bartoe, encouraged by Selwood's silence, intervened more boldly himself. Selwood put up his hand to check both.

"Atkins," he said, without raising his voice, "this isn't the only one you've got to settle with you, but I'll settle this now. You robbed this boy; now; you're going to pay him back every dollar you took. Now pay down with you for the present—shut up, Bartoe"—he turned on the accomplice—"if the six hundred isn't up on my table by eleven o'clock tonight, I'll close this joint in the morning and run you out of town—or, what's just as good, I'll give you a chance to run me out. Just get together your friends—or, don't talk to me," he said it all, Starbuck! Why, yes, call in Starbuck, by all means. Selwood hardly took the trouble to laugh at the threats flung at him. "Yes, I know that, too. Just as you like. Now you are you are? Well?" Selwood caught his breath in quick, almost startled excitement. "I hope," he said "—for the sake of a disagreeable duty—Atkins that I am more of one. Anyway, if you want a real good time, Atkins, with Starbuck for an opener, you know now just exactly how to get it."

## CHAPTER IV

### Starbuck Intervenes.

A wraggle between Atkins and Atkins followed Selwood's departure—forced and acrimonious on Atkins' part, not cheerful on Bartoe's. Atkins counseled discretion, Bartoe counseled him sullenly that he had nothing whatever at stake. Atkins had nothing more to do than attend to range for fresh pastures—he was required to carry his roll all in his pocket—and come back to his barn when things blew over; Bartoe, who had faced the immediate loss of his whole establishment, had to think of the rest of their quarrel Starbuck, the man whose name had been thrown about so actively at Selwood, walked bluffly in on the angry men.

"Yes, Harry told me Selwood had been here," Starbuck nasaled as "Harry" for Harry Bartoe, who by dint of some crafty bustling about, some skilful evasions, and the exercise of some extraordinary instinct, had possessed himself of the whole story and "scooped" the house by getting first with it to Starbuck's ear. "I know all about what he want ed," continued Starbuck. "What's he going to do?"

His appearance had a quieting effect on the disputants to the degree that they left off shouting each other and turned together to share Starbuck. Built in his parts thirties, Starbuck, well built, frank to a manner more than equal in suave speech to the worries in Sleepy Cat, was used in such local encounters as had to fallen him, enjoyed an accredited reputation in the River quarter for pleasing in feature—rather light of complexion and with a boyishness that was looked to as a local artifice of River quarter affection and was by Bartoe to give the boy back his Cut. I say de Selwood, Starbuck, "that else was only a nominal part of Harry's politics and friendships. It was of more words about it—that's all there is to it."

"Well, I wouldn't say that's all, Starbuck," Atkins said scarcely, sourly himself. "To here to keep law and order and I can't have any places shut up by the new superintendent of Sleepy Cat. He's in the gambling business some as you are—"

Selwood jumped as if stung, and said in a voice that caused a "Who has accused Atkins, unpleasantly significant

Starbuck silenced his nervous letters by confining a few brief remarks strictly to non-syllable words. Then, farrying city hall matters to about all pertinent details of the row, he strode up street to interview Selwood.

Starbuck realized the delicate position in which Selwood's action left him. The bosses could not afford to the same time in Sleepy Cat, and there was in the situation this further element of uncertainty that Starbuck wanted to solve. He knew Selwood but slightly and knew him chiefly as a man who minded strictly his own business. Did he mean now to aspire for local leadership? Starbuck hoped not but wanted to know.

He bent his steps straight toward Selwood, who stood smoking while he talked with mild interest the play at a table where a new dealer sat installed.

"Selwood?" said Starbuck, inquiringly, putting out his hand. "I'm You're Starbuck," answered Selwood facetiously as he gave him his hand.

"Can I have a word with you?" asked Starbuck. For answer Selwood proffering a cigar from his waistcoat pocket, led the way to his table in the corner and pointed to a chair. Both men sat down. Starbuck's tone, as he said it all, Starbuck! Why, yes, call in Starbuck, by all means. Selwood hardly took the trouble to laugh at the threats flung at him. "Yes, I know that, too. Just as you like. Now you are you are? Well?" Selwood caught his breath in quick, almost startled excitement. "I hope," he said "—for the sake of a disagreeable duty—Atkins that I am more of one. Anyway, if you want a real good time, Atkins, with Starbuck for an opener, you know now just exactly how to get it."

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