

Honor Among Thieves

BUCK knelt in the dust and sliced a carrot into a half-gallon can. He held the carrot with the stump of his left arm and his thighs as he deftly cut the slices with a worn pocket knife.

Rotty stood behind him. "Why da hell we didn't take that money I don' know." His voice shrilled across the weeds and brush still damp with dew. "Bust into a store jus' ta steal vegetables and meat so's you can cook that Goddamn junk. We coulda et a good meal with thet money." He looked in the direction of the town on the other side of the black railroad bed. "Hurry it up, ya old fool. I'm hungry."

Buck hummed and dropped chunks of a roast into the stew. His whiskered face was calm and pleasant. He was unmindful of the scorning boy.

Rotty spat in the dust and flung himself down in the damp weeds at the top of the shallow gulley. His eyes blinked incessantly as he watched the town. The squat, rambling houses, lining dirt and cinder streets, spurted thin columns of blue smoke that were quickly absorbed by the clear, morning sky. The black smoke of the cannery by the tracks rolled across the flat land. Rickety trucks groaned out of town toward the long rows of pea vines. People stood in the truck beds watching the early sun blink a promise of heat.

Buck carefully placed scraps of wood in the fire in the bottom of the flat gully. He set the stew on three rocks placed in the coals. Sitting on a splintered log near the fire, he carefully wiped his knife on shabby corduroys. Buck was a big man, tall and thin. Gray hair flowed from beneath a crumpled, grease-smudged felt hat and spilled over the collar of his blue shirt. His beard was gray and matted.

Rotty sulked over to the fire. "When's thet garbage gonna be done?" he snarled.

Buck looked at him with quiet eyes. "Won't take long, boy." Black snags of teeth showed when he talked.

Rotty's boyish face, covered with white fuzz and red pimples, drew into a menacing scowl. "I told ya not to go callin' me boy. By God, I'm more'f man than you are, you old one-armed sonofabitch."

Buck stared at the fire and rubbed the stump of his arm. Rotty watched him intently. He wanted to rile the old man because Buck had stopped him from taking the money. Buck didn't move. Rotty sat down by the fire with disgust.

"Maybe I only got one arm," Buck said slowly, "but I ain't a sonofabitch. I had a good ma. She lived with me an' my wife till she died."

"You had a wife?" Rotty sneered, "Shuuuu, what woman'd have an old buzzard sech as you?"

Buck grabbed a heavy stick from the pile of wood nearby and beat the dust in front of him. "By God, I ain't been old all my life, you little shuuuuuu. You give me any more your mouth, I'll bash you a good one, ya hear?"

Rotty drew back out of the stick's range. His face turned red. He looked into the fire sullenly. The old man had a wife, and he's touchy about it. Rotty would remember that.

The stew bubbled in the can. The sun worked its way up the sky and steamed the weeds dry.

"Buck," Rotty said. He looked sideways at the old man to see if he was still mad.

"What?" he said quietly.

"Are you sure we can get a rattler out of here today?"

"Fella told me they's one out of here everyday during the harvest season," the old man said thoughtfully. He dug

in his ear with a stick match and stared across the fields.

A scuffing noise at the rim of the gully broke the silence. Rotty jumped up. His hand shot into his pocket. A sharp click produced a gleaming blade. Buck looked at the shiny blade and then at the rim of the gully. A young girl appeared. Her black hair was straight and clipped short. The print dress she wore looked like a hand-me-down that was much too short. Her long legs were tanned; she was barefoot. "I'll be Goddamn'," Rotty shouted. "A little girl." He laughed nervously and fumbled to close the knife. His eyes squinted as he looked at the girl. He brushed a hand across his hair.

Buck looked at him carefully and then turned on the log to look at the little girl. "Well, little girl, did you smell Buck's stew and come to have breakfast with us?"

The girl twisted at the front of her dress and rubbed the top of one foot with the other.

"Goddamn, a little girl," Rotty chanted.

"Come on down. The stew will be ready in a minute," Buck said.

The girl walked slowly toward them. She looked slowly from one to another.

"This here's Rotty," Buck said jovially. "I'm Buck. What's your name?"

The girl stood a few feet from them. Her brown eyes surveyed them carefully.

Buck's eyes sparkled, and he smiled good-naturedly at her. "Cat got your tongue, huh?"

The little girl giggled and scratched her stomach.

Buck patted the log beside him. "Come over here and talk to old Buck." The girl shuffled over and sat down beside him. "What's your name?"

"Shirley," the girl said softly. Her brown eyes were wide with wonder as she studied Buck's gray whiskers.

Rotty scratched his groin and sauntered to the log. He sat down beside the girl. "A Goddamn' little girl," he said. He put his hand on the tanned thigh of the girl.

Buck grasped him by the wrist. With one swift jerk he drew Rotty off the log to the ground. "What in the hell you

think you're doing?" he shouted.

Rotty clawed at Buck's hand that was clamped on his wrist. "Buck, Buck, you're breaking my arm!"

Buck's mouth twisted into a snarl. "Did you go to reform school for stealing cars like you said or for molesting little girls?" he shouted.

"Goddamnit, you're breaking my arm!" Tears were streaming down his fuzzy cheeks. "Both, dammit, both. Let go my arm." Buck released his arm. Rotty rolled back in the dust.

"You little shuuuuu," Buck said quietly, brokenly.

"You ain't got no call to look at me like thet," Rotty sobbed. "You ain't nothing but a Goddamn tramp yourself. I wasn't gonna hurt her. I never hurt no little girls. Fella gets horny, thet's all."

"She ain't more'n eight or nine, and you're near eighteen." Buck looked hard at the boy. "What's the matter with you?"

Rotty gained courage with his distance. "What's a matter with you?" he sneered. "Your Goddam wife leave you for a good man?"

Buck started from the log, but then settled back. His grayish skin turned slightly red, and he began breathing heavily. He looked at the girl beside him. She stared wide-eyed at Rotty. "You see, Shirley, I had a wife and a little girl," he said quietly. "Not quite such a big girl as you, but a little girl none the same." He looked past the girl down the gulley that stretched across the field. "Then I lost my arm in a mining accident. Couldn't get any work after that. No money—times were tough then, too. My wife, she took our little girl and went to her ma's place to live."

The little girl looked thoughtfully at Buck with her brown eyes. "Have you seen your little girl?"

Buck put his hand tenderly on her head. "Not since then. I lit out looking for work, but I never found none that amounted to anything. Nobody wants a one-armed man." He rubbed his stump and looked at Rotty. "Got nothin' to do now but wet-nurse some young pup that's gone astray."

Rotty spat in the dust and flopped on his side. He looked

up the little girl's dress and rubbed himself.

"You always been taking care of him, Bu—Buck?"

Buck shook his head slowly. "About a week is all. Look's like I'm gonna have to take care him a long time though. Cut that out, Goddamn ya."

Rotty jumped to his feet. "Go to hell, you old sonofabitch. You or nobody else is takin' care a me. Ain't nobody ever takin' care a me, and you ain't gonna start." He walked back and forth across the gulley. He pulled on one ear as he walked and blinked his eyes rapidly. "Shuuuuuu, nobody takes care of me," he screamed, then scrambled up the side of the gulley.

Buck walked to the fire and stirred the stew. The faint aroma of onions and meat drifted up from the can.

Rotty stumbled down into the gulley. His hands were clasped together, fingers interlaced. He beat his thumbs against his chest. "Hot damn, hot damn," he squealed. "Jesuschrist, there's a woman coming. All by herself. Hot damn." He danced around in the bottom of the gulley; his cracked bogans kicked up clouds of dust. "You'd better keep your nose out!" he screamed at Buck. "This's a woman. A Goddamn, bitching woman." Rotty stopped dancing and stood straddle-legged facing the unheeding back of Buck. He pulled the switch-blade from his pocket and held it flat in his hand. "Buck, I said keep your filthy nose out of it, Goddamnit. You butt in, and I'll cut you into smaller pieces than that garbage you're makin', do ya hear me?"

Buck grunted and put more wood on the fire. He shamled to the log and settled down beside the girl.

"A bitching woman," Rotty screamed. He began to giggle. A harsh, throaty laugh. He held his sides and fell to his knees. "Hot damn, hot damn." His hands beat the dirt as he rocked back and forth on his knees. He stood up and scratched his groin and hitched at his pants.

The woman appeared at the rim of the gulley. She was young and fair skinned. Her dress was of cotton print, loose and wrinkled. She was a pretty woman, but already the lines of hard work and child bearing were written across her face.

"Hi, Mommy," the little girl said from her seat beside Buck. "We're going to have stew."

The woman looked at Rotty and Buck. Her hands trembled. She would have run but for her girl sitting beside the old hobo.

"Look at her," Rotty shouted. His eyes were wide and the lids blinked rapidly. "Look at her. Look at them tits pushin' against that dress." Sweat stood on his forehead and rolled down his cheeks. "I've got to have you," he screamed.

The woman pressed her hands against her stomach. "Shirley, Shirley, come up here," she croaked.

Rotty screamed and scrambled up the bank toward the woman. A heavy stick whirled through the air and struck him in the side of the face. Blood spurted as he fell to the ground and rolled down the bank. He lay in a heap in the dust of the gulley.

Buck pushed the little girl up from the log. She stood wide-eyed, looking at the limp form of Rotty for a moment and then struggled up the bank to her mother. They disappeared over the rim.

Buck took his worn knife from a pocket and began eating the steaming stew. He wiped the grease from his beard and carefully cleaned the knife with a red handkerchief. He dumped the remaining stew on the ground and, carrying the can, walked down the gulley to a creek. He filled the can with clean water and returned to the limp form of Rotty. With his red handkerchief, he wiped the blood and dust from the boy's face. He threw part of the water in Rotty's face and the rest on the fire. Buck struggled up the bank to the rim of the gulley. A group of men were crossing the railroad bed and walking in the direction of the gulley.

Buck pulled the still shaky Rotty to his feet. "Come on, boy. We got to go. Come on. We can go up this gulley to that timber up yonder. That'll hide us till the rattler comes." He pushed Rotty's bundle into the boy's hands and hefted his own. "Go on, boy. We'll get that rattler and go someplace else, and you can learn another lesson. Go on."

Rotty stumbled ahead of Buck up the dusty gulley. The whirl of the picking machines droned in the distance as the two threaded toward the timber. The sun worked its way up the sky and wilted the weeds.

— Roger D. Crouse, Sc. Jr.

The Art of Scientific Criminal Investigation

THE great dowager of society paced nervously back and forth across the vast expanse of carpet that covered the sitting room. Her enormous bust shook within her lavender sequin-studded gown as she crossed to the window. She raised her glasses from the chain around her neck and fitted the lenses across the bridge of her overly-powdered nose. She searched up and down the quiet street with a look of urgency. Seeing nothing, she twitched her nose, and the glasses fell down to their resting place again at the end of the chain.

As she turned from the window, a flashing red light played upon the panes, and the sound of screeching tires reached her ears. She hurried back to the window in time to see a car settle back on its other two wheels after careening around the corner at the end of the block. A multitude of lights flashing, a siren wailing at the top of its lungs, the patrol car skidded to a halt in front of the great stone house. The siren died out slowly, exhausted.

A figure stumbled out and ran to the front door. A rapid staccato from the knocker, plus a counter-rhythm from the door bell, urged the mass of the woman to the door. She