

Penny Sale

Irving Spaulding

Sci. Sr.



“WELL, have things started?” Molly asked dryly. Pete nodded his answer to his cousin’s wife as he slammed the door.

“Who’s the auctioneer?”

“Weston. Two clerks with him today. Another family affair between him and Burns. That banker can’t get anyone but his brother-in-law to cry these foreclosure sales for him.” Pete’s corduroy cap hurtled into a straight-backed chair, and his blanket-lined jacket slid from his shoulders.

“We’ve got some dinner saved for you.”

“Don’t want much. They started at twelve o’clock; it’ll be half an hour before they get that row of old corn plows sold. Gotta be there, then. How are you, Rob?” He tousled the hair of the ten-year-old lad who came toward him.

SIGHING, he sat down at the kitchen table. Molly quickly set some warmed-over coffee, a few slices of corn bread, and a dab of boiled potatoes before him.

“I’ll have a couple of eggs fried in a jiffy.”

Pete waited silently. He was tired. Three hours sleep showed him up. Not so young any more.

“Where’s Luke?”

“Down at the barn showin’ ’em which teams and cows to bring out first. Your husband’s a plucky fellow. He’s looking up.”

“Any place else to look?”

“Nowhere.”

Pete clasped his hands, his elbows resting on the table. Before him, from the kitchen window, stretched eight miles of half-snow-covered fall plowing, fields of corn stalks, and unplowed stubble, dotted with box-like groves from which windmills protruded.

“Mamma! Can I go out in the barn where Daddy is?”

“No, Rob. You stay in here today. Here are your eggs, Pete. Now, don’t whine,” she added as the boy showed signs of fretting.

“Better stay in here a while, Bub,” Pete admonished. “Wait until the crowd’s gone, and we’ll go out and have a look around.”

He began gulping food.

This was different from his sale back in 1930, he thought. Every fellow who came then brought at least one kid, or so it seemed, and they’d played around, getting in and out of the way, until their dads had corralled them when the sale broke up. This afternoon there wasn’t a kid on the place. At least, not one who couldn’t handle a gun.

Yep. They’d sold him out in ’30. Three years had passed. Three years of hard living for him and his wife. They’d bought a team and a couple of cows with what was left from the sale. By working out they were able to exist on the acreage they’d rented near town. It had been hard, at first, to work as a hired hand for fellows with whom he had traded work when he was farming for himself.

BUT now—it’d be different with Luke. There wasn’t work to be had. There wouldn’t be anything left from the sale. He would go on relief, unless he could get some machinery and some livestock. Then he could move on to his mother-in-law’s eighty.

If things went right this afternoon, Luke’d have his machinery and livestock. There were at least two hundred men in the yard. Neighbors—good neighbors! With guns in their cars. They wouldn’t use guns less they had to. Blanchard’s sale last week had been bad—two men killed and half a dozen in the hospital. But—if they had to use ’em—rifles and blank shot gun shells first—in the air. A fellow could always lower his sights! They wouldn’t have to, though, if they could bid things in for less than a dollar this afternoon! Then they’d give ’em back to Luke!

A sudden pounding on the door brought Molly from the

front room where she'd been watching the crowd of "neighbors—good neighbors! With guns in their cars." Wrenching the door open, she paused.

"Hello, Loren."

"Pete here?"

"Yeah. Come on in." She turned to Pete, "It's Loren Schmitzer," and returned to the front room with Rob, who had followed her to the kitchen.

"How near the end of that row of corn plows are they, Loren?"

"Close. Ya better get out there pretty quick. Pete, this is my nephew, Rogel Layden, from Lone River."

"How are you?" Their hands clasped.

"They're foreclosin' on him. Sale's a week from Thursday."

"Burns?"

"Yeah—and the local bank at Lone River." He shook his greyed head, and his stooped shoulders jumped in a little shrug. "Well, he's wonderin'—if this scheme of yours works—if you'd come over and run his sale."

"I don't know. We aren't sure we can put it over. You can rent a place if you have equipment?"

The nephew nodded. "There'll be some cash or beef for you, if you come."

"Pete!"

A boy of sixteen burst into the house. "One corn plow left, Pete! Luke's ready to have 'em start!"

"See me when this is over, Loren," Pete said, glancing at his nearly finished dinner and reaching for his cap and jacket. "If we're able," he added. "Where are you stationed, Larry?"

"I'm with the guns in the four cars at the end of the chicken house."

"Well—take care of yourself." Pete strode from the house, Loren and the nephew at his heels.

AS HE reached the gas barrels by the machine shed, Pete stopped. Yes—the roans were being brought out! Luke's favorites—tall, broad, husky—their harness jangling—walking—trotting—now standing in the large space between the orchard and the corn crib. The crowd shifted its position, circling the team. By the crib—Pete glanced—yes!—a half dozen fellows apparently not interested in horses, their hands filled with long, tapered

ears of corn which they were examining carefully. Swinging up to a position on the barrel racks, Pete scanned the yard.

Weston, flanked by his two clerks, stood near the team inside the circle of men. Crisply his lingo ran across the space to the gas barrels.

"Now, men—here's a pair of eight-year-old roans. Both of 'em sound—except the left one. She was caught in a fence once and has a scar on her left shoulder! The injury doesn't bother her, and she's a good worker! The other one's as sound as a dollar! Now, we're gonna sell 'em as they are—in the harness! A right smart good team! Who'll start 'em off?"

There was a long pause.

"Anybody? Who'll start 'em? Ya've seen 'em in action, boys! They're a good team! Wha' da' I hear?"

Another long pause.

"Fifty cents." The drawled bid came from the edge of the crowd.

Pete smiled. Harley could be relied on. Trust him to start things off.

"Fifty! Fifty—a— What did you say?" he asked the bidder.

"Fifty cents." Again the slow drawl.

Weston grinned.

"O. K. Fifty cents! Anybody give fifty dollars? Fifty dollars?"

"Fifty dollars."

PETE gazed at the bidder—a well-dressed young fellow—near the edge of the crowd. Quailing under the farmers' glances, the smooth-shaven chap drew the collar of his trim, grey overcoat high and pulled his grey hat over his face. Quietly an ear of corn spun low across the crowd and shattered with a bang on the steel snout of the corn picker. The roans jumped—three men grabbed their bits.

Pete waited, watching the crowd draw closely about the team; good fellows, these neighbors—they knew what they were here for! Weston's call rolled out:

"Got fifty! Who'll give sixty? Sixty, sixty, sixty,—"

"Fifty-one cents!" It was not the drawl this time.

"Fifty-one cents, the gentleman says! Who'll give sixty dollars?"

"Sixty dollars!" Again from the grey overcoat.

Anxiously, Pete glanced toward the men at the corn crib. Again corn spun over the crowd. Half ears this time. A heavy butt struck the grey coat squarely in the right shoulder. With snake-

like rapidity the chap turned, striking with his left hand, only to find himself in the embrace of a wiry, denim-clad pair of arms.

“Look out! The team!”

“Get out of the road!”

“Quit throwin’ corn!”

Pete flinched as the roans reared, excited by the mob and the crash as a couple of pieces of corn hit the picker again. Farmers scattered. Snorting, the team plowed their way to the edge of the ring of men, where they broke into a dead run, then cavorted aimlessly about the yard.

“Must ‘a’ been hit with some corn!” “Let ‘em run!” “They’ll be all right as long as they run together!” “Better catch ‘em ‘fore they run into some machinery!”

“HEY! Whose car is that?”

A BLUE sedan was crawling onto the graveled road at the end of the ruddy driveway. It paused as though to set itself for the five-mile sprint to town.

Pete dropped from the barrel rack. “Who’s in it?”

“One of Weston’s clerks and the guy with the grey overcoat.” “Who is that guy?” “A cousin of Weston’s, I guess.” “Oh!” “Well, they’re gone.”

“Let’s get the team!” Pete called, and a dozen fellows headed for the far side of the orchard where the roans now stood nervously in the fence corner.

The team being caught, Pete watched the road from the corner of the wellhouse. The blue car had disappeared. A tough break! What now? A posse, perhaps. And the men—the men, in little groups of five or six, were dropping away from the crowd to return a few minutes later with shotguns and rifles slung under their arms. Neighbors—anxious to help! By pairs, a score of them strode through the orchard to the road. A dozen clustered at the end of the driveway. Two pairs stationed themselves in the far corners of the barnyard. Above Pete, dangling his feet over the edge of the small platform at the top of the windmill tower, a red-scarfed little Irishman sat where he could watch the roads and fields. “No posse’s gonna slip up on us!” he’d muttered.

Calls of “Get the sale goin’, Weston!” “Bring out another team!” “Bring out some cows!” “Come on! Get goin’!” rolled through the air.

Pete motioned for a team to be brought from the barn, as he stalked toward the crowd of men. Moving close to the auctioneer, he picked up an ear of corn. Slowly, he shelled a few kernels, watching them slide from their long even rows as a team of bays trotted up. Pete raised his head; his eyes met those of the auctioneer. "All right, Weston! Let's start!"

RELUCTANTLY, Weston started. The bays sold quickly at 90 cents; the roans were sold next at 99 cents. Luke could use four horses. The five best cows—Luke would need them; the year-old corn planter, the two-row corn plow, the gang plow, the four-section drag, the harrow—Luke would need them, too. Weston sold rapidly—with apparent disregard for the word "cents" which followed every bid. An ear-splitting whistle from the windmill tower brought activities to a halt.

"Keep selling," Pete said quietly to Weston.

Three rifle bolts clicked.

As Weston took up his call, Pete hustled to the foot of the windmill. He exchanged shouts with the Irishman. Two cars, eh? Blue? Grey? Turning, he sprinted toward the road, as the fugitive clerk and Weston's cousin stopped the blue sedan in the "Y" of the driveway. Burns' long Packard followed. Guns in their hands, the cluster of men blocked the drive.

Sliding through the group of men, Pete halted as Burns rolled down the window of his Packard.

"What's going on here?" The words were wrapped in cigar smoke.

"We're havin' a sale. Want to go up and look around? Or'd you rather watch from here?" Empty handed, Pete stepped near the open window of the Packard.

"What's this about bidding in cents?"

"We're buying things at a price we can afford—with corn at ten cents a bushel."

"What's the idea?"

"Just savin' enough stuff for Luke so he can go over and work his mother-in-law's place."

Pete watched a curl of smoke twist thoughtfully from Burns' lips. In the silence Weston's voice—Burns' brother-in-law's voice—hummed from the yard, "Got twen'y-three! Anybody give twen'y-four? Twen'y-four? Twen'y-four, twen'y-four—" hummed

from the center of a ring of determined men, men with guns! Guns which had been used with accuracy on rabbits, squirrels, and pheasants; guns which could be used on deputies, auctioneers, and bankers!

Behind him—facing Burns—stood a dozen half-amused men—grimly amused. Seven of them had been at Blanchard's sale last week. Two fellows killed. The auctioneer's shoulder filled with shot. Five others in the hospital. Grimly amused men.

Weston's cousin could be glad that only an ear of corn clipped his right shoulder! Burns knew that!

SLOWLY Burns let a cloud of smoke stream from the Packard's window. Steadily, he gazed at Pete. "Well," he began. Pete's fists tensed in his jacket pockets. "Settle up with the clerk as soon as you can," the banker stated crisply.

There was the sudden closing of the Packard's window—the throb of two racing motors—two cars backing jerkily into the road, heading toward town—Pete's clenched hands relaxed in his jacket pockets; he turned, slowly, to face a row of smiling men.

An hour and a half later, Pete leaned against the side of the wellhouse and pushed the corduroy cap back on his head. Slowly he glanced across the vacant yard; then at the fellows with him. "Well, Loren—the sale's a week from Thursday, eh?" he said to Schmitzer.

"That's right. Six miles east of Lone River."

"It's Burns and the local bank there," Pete told the men. "Anybody not interested in going over?"

There was no answer.

Schmitzer looked at his long shadow. "Gettin' close to chore time," he remarked. "Want a ride toward town, Pete?"

"Sure. Riding's better than walking."

"Anybody seen Luke during the last half hour?"

"He's probably out in the barn with the team of roans."

"Well—he's with the roans, but they're down at the tank."

Pete stepped around the corner of the wellhouse. By the low cement stock tank stood Luke, the halter ropes of the drinking team across his arm; at his side—Rob. Stooping quickly, he caught the boy under the arms and flipped him to the back of the nearest mare.

Pete smiled. Turning to Schmitzer, he half-chuckled, "Luke'll make a good farmer out of that boy in the next ten years!"