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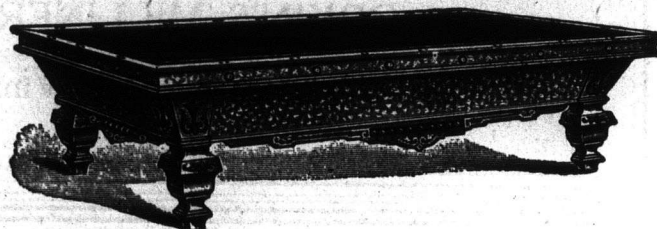
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Gabe, with a hush of mingled awe and joy softening his voice. "It's Sally's fust goin' out with a man. I've never spoke, because she ain't like no other gal; but I'm goin' to say something comin' back from the Corners. Her consentin' to go with me ain't like no other gal's consentin'. That's what set me to thinkin' so pow'ful 'bout—'bout —"

"Blood-hunters an' feudin'," suggested Tom. "Meanin' Turkeyfoot Jake this time, I s'pose?"

"Yes, meanin' Turkeyfoot Jake—the low, rock-hidin' hound! I ain't no coward an' skeer-bōdy, as you know, Tom; but life's a whole lot to me jest now. I can't shoot a man in the back an' Turkeyfoot can't shoot one any other way, an' he's swore to kill anybody who marries Sally or tries to go with her, an' he's a plumb dead shot. If I could git him into a clearin', or to face me anywhere, 'twould be more like even chances. But I can't. Sally won't look at him, an' that makes him so mad he skulks mostly among his rocks, an' his eyes are everlastin'ly squintin' over that long gun o' his."

"Hide in the bushes an' pot him the fust time he goes by," suggested Tom.

"Can't. Wish I could; but 't aint in me to pot a man who ain't lookin'."

"Run off."

"Wuss yet. Sally'd rather a man would do that than shoot behind; but she hates a coward."

"Dep'tize me to hide in the bushes an' do the job for ye."

"Oh, ye're jest a talkin' now, Tom," groaned Gabe. "Ye couldn't do a thing like that any more'n me. No, it's got to be my wits ag'in his pizen meanness. If I win, it's goin' to be for all a man's life could be in this world; an' if I don't—why, Sally needn't ever know but I built the house for my old pap an' mam."

There was a cautious step coming down the mountain path, and a "Sh" from Tom; but Gabe did not turn. His quick ear had already recognized the habitually stealthy tread, but he knew that Turkeyfoot would not attempt assassination in the open path with Tom looking on, and with the settlement store not a dozen rods away. He did not even shift his straightforward gaze when the cautious step approached rapidly behind and a figure brushed his shoulder in passing.

"Huh! Gabe, so it's you?" a sneering voice asked. "I didn't know ye with them big shoulders humped over. Thinkin' 'bout Canaan an' the shinin' shore?"

"No," answered Gabe slowly. "I was jest thinkin' how easy wild varmints git caught in traps."

"Traps is for them that can't shoot," taunted Turkeyfoot. "Sally don't—"

But Gabe whirled with a look in his eyes that stayed the sentence. Turkeyfoot's itchin' for? If he can hector ye to a fight it'll save him shootin' from behind a stone or through a winder, an' folk's 'll pat him on the back an' say he's a brave man. But ye know what Turkey's fightin' way is. His gun was all ready just now, an' if your hand had moved toward yours y'd been potted 'fore it got there."

"I know," said Gabe shortly. "But come on over to the store. I 'low there's a dozen loafin' 'round the steps right now, an' I want to hear the talk." Tom sprang to his feet.

"Don't ye do it, Gabe," he cried earnestly. "It'll be playin' right into Turkeyfoot's hands. He—"

But Gabe was already striding down the path, and with grave foreboding Tom followed.

As Gabe had surmised, there were a dozen or more mountaineers lounging about the store steps. When the two drew near, a sudden hush fell upon the group. Evidently Turkeyfoot had been saying something that excited mirth, for several faces were still on a broad grin.

What it was soon appeared. The mountaineers were neither sensitive nor delicate.

"Gettin' sort o' skeered, Gabe, air

ye?" one of them drawled. "Standin' with your shoulders all scrunched down, so's to offer a small mark! I 'low I didn't think it of ye."

Gabe leaned his rifle against the steps and moved away several feet. Turkeyfoot was still grasping his weapon, with his furtive eyes watching Gabe's every movement.

"Well, mebbe I am a bit skeered," Carmel acknowledged. "I was sayin' so to Tom up on the path jest now. I've heered as how Turkeyfoot has swore to kill me, an' everybody knows what Turkeyfoot is with a gun. However, I've killed my b'ar an' my cata-mount, an' have stood up before shootin' without showin' my back; so folks round here know I ain't no coward. But when a man's young an' strong like me, an' has things ahead, he's excused for bein' weak-kneed when he's goin' to be shot plumb through by a cheap, sneakin' coward like Turkey."

Turkeyfoot's rifle went to his shoulder with a quick, vindictive movement; but there were a dozen pair of condemning eyes watching him, and the weapon was reluctantly lowered.

"What d'ye mean?" he cried angrily. "Pears to me the shoe's on t'other foot."

"Oh, no, I reckon not," retorted Gabe with tantalizing coolness. "Everybody knows what ye 'mount to without that rifle, Turkey. You're the cheapest, meanest coward in the whole mountain. Mebbe the gun's brave, but 't aint you; an' mebbe ye can kill me, but ye're a coward jest the same!"

"I dar' ye to fight me!" screamed Turkeyfoot fiercely. "I dar' ye! An' here's all these folks for witness."

"Might 's well, Gabe," commented one of the men philosophically. "It's bound to come; an' if ye're feelin' dubious, ye're goin' to git more so, an' that'll mean less chance for ye. We'll make the fight fair's we can, seein' he can beat ye all to pieces shootin'."

Gabe considered a moment, as if hesitating.

"Well," he said at length, "I s'pose it may as well be now. But bein' the fight's forced on me, I have ch'ice o' weapons."

"It's got to be guns," interposed Turkeyfoot, in sudden alarm. "All mountain men fight with guns."

"Yes, we'll let it be guns," agreed Gabe. "But I have my say 'bout the way it's to be did. We'll stand six foot apart."

"Six foot! Why—"

"Yes, six foot," Gabe repeated placidly. "An' now 'bout the loadin'. What you got in your gun, Turkey?"

"Bullet," was the sullen reply. "For deer."

"An' I've got bird-shot. We must have things jest alike, to be fair. Hand your gun to somebody to draw the load, Turkey. Here, Tom, you draw mine."

Again Turkeyfoot hesitated; but they were all looking at him, and he passed his rifle to the nearest man. In a moment the two charges were withdrawn.

"Now give 'em back," ordered Gabe. "We'll do the rest. Understand," he added, looking at the group about the store steps, "this is to be a fair fight, jest between Turkey an' me. If he does the killin', as seems to be likely, none o' my friends are to take it up an' pester him. It's to end right here. An' if I git the best o' Turkey it's to be the same. You all witness."

"Yes, yes, we'll look out for that. If either one or t'other tries to keep it goin' we'll pitch in an' make a feud of it an' run him into the ground or out of the country. It shall end right here. We witness!"

"All right," Gabe stepped to his place, and suddenly grasping his rifle by its barrel and swinging the stock high above his head, he cried: "Swing up your gun, Turkeyfoot, quick! I'll give ye two seconds. We'll fight with guns, butt ends!"

Turkeyfoot half raised his rifle, his eyes bulging. Then his real nature asserted itself, and he whirled and sped frantically up the mountain path, followed by the jeers of the loungers.