

Budd Dabbles in Homesteads

Burnt Creek

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TIME passed, and now Burnt Creek—three frame outhouses and one general merchandise store—simmered under the midday heat. Old man Budd sat on the porch of the store, his bulk welded to the chair, and watched the successive atmospheric waves dance across the Bend-Klamath Road and evaporate in the jack pine forest. "Must be a hundred 'n' ten degrees in that brush," he commented to himself. A laggard drone accompanied the heat. From the highway came the red-hot puff of air which funneled the sand and struck the porch. Budd closed his eyes and endured it with stoic gravity. "Scorch, dang ye. I'm seasoned."

He opened his eyes and found company. Sim Meeker rode a slattern horse through the jack pines, wilted in the saddle. Budd clucked his tongue and moved a foot back from the sun. He'd heard rumors of Meeker's being in trouble. The newcomer got down, tied his animal on the shady end of the porch, and walked up.

"Lo, Sim."

"Lo, Dave. Kinda warmish."

"So it be, Sim. What's made you travel this a-way at noon?"

Meeker's sun-blackened face draped itself into wrinkles of bitterness. He was a tall man, very thin, and passing into middle age. His hands were lumpish, his shoulders rugged, indicative of many years' hard work; the sharp rebellion in his eyes, however, was witness to the fact that no prosperity or happiness had come of all that toil. "Why," he said, "I thought I'd like to talk a mite with you, Dave. Fact is, I'm about to be thrown off my ranch."

It was a startling announcement to Budd. He closed his eyes again and gently scratched his chin. "What fer?"

"Foreclosed mortgage," was the laconic answer.

"What in time! How'd that come?"

"Needed money last year fer seed an' some tools. So I borrowed four hundred 'n' fifty dollars on the place. Thought I could pull out this season an' pay it off. But I'm like all the rest. Wheat burned to cinders an' my few cows ain't worth shippin'."

"What you worryin' about?" queried Budd. "We're all in the same wagon. Ain't anybody in a hundred miles out of debt. But no bank's goin' to freeze you out. They can't afford to. They got to stick with the crowd, else they go bust."

"I couldn't get the loan from a bank," confessed Meeker. "Aaron Bixby lent it me." The last phrase was an angry shout. "At nine per cent! You understandin'? And he warned me he wa'n't givin' no extensions, either. That's like him, but I couldn't help myself. Had to take it."

Old man Budd wrinkled his face. All the genial humor faded. Long ago some grateful homesteader had labeled this noncommittal storekeeper the "shepherd of southern Deschutes County." It was a title he took pride in, and he had quaintly boasted that, if he were to press collection of all the money due him from farmers, half the county would be his property. "Share an' share alike's my motto," he had always said. "When water comes, we'll all be rich. Ain't but one soul in fifty miles I wouldn't trust."

Aaron Bixby, all knew, was the exception, a shrewd, avaricious creature whose house resembled a swine pen, whose horses were half starved, and whose fences were forever on the verge of decay. The man was never known to release a cent without a scowl, and he was worth, reputedly, more than twenty of his neighbors put together. A dozen tales of close dealing and actual injustice were attached to his name, and yet in hard times people trafficked with him out of sheer necessity. He always stood ready to exact his penalty in the bad years on the homesteaders and, like a buzzard, always seemed on hand for these occasions.

Budd's displeasure grew more pronounced. "Sure walked into trouble, didn't you?" he grumbled. "Nine per cent! That's worse'n Shylock. Got any papers with you?"

Meeker was in the depths of misery, and Budd had to repeat the question. Finally the man drew out duplicate mortgage papers and passed them over. The storekeeper went through the clauses word by word, his lips pursing in greater dissatisfaction as he proceeded. "Huh," he said. "Air tight, rain proof, an' iron clad... fer Aaron Bixby. Son of a gun! Whyn't you come to me when you needed help? Ain't my money good enough?" His pride had been touched.

Meeker found an embarrassed answer. "Well, I figgered there'd be others wantin' help from you, an' I didn't want to bother. Everybody seems to come to you."

"So they do. But I could've spared that money last year."

Meeker's face mirrored sudden hope. "Could you do it now, Dave? I been to the bankers again. Nothin' doin'. Bixby's holdin' the watch over me. Money by tomorrow night or out I go." The thought of it made him groan. "You don't know what that means, Dave."

Old man Budd shook his head. "Sim, I can't do it now. My credit's no good. Was the President of the United States to come to Bend he couldn't borrow a nickel from anybody. It's that bad."

Meeker dropped his chin and turned his face away. By and by he thrust forward his callused hands. "Look at 'em! Ten years I spent on that place. Worked like a field slave. Up before light and out to dark. Dog tired all the time an' just breakin' even. No fun, no knickknacks, no shows... nothin'. Barely keepin' above the surface an' hopin' water'd come some day and make us well off."

"'Twill," interrupted Budd, with unshakable conviction.

"What good will it do me?" cried Meeker in a fury. "Ten years outa my life and Ethel's life... then we lose it and there ain't a cent... not a red cent... to show!" The heat beat against the porch and took the energy from him. "Oh, well, I guess I can manage," he added dully. "Always have. But it's nigh killin' Ethel. She's been the one to bear the most. Most of her health an' spirit's buried on that land."

Budd reached for a cigar and chewed distractedly. "Poor kid," he muttered.

"Guess I'll go to Bend an' get a job in the woods," continued Meeker. "Back where I started from ten years ago."

Budd shook his pendulous chin. "Poor Ethel." He bit the cigar in twain. "That two-footed hog! Now you listen, Sim. 'Member that place Steve Ordway forfeited to me... 'twas his own fault? It's beyond your land a quarter mile toward the Paulina Mountains. There's a house an' well. You just up stakes an' move into it while I see what we can do with Bixby."

"Too late," answered Meeker. "It ain't no use. You can't move him after he forecloses. He's gettin' a bargain."

"Never mind," interrupted Budd testily. "You do as I say. There's more'n one way to skin a skunk." A bit of his offended pride rose.

"'Course, mebbe I ain't his equal in brains, but I'll stand it somehow. Get along now an' do that. I'll be travelin' to Bend right off an' see what I can figger."

Meeker got to his feet. "You're a square gent," he said, and walked toward the horse.

"Hold up," ordered Budd. "You folks ain't had any grub from the store fer a long spell."

"No money for grub," answered the other, keeping his face averted.

Budd exploded. "Who said anything about money? Cuss my hide! Get in that store an' fill a gunny sack afore I bust!"

MEEKER did as requested and, when he left the clearing, provisions across the pommel, old man Budd called wistfully after him: "You give my regards to Ethel, Sim." The homesteader turned in the saddle, his gray eyes blinking. "All right, Dave."

The storekeeper watched his friend bend under the wilting heat and disappear into the oven-like forest. Then, rising, he went through the darkened store to a bachelor kitchen and poured himself a glass of lemonade. It eased him, and presently he was in a deep study. Aaron Bixby, he told himself, was such a character as would estimate values to the fraction of a penny. Once in possession of the Meeker place, no amount of sentiment would move him to consider disposal of it at less than his own figure, which certainly would be more than four hundred and fifty dollars. In these stringent times money was very, very hard. Land was worth nothing at all. But a prosperous year would increase the price tenfold. And Bixby could afford to wait.

Budd drank another glass of lemonade, staring thoughtfully into the depths of the liquid. The cussed, two-footed hog! There was no crime equal to that of dispossessing a man of his land, even when a mortgage fell due. They must all work together in this country. There could be no strict accountability in seasons when the bottom fell away from the market, and the desert sun burned men's hopes to a blackened shred. In all the southern end of the county, only Bixby failed to respond to common decency. Legally right, he possessed no moral justification for his action in the storekeeper's mind. To shoot a man was less injury than to take away his home, wherein had been placed so many hopes, so many dreams. And there was Ethel!

Budd looked out the door at the fluttering heat mirage—and it seemed like he could see there the corn-colored hair of Ethel and her clear, sweet face. That was many years ago when both had loved her. Budd dropped his eyes from the intolerable glare. "The penny-pinchin' hog!" The lemonade was gone and, with it, peace. He rose and went to the barn. A half hour later he was driving toward Bend, the store wide open, and a scrawled invitation to *Help Yourself* on the door.

"One thing about Bixby," he said two hours later, as the town popped out of the plain, "the smell of a nickel makes him cautious, but ten dollars goes to his head. All curmudgeons're like that. We'll think it over."

He had a great deal of business to transact in the small Central Oregon town. All the afternoon and evening was spent in seeing men and soliciting money. It was a forlorn venture, as his better judgment told him, and at last he gave it up and late in the evening called a small party in his room where he held earnest counsel.

EARLY morning found him bound back toward his own country via the Prineville Road. As far as the eye might reach, there was nothing save the uneven roll of the land, with the heat beating down and refracting from it. Budd lolled in the buckboard and passively suffered, breaking his silence only when a homesteader's shanty varied the monotony of the bare horizon. Then, at the end of

two or three hours, he turned off the road and journeyed cross country. Presently he was at Bixby's place. He would have gone by, but the miser came from the house and waved a hand. Budd drew rein out of common courtesy.

"Whut yuh travelin' around here fur?" demanded Bixby. The voice was a thready whine, mixed with a wavering contempt. It fitted well with the thin, stubbled face and the close-set, avaricious eyes. The man wore clothes that were ragged. He stood in a yard littered with trash, articles he had collected from the countryside in the hope of profit. The fences were broken down, and the house was a slattern thing, scarcely to be called a shelter. Around the corner limped a horse with prominent ribs and a beaten look.

"A mite of business," answered Budd. It had always been a mystery to him how such a man could make money.

"Heard yuh was goin' to let Meeker stay in Ordway's old place," said Bixby. "That so?"

"Aim to."

"Free?" screeched the miser. He saw Budd nod and broke into enraged protest. "Coddlin' people won't get yuh no profit! It ain't right. Make 'em pay... it'll teach 'em to stand on their own feet! Now I was goin' to let Meeker stay on his ranch at ten dollars a month, me sharin' crops. What'd yuh butt in for? Can't let a man make a little money?"

Budd squinted over the land. A quarter mile along stood the deserted Ordway place, with the rise of the Paulina Mountains behind. In another quarter of the horizon, just visible, was the Meeker ranch. "Business," he grunted. A chuckle of satisfaction escaped him when he saw the miser's futile rage. "Meeker'll sort of fix up the house and barn so's it'll be worth somethin'," he continued. "I aim to sell it as soon's I can find a buyer."

This was shrewdness Bixby could understand. A sly grin flitted across his parsimonious mouth. "Guess you ain't so much of a saint as people think."

"Oh, I make a nickel when I can," agreed Budd. He gathered the reins. "If you hear of anyone wantin' to buy land, let me know. Giddap, Toby." Farther down the road he exclaimed: "Cussed swine!"

WHEN he reached the Meeker ranch, he found the family and their belongings packed in a wagon. Sim's discouraged droop left him as he saw the storekeeper, and he asked the inevitable question. "Could you fix it, Dave?"

Budd said no, eyes fastened on Ethel Meeker. Ten years of labor in the desert had left its mark, but still she retained a spark of youthful beauty and even time, it seemed to him, could not dim the luster of her corn-colored hair. She, too, looked eagerly for some happy bit of news, all the heartbreaking disappointment confined in her blue eyes. Budd felt a sudden reverence and removed his hat. "No," he repeated. "I'm sorry, folks, but I couldn't fix it."

The woman gripped the seat, and her lips set to trembling. The hurt of this last dead, forlorn hope was almost too great for her to bear. But the man broke into a bitter tirade, flinging a hand to the place that had been his home. "There's a fool's reward!" he cried. "Worked like a field slave... and get kicked out with just the clothes on our backs! Without a penny!" He turned to the reins, face lowered.

"What's the use? Dave, you should have married Ethel ten years ago. You could have provided at least."

"Sim!" protested the woman. "What have I done to deserve that? Shame on you!"

"Guess I'm crazy," he admitted. "But it hurts to be a failure."

"I haven't complained," she said and put a hand to his shoulder. "We'll get along." Then, conscious that she was showing her affection, she dropped the hand. "Dave, we're glad to have such a... a friend."

"Shucks!" growled out Budd. "Shucks! You people get along now. Fust forty years are always the hardest. An' you can live right comfortably in Ordway's house. Call on me for grub an' seed at any time. Everybody else does. We're all in the same wagon this year! 'Tain't no disgrace to be broke. Fact is, a man's queer if he has got any spare change. People'd suspect he wa'n't honest."

They drove down the road. Budd continued on his journey homeward. "I'm gettin' to be a regular cry baby, Toby. Son of a gun! That cussed, mean swine!"

He passed Ralph Olmstead's place and started into the jack pines. As he left the open land, he saw on the right two horsemen angle toward the Prineville Road. The heat waves fluttered and rose like a curtain, obscuring them, and Budd was satisfied with a long gaze, after which he plunged into the stifling shade. "Son of a gun!" he muttered. "But there's more'n one way to skin a skunk."

THE two horsemen he had noticed continued across the open land. They passed the deserted Meeker home, and one of the two, the younger, stopped. "This it, Bill?"

"Nope, Bixby lives in the next rancho, I think. We'll amble on."

When they drew up in front of the latter's piece-meal structure, the miser walked around the yard and met them.

"Howdy," he grunted.

"Looking for a place to board," said the one called Bill. "Could you put us up for a few days?"

Bixby's suspicious eyes followed them from head to toe. They were dressed in light khaki and carried what appeared to be surveying instruments. "Guess so," he decided. "But it'll cost yuh somethin'. Times is hard an' I'm a poor man. Two bits a meal an' two fer bed."

"That's fair enough."

"Apiece," he added swiftly.

"Sure. If it's not too much trouble. Otherwise we'll just go on to that other place," he said, pointing to the Ordway house.

"No... no," said Bixby. "They're just movin' in. I'll take yuh. Come in. What might yuhr business be?"

They dismounted and walked to the door, not answering the question. On the threshold Bill got a view of the interior and stepped back. "Maybe it'd be just as well, Johnny, if we did go on to the other place."

Bixby raised a quick objection. "I'll feed yuh well here. Lot of grub an' a good feather bed to sleep in. What'd yuh say yuhr business was?"

They were young men but evidently bent on keeping their own counsel. Bill turned to the horses. "We'll stay, I guess. There's still time to work, Johnny. I think we'll run a piece of line westward." He turned to Bixby again. "If you want to

make a few dollars, go cut us some stakes, about a foot high and pointed on one end. Quite a few."

Bixby disappeared in the woodshed. When he came back a quarter of an hour later with an armful of such stakes, the surveyors were at work down and beyond the road. Bill was busy at his transit, sighting along a fold of the Paulina Mountains.

"Take the pegs down to Johnny," he ordered.

Bixby trudged through the sand, his curiosity at fever heat by this air of secrecy. He had secured no answer from Bill, but Johnny seemed younger, and therefore it might be easier to get information. He dumped the pegs nearby and watched the young fellow adjust a high measuring stick on the ground.

"Say," he spoke up, smitten by a fearful idea. "Yuh're on my land. If yuh're a dummed county surveyor tryin' to shave my claim, yuh get off right now!"

"Left!" bellowed Bill from the distance. The measuring stick edged toward the road, stopped, edged again, and finally was beyond Bixby's land into government entry stuff. "That's good," yelled Bill. "Set 'er!"

Johnny beckoned. "Your name's Bixby, ain't it? Well, drive a peg right here, Bixby, and follow me."

Bixby obeyed and ran after this man who by now had shouldered the instrument and was still farther down the road. The rising curiosity could not be stifled. "What'd yuh say yuhr business was?" ventured the miser.

Johnny accelerated his pace. Bixby followed and repeated his query.

"Why, we're running a line," said Johnny vaguely. He was a sorrel-topped youth and had a jovial eye.

"What fer?" persisted Bixby.

Johnny threw a glance over his shoulder and spoke confidentially. "Can you keep a secret? I suppose you'll know sooner or later, seeing as we're working near your place. But keep in under your hat... there's a railroad coming across the country."

"Jerusalem!" Bixby's eyes sparkled. "A railroad! That means money." Immediately he became suspicious. "Say, young fella, what'd be the use of a road through here? There ain't no towns, an' the country's dog poor."

JOHNNY set his instrument, and again the peg-setting formula was repeated. Bixby, squinting along the line, saw that they were headed straight for the Ordway place; moreover, they would strike the house into which the Meekers had just moved. He chuckled at the thought.

"Towns?" repeated Johnny. "Who cares for towns? This is a cut-off from the main line out of Huntington. It's to get California traffic around Portland and save ten hours. To speed up through freight. That's what."

"Jerusalem! That means money. They pay well fer right of way." Right there disaster broke over his head, and he screeched like a frightened owl. "But say, ain't yuh goin' across my land?"

Johnny jiggled his instrument. "Drive a peg. Where's the corner of your land?"

Bixby pointed to the road. The young man shook his head. "Nope, we miss you by two hundred yards. You're lucky. Right of way cuts farms into messy strips."

"Lucky?" shouted Bixby. "The devil, that land ain't good fer anything but road beds." He had for a moment seen a fat check in his pocket, accrued from sale of right of way. There would always be adjoining land to farm on, land to be had dirt cheap, but there would only be one road bed. The sight of fleeing dollars made him frantic. The thought that the Ordway place—Budd's property—would be used made him still worse. "Say," he whined, "why can't yuh shove this line over to my proputy? Few yards wouldn't make no difference."

Johnny gave him a cold eye and marched ahead. "You're no surveyor. Shut up."

"I'd make it valuable fer yuh." He made a reckless offer. "Twenty dollars."

Johnny planted his standard. "Shut up, I say. One more crack like that and I'll turn you end for end."

Bixby subsided, trailing through the blistering sun. As the rows of pegs advanced straight upon the Ordway place, his small eyes flickered with rage. Who was Budd to profit by this while he was passed by? But the storekeeper had declared his intention to sell, evidently not knowing of the forthcoming road. Bixby's colorless lips snapped, and he permitted a dry grin to waver across his face.

"That's all for today!" yelled Bill. They returned to the house. Bixby got supper, and watched the two men eat. "Reckon that was half a day's work fer me," he announced. "It'll cost yuh three dollars."

Bill grinned. "All right, you pirate. It's not my money."

"I got to go away tomorrow," added Bixby. "But I'll cut the pegs an' scatter 'em along the line tonight. That's a day's wages, too. Six dollars."

"Correct, Shylock. Why waste your talents in this wilderness?"

So Aaron Bixby performed his chores while the others slept. At dawn he cooked their breakfast, saddled his horse, and with a purse bulging in his pocket crossed the desert toward Burnt Creek. When he reached the store, old man Budd had gone, leaving a note on the door. *In Bend. Help Yourself.*

"Jerusalem!" panted Bixby in a panic. "I got to ketch him afore he sells to anybody else." He was in a tremendous hurry, and yet the bent of his nature would not be denied. Going into the store, he took a can of coffee and some lesser articles from a shelf. "That'll teach him a lesson," he grunted. He was not a very robust thief, and stared furtively around as he stuffed the plunder in his saddlebags. Then he urged the horse along the Bend-Klamath Road. "I got to ketch him," he murmured.

OLD man Budd was having a peaceful dinner at the Bend Eating House when Bixby found him. The trip had not improved the miser's temper, and the sight of the larger man's serenity caused him to bark like some ungrateful lap dog. "Whyn't yuh home tendin' to business? Snakes, I can't see how yuh make any money!"

"Whose business... mine or yourn?"

"Yuh'll learn better when yuh're broke," warned Bixby, taking a chair. He attempted a smoother manner. "Wanted to see yuh. Figgered I might take that Ordway proputy if yuh wa'n't onreasonable."

"Aim to please," said Budd mildly. "What need have you got fer more land?"

"Well, now, I figgered on tryin' cattle next year, an' that takes a lot of space. Yuhr place an' the government land atween... which I can use free... will just about be what I need."

"So it will," agreed Budd. "Cows'll be as good as gold, some day. What's your offer?"

Bixby's face took on a bargaining cast. The storekeeper had a reputation for being an easy man to deal with, and he meant to take advantage of it. "Well, now," he whined, "I'm a poor man, an' I know yuh'll be easy. That Meeker place... I ain't got a bit of use fer it. Too far away. But it's shipshape, good house, well, nice barn, fences tight. Tell yuh what, I'll trade even up."

Budd's fork clattered on the dishes. "Gosh almighty, Aaron! What ails you? I ain't Santy Claus. Son of a gun!"

"Meeker's place is twice as good," Bixby defended. "It's cultivated. Ordway's ain't."

"Ordway's place is twicet as big," countered the storekeeper. He recovered sufficiently to partake of his beefsteak.

"No, I guess you 'n' I can't dicker. Ain't got any use fer more land, anyhow. Need hard money. There's a fella made me an offer this mornin'. Think I'll take it, hook an' sinker."

"How much yuh want fer it?"

Budd balanced a potato on his knife. "Well, land ain't worth nothin' now. I'm pinched an' got to sell. A thousan' dollars. That's givin' it away, too."

Bixby was horrified. "I could buy Deschutes County fer that!" he yelled. "I won't pay it!"

"All right, don't." Bud was serene about it, and the miser, after half rising, fell back. He detested this gross, easy man with all the passion of his small body. He wanted to emit the whole load of his scorn, wanted to sneer, but these things he dared not do yet. Choking back his rage, he made another offer. "I'll trade farms an' give yuh a hundred to boot."

"Chicken feed, Aaron. Now here's what. Trade farms an' five hundred. No more, no less. Take it or leave it."

The miser protested again and made an offer of half the sum. Budd seemed not to hear. "Three-fifty," urged Bixby. And still the storekeeper was deaf. It left Bixby greatly perplexed. He had not expected to bid so high, and each hundred extra caused a revolt of his conscience. Yet the right of way should bring him a good profit and leave him a large piece of land near his original place, a piece twice as big as the one traded. It would be good business. He thrust away the last silent objection, cursed Budd under his breath, and gave in. "All right, I'll take it."

The storekeeper seemed unpleasantly surprised. "You do? Shucks, Aaron, I didn't think you was serious. I can get more from the other fella."

"I took yuhr offer!" raged Bixby. "Yuh can't back down! There's the money." He threw the purse on the table. Budd was silent, plainly unsatisfied. "Yuh got to take it," con tinued the money lender.

"Spoils my meal," complained Budd. "I reckon I'm caught. I gave my word an' I'll 'bide by it. I warn you, though. You might be disappointed in that land."

A malicious grin spread over Bixby's face. "I ain't to be talked out of it. We'll sign an' seal right off."

He was visibly anxious to have the deal consummated and impatient of Budd's elephantine pace. He attempted to hurry the journey down the street but found himself alone. Budd had stopped to talk with a shopkeeper. "Dang!" snarled out Bixby. "I can't be kept all day! Time's money. It's a wondeh yuh ain't stone poor!"

THEY reached the office of Budd's attorney and there transacted the deal. Budd signed with reluctance, further warning Bixby. "Never say I didn't tell you, now." The miser counted the gold pieces from the purse, pinching each eagle as if he could not release it. He took the deed, when it was tendered to him, and stuffed it in his pocket with a leer of triumph. "I heard tell yuh was a smart man, Budd. I doubt so."

They came to the street, and Budd turned from his companion. But Bixby could not let him go without a taunt. The stored malice would not be longer repressed. "Smart!" he cackled. "Heh! Yuh know why I bought this land? I wouldn't pay five hundred fer ten thousand acres just to farm. I bought this,"—and he yelled the phrase at the top of his voice, his small eyes squinting their pleasure "'cause there's a railroad comin' through, an' it hits dead across the Ordway place. Surveyors told me!"

Budd's cheeks flushed red. So far he had endured the miser, retaining his serenity in face of all the petty malice Bixby had used. But the exultation over this shrewd piece of business was more than he could bear. It recalled to his mind the discouraging case of the Meekers, and of a sudden the wrath broke upon Bixby's head as a prairie storm, unannounced and in full fury.

"You cussed, two-footed swine!" roared Budd. His voice boomed down the street and brought people from the stores. A doubled fist wavered under the miser's nose. "There ain't no animal that travels in a lower track than you! Somebody ought to get you a rattle an' make a regular snake of you! The kind of man that'd throw Sim Meeker off his place in a year like this is the meanest, dirtiest skunk as ever breathed! There ain't no place in Deschutes County for such trash an', if you ever cross my trail in five miles, I'll tie a rope around you and drag a trail clear to the Californy line. Now you get to the devil outta my sight afore I lose my temper an' shoot! Go on, git! You shifty-eyed rat! I'm 'most tempted to kick you!" He had relapsed to cow-hand idiom in his wrath. The crowd had gathered around at a discreet distance, and Bixby, face yellowed with fear, appealed mutely to them. There was no one to answer such an appeal. Old man Budd was not a character to side against at this moment.

"Yuh..." stuttered Bixby.

"Get out! If I see you in ten minutes, you'll wish you was dead." The irate storekeeper advanced, a lane opened through the crowd, and Bixby shot down it like a hunted rabbit. Budd watched him go to the hitching rack, jump a saddle, and tear through the sultry haze along the Prineville Road. Then he reached for his bandanna to wipe away the perspiration, and the rosy complexion deepened to a look of shame. Old man Budd always suffered for the loss of his serenity.

The sheriff walked up to him. "What in time did he do to bring down all that?"

"Oh, gosh!" moaned Budd. "Did you hear it, Cal? I oughta be kicked clean back to Burnt Creek! Me a-losin' my temper like that. I ain't goin' to feel right fer a month. Oh, gosh, what did I say, Cal? Anything bad?"

They could not console him. Downcast and miserable, he climbed into his buckboard and rode away through the late afternoon glow. He scarcely moved in all the trip, save once to shake his head and mutter, "I sure deserve to be shot fer such a ruckus."

But when, in the first of the dusk, he came upon the Ordway house and saw Ethel Meeker and her husband on the porch, he felt greatly cheered. He paused for a moment to tell the news that would please them, omitting the part about the railroad. "So," he concluded, "me bein' owner now, you move back. In a few days we'll fix up fresh mortgage papers an' you'll be ready to start all over."

He would not stop to hear a crowded, uncertain sentence from Ethel Meeker. "Giddap, Toby," he said, and his eyes were blinking, and he seemed to see the woman's corn-colored hair beside him. Then he started to find the two surveyors, Bill and Johnny, on horseback by the side of the buckboard.

"Did it work?" asked Bill.

"Sure did," agreed Budd. He chuckled softly. "We traded farms an' got a little to boot, which is more'n I expected. There's a saying, boys, that you want to remember: 'A penny makes a miser wise, but a dollar goes to his head.'"

Johnny grinned. "It was easy, Mister Budd, except for sleepin' in Bixby's house. I wouldn't do it again. But I guess we made a good imitation of two young surveyors. Say, honest, do you ever think there'll be a railroad through this country?"

"In about thirty years," replied Budd, chuckling again. "So long, boys. You'll find your pay in town."

HE gave the horse free rein to follow the homeward trail. On the horizon stood the black line of the jack pine forest merging with the dark, star-scattered sky. A heavier shadow formed on his right, and it seemed to Budd as if it were a tree advanced beyond the ranks of its kind. He leaned forward and stared. The shadow dissolved to nothing. That, he thought, was like his own hard-spent forty-five years, full of illusions until he peered at them with the eyes of experience. Then the illusions dissolved, and there was only the reality left—hard reality.

A gust of chill desert wind brought up the clack of crickets and the pungent odor of sage. Budd lifted his heavy chin. "But reality's better'n illusions," he grunted. "Dang, I love this country... an' all that's in it. Git along, git along, Toby."

