

From the Listening Hills

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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The hunted man lay behind a crude parapet in a low-roofed, wind-eroded cave on the north slope of Tokewanna Peak. One hundred yards down the slope, at an approximate altitude of eleven thousand feet, just inside a fringe of alpine fir, were scattered the hunting men.

The bare, intervening stretch of rock was flecked here and there with patches of snow. Within the fringe of trees but concealed from his view except for the faint wisps of smoke, were the fires of his pursuers.

Boone Tremayne had no fire, nor at this time dared he make one, for as yet his position was not exactly known to the armed men.

It was very cold and he lay on his stomach, favoring his left side where the first bullet had torn an ugly wound. The second bullet had gone through his thigh, but his crude bandages as well as the cold had caused the bleeding to stop.

A low wind moaned across the rock, stirring the icy bits of snow on the cold flanks of the peak which arose two thousand feet above and behind him. Within

the low cave it was still light, and Boone Tremayne clutched the stub of pencil and looked down at the cheap tablet at his elbow.

He must write with care, for what he wrote now would be all his son, as yet unborn, would ever know of his father and uncles. He would hear the stories others would tell, and so it would be important for him to have some word in his father's hand.

The pencil clutched awkwardly in his chilled fingers, he began to write:

It's getting mighty cold up here, Son, and my grub's about gone. My canteen's still half full, but it ain't no use, they've done got me.

Time to time I can hear them down in the brush. There must be a hunert of them. Seems an awful lot of folks to git one lone man. If I only had Johnny here I wouldn't feel so bad. Johnny, he always sort of perked a feller up no matter how bad things got.

Except for you, I'm the last of the Tremaynes. Somehow it ain't so lonely up here knowing there's to be a son of mine somewheres.

Now, Son, your ma is a mighty good woman as well as a pretty one. I never figured, no way you look at it, to get such a girl as Marge. If she'd married up with Burt, or Elisha, I'd no-ways have blamed her. They were the pick of the lot, they were.

Just had me a look down there an' I reckon they are gitting set to rush me. Wished they wouldn't. I never aimed to kill nobody. They figured to hang me if I'm got alive, and I promised Ma I'd never stretch no rope. Least a man can do is die with his face toward them who aims to kill him.

Boone Tremayne put down the stub of pencil and chafed his cold fingers, peering through the stacked flakes of rock he had heaped into a wall before the opening. The cold was all through him now, and he knew he would never be warm again. That was okay, he had this one last job to do ... and then he no longer cared. The wind whispered to the snow and then he saw a man, bulky with a heavy coat, lunge from the trees and come forward in a stumbling run.

A second man started as the first dropped behind a shelf of rock, and Boone put his cheek against the cold stock of the Winchester and squeezed off his shot. He put the bullet through the man's leg, saw the leg buckle and saw the man fall. Another started and Boone dropped him with a bullet through the shoulder.

He gnawed at his lip and stared, hollow-eyed and gaunt, at the shelf of rock where the first man had fallen. „Reckon I'd best let you git cold, too, mister,“ he said, and flicked a glancing shot off the rock over the man's head. That would let him know he had been seen, that it would be dangerous to try moving.

He shifted his position, favoring his wounded side and leg. Nobody moved, and the afternoon was waning. At night they would probably come for him. He glanced at the sullen gray sky. There was still time.

It started over a horse. We Tremaynes always found ourselves good horse flesh. Johnny, he ketched this black colt in the hills near Durango. Little beauty, he was, and Johnny learned him well and entered him in a race we always had down around there.

Dick Watson, him and his brothers, they fancied horses too and one of Dick's horses had won that race four years running. We all bet a sight of money. Not so

much, when you figure it, but a mighty lot for us, who never had much cash in hand. Johnny's black just ran off and left Watson's horse, and Watson was mighty put out.

He said no horse like that ever run wild, and that Johnny must of stole him somewheres. Johnny said no he never and that Watson's horse just wasn't all that fast. Watson said that if Johnny wasn't such a boy, him being just sixteen, he'd whup him good. Then our brother Burt, he stepped up. Burt was a mighty big, fine figure of a man. He stepped up and said he wasn't no boy, if it was a fight Watson wanted.

Well, Burt, he beat the tar out of Dick Watson. There was hard words said, and Ma, she reckoned we all better git for home. We did, an' everything went along for a time. Until that black was found dead. Somebody shot her down in the pasture. Shot her from clost up.

Johnny, he was all for going to town and gitting him a man, but Ma, she said no and Burt and Lisha, they sided with her. But Johnny ... well, it was some days for he tuned up that mouth organ of his. And when he done it, it was all sad music.

We wasn't cattlemen, Son, not like other folks around. We was farmers and trappers, or bee hunters, anything there was to git the coon. Mostly, them days, we farmed and between crops we went back in the high meadows and rounded us up wild horses.

They was thousands of them, Son. Land sakes, I wished you could of seen them run! It were a sight too beautiful for man to look upon. We rounded up a sight of them, but we never kept but a few.

We'd pick the youngest and prettiest. We'd gentle them down with kindness and good grass and carrots, then we'd break them. My Pap, he broke horses for a gent in Kentucky, a long time ago and he knew a goer and a stayer. I guess none of us ever did forgit that little black mare.

Now that horse was shot clost up. It was no accident. And no man would kill a good horse like that. Except for if he done it in pure meanness. And who had him a reason? Dick Watson. That black mare beat Watson's horse once and he would do it again.

Johnny, he never said much, but from that day on he packed him a gun, and he never had afore.

Them boys down in the bresh is fixing to move. Gitting cold I reckon.

Boone Tremayne's head throbbed with fever and he stared through the chinks in the flaked rock. The man under the ledge stirred cautiously and Boone put a shot down there to keep him from stretching out too much. He rubbed his hands and blew upon the fingers. A man moved in the brush and Boone laid a bullet in close to the ground.

Bullets hailed around his shelter, most of them glancing off the rocks, but one got inside and ricocheted past his head. A hair closer and he would have been dead.

Flat on his belly he stuffed the tablet and pencil in his pocket and crawled along the bottom of the shallow cave. Painfully, he wormed his way along the cave for thirty yards and found a place where it was a few inches deeper and where some

animal or bird had long since gathered sticks for a nest or home. Gathering some of the dead sticks together, Boone built a fire.

The long-dead wood made little smoke and the tiny flame was comforting. Later, when it was dark the reflection would give him away so he tried to shield it with rocks as much as he could. He held his blue and shaking fingers almost in the flame, but it was a long time before any warmth reached him.

They were waiting now, waiting for darkness. He must finish his letter. There would be no time later.

Mighty cold, Son, I've moved a mite and got me a fire. Well, the black was dead but we had us about forty head of good horses ready to move. Sam and Lisha, they set out for Durango. We figured to buy Ma a new dress for her birthday and to get us some tools we needed and other fixings. Going in the boys had to drive past the DW where the Watsons ranched. They seen Dick a-watching them, but thought nothing of that at the time.

Well, when they got into Durango the sheriff come hightailing it up with five, six men, all armed heavy. They tell the boys they are under arrest for stealing horses. The boys tell them they trained them horses, that they was wild stock afore. The sheriff and that bunch with him, one of them was a Watson, they just laughed.

Well, the boys was throwed in jail, but the sheriff, he wouldn't let them get word to the rest of us. Only Johnny, he got to thinking and when the boys was slow gitting back, he mounts up and heads for town. But they was ready for him, the Watsons was.

Johnny, he seen the horses in the corral, and he hightails it for the sheriff. The sheriff is out of town, maybe a-purpose, and Johnny, he goes into the T-Diamond Saloon. And there's three Watsons and two brothers-in-law of their's, all setting around.

These brothers-in-law, one named Ebberly, the other Boyd. This Boyd was some gun-slinger or had that reputation. Johnny, he never knowed them at all, but he knowed the Watsons. He asked the barkeep where was his brothers, and Dick Watson speaks up and says they are in jail for stealing horses, where he'll soon be. Johnny, he knows what Ma would say, and remarkable for him, keeps his head. He says nothing and turns to go and Dick Watson says, „Like you stole that black mare.“

The three Watsons are spread out and ready. He seen then it was a trap, but still he never knowed those other two which sat quiet near the door, never saying I, yes, or no. Johnny, he says, „I trained that black mare, Watson, an' you kilt her. You snuck up an' shot that pore little horse dead.“

„I never!“ Watson says, and folks say he looked mighty red in the face. „You're a liar!“

Watson grabbed iron and so did Johnny. The Watsons, they got three bullets into Johnny, but he still stood, so this Boyd, he shoots him in the back. Johnny went down, but there was two Watsons on the floor, one dead, and Dick badly hurt.

Johnny, they figured for dead, and they was so busy gitting their kin to the doc they never thought of him. He was alive and he crawled out of there. A girl he knowed in town, she got her Pap, who was a vet, and he fixed Johnny up and hid him out.

This here girl, she run down to the jail and told Lisha and Sam through the bars. She said they better get set, there'd be trouble. She had Johnny's gun and she passed it through the bars and along with it a chunk of pipe standing close by.

We heard about it after. The one Watson that was on his feet, him and Ebberly, Boyd and some half dozen others, they got them masks and come down to the jail to lynch the other boys. They got into the jail and the jailor he just stepped aside, easy as you please, and says, „In the second cell.“

They rushed up. The boys just stood a-waiting, just like they didn't know what was going to happen. The barred door swung open and then Lisha, he outs with his gun and that bunch scrambled, believe you me. One of them turns to slam shut the door, but Sam, he got his pipe betwixt the door and the jam to keep it from closing. That feller dragged iron, so Sam raised the pipe and shoved it into his throat. That feller went down. The mob beat it, and so the boys, they took out. They told that jailer they would surrender to a U.S. Marshal, but nobody else.

Lisha and Sam, they went to the corral and got their horses, every head, and they started out of town. By that time the story got around that the Tremayne boys had killed two men and wounded a couple of others, then broke jail. So they fetched their guns and come running.

They got Sam right off. Folks said he was shot nine times in that first volley. At that, Lisha rode back to pick him up, but he couldn't get nigh the body, and could see by the way Sam was that he must be dead. So he headed off to home with his horses.

Boone Tremayne put aside his letter and added a few tiny sticks to his little fire. It was so small a man might have held it in his two hands, but the little flame looked good, and it warmed his fingers which were cramped from writing and the cold.

An icy wind blew over the slope of the mountain. Boone looked longingly at the woods below, and the first silver line that was the Middle Fork of the Green, which stretched away almost due north from where he lay. If he could get down there he might still have a chance... But there was no chance. The lost blood, the lack of food and the cold had drawn upon his strength until he was only a dank shell of a man, huddled in his worn clothes, shivering and freezing and looking down at the hunters who held him.

Cautiously, the man under the shelf below was moving. He, too, was feeling the cold. „Well, feel it,“ Boone whispered, „maybe next time you won't be so anxious to go hunting a lone man!“ He ricocheted another bullet off the rock shelf.

Several rifles replied, and suddenly angry, Boone fired a careful shot at the flash of one of the guns. He heard a rifle rattle on rocks as it fell, and then a heavy body tumbling into brush. More shots were fired, but now he had turned ugly; the loneliness, the cold, the fear of death, all crowded in upon him and he shot rapidly and frantically, at rifle flashes, and dusting the brush around the smoke of the fires. He fired his rifle empty and reloaded and then with careful shots, proceeded to weed the woods below.

Then he doused his fire and moved farther along the undercut rock and found another place, almost as good as the last. Here he started another tiny blaze, shielding it with a large slab of flat rock.

Finished off telling how Sam was kilt. Johnny, he was shot bad and we didn't know if he was dead for two days, then that girl, Ellie Winters, she come up the mountain with the news. The town was mighty wrought up. Some of them was coming up after us.

We kept watch, Burt, Lisha and me. Meanwhile, we tried figuring what to do. For Ma's sake we would have to pull out, git up into the high meadows or west into the wild country over the Utah line.

Now we knowed they was hunting Johnny, and Ellie's Pa was worried too. So the three of us ups and goes down to Durango. Johnny, he mounted the horse we brought for him, and we dusted out of there.

Slow, and careful not to leave no tracks, we moved out, leaving our cabin, our crop, everything but the horses. We made it west-northwest past Lone Cone and finally crossing the San Miguel into Uncompahgre Plateau country. We found us a little box canyon there with grass and water, and we moved in. By hunting we made out, but Ma was feeling poorly so Burt, he stayed with her while Lisha and me, we mounted up and with five head of horses, we headed for a little town north of us on the river. We sold our horses, bought up supplies and come back.

Ma, she didn't get no better, and finally, she died one morning, just died a-setting in her rocker. We'd brung that rocker along, and it had been a sight of comfort for her. So Ma died and Johnny played his mouth organ, and we buried her. Then there was just the four of us, with Johnny still recuperating from his bullet wounds.

We could move on, but this here was our country and we knowed it. Pa was buried back at Durango. Sam, too, now. And Ma, she was buried there in the lonely Uncompahgres, all because of the orneriness of one man.

Them horses we sold let folks know where we was, and soon there was a posse after us. We were figured to be outlaws, real bad hombres. We'd killed folks and we'd busted jail. That posse cornered us in the mountains and we shot it out and got away.

That began the bad and lonely time, made pleasant only because we were together. We drifted west into the La Balas and sold our horses except for an extry for each of us, and then drifted into the Robber's Roost country. It was there I kilt my first man. It was that there Boyd. The same one who shot Johnny in the back.

He'd kilt a woman in Colorado, and then her man. After that the country got too hot to hold him so he drifted west to the Roost. There was a shack in the Roost them days, a log shack, long and low. The floor was adobe and there was a bar and a few tables. It was low-roofed, dark, and no ways pleasant. It was outside of that place I come up to Boyd.

He seen me and he stopped. „Another one of them miserable Tremaynes!“ he sneers.

Men stopped to listen and watch. „You shot Johnny in the back,“ I tell him, „and I figure you're good for nothing else!“ He grabs iron and about that time my gun bucks in my hand and this gent he just curls up and folds over.

The boys come a-running and we look at that passel of rustlers, thieves and no accounts, and a few mighty good men scattered among them. „Anybody got a argyment?“ Burt asks.

One gent, his name was Cassidy, he chuckles, and says, „Boyd was no good and we knowed it. Anyway,“ he grins at us, „the weight o’ the artillery is on your side!“ Then he bought a round of drinks.

We drifted north through Wyoming, selling a few horses we broke and working time to time on spreads in the Wind River and Powder River countries. We drifted north into Montanny, and finally down to Deadwood. Here and there we heard rumors. Folks said we were robbing banks and trains, which we never done. Folks said we had killed this man or that one, and without ever doing a thing, we got us a name most as bad as the James boys. All on account of how people love to talk and gossip.

The fact that I killed Boyd got back to Colorado. He’d been some shakes as a gunman, so they now had me pegged as one. Boyd, I kilt, but if they figured he was fast, they wasn’t figuring right. In Deadwood I heard Ebberly was in town, making his brags what he would do if he ever come up to any of the Tremaynes.

Bullet come nigh me just now. Better I tend to business for a mite. Boone edged over a little and peered through the chinks in the rocks but could see only the dark line of the forest. The man he had kept under the rock shelf was off to his right now and it was not an easy shot ... anyway, he had suffered enough.

His mouth felt dry and he rinsed it carefully with water from his canteen, then let the cool water trickle down his parched throat. It was his first drink in many hours. His face felt hot and there was a queer feeling around the wound in his side.

Bullets snarled and snapped, biting at the rocks, near him and farther along. He held his fire, reluctant to give himself away. Boone found no malice in his heart for the officers of the law. This was their job, and not theirs to decide the right and wrong, but to bring him in. He moved, crawling back along the long undercut of the cave. There was a little more to write. Ten ... maybe twenty minutes more. Then it could be over ... he could finally let it be over.

Ebberly, Son, he made his brags, but we kept away from him. Only we shouldn’t have. He knowed we was in town and when we kept away he figured we was scared. Then he seen Burt and took a shot at him. Burt shot back. Both of them missed.

Burt, he hunted him and lost him. It was me who run into Ebberly last. I come down the street afore noon, hunting a couple of copper rivets to use in fixing my saddle. He stepped down into the street and yells at me, „Boone Tremayne!“

He yelled, and he shot. Yet my gun come up so fast the two shots sounded like one. Only he missed ... I didn’t. I stood there, looking around. „Folks,“ I said, „I’m surely Boone Tremayne. But none of us, my brothers or me, ever stole a thing off any man. Nor we never shot at no man unless he hunted us down. We got us a bad name, but it ain’t our doing. You seen this ... he come at me with a drawn gun.“

„You all better ride,“ a feller says. „This here Seth Bullock, our sheriff, he'd have to take you in.“ So we rode out. Sam was kilt and Ma was dead and everywhere they was after us.

We headed west, making for the Hole-in-the-Wall where men beyond the law would be let alone. We come down Beaver Crick out of the Black Hills and we rode up Cemetery Ridge and we drew up there and rested our horses.

After awhile Lisha, he tunes up his old gitar and starts to play a might, and then we saw a feller coming up the slope. He looked a mighty rough customer and when he heerd our music he slowed up and looked us over. Then he come on up clost.

„Howdy!“ he says. „Goin' far?“

„To Sundance,“ Burt says. „How fer is it?“

„Mebbe fifteen mile,“ this gent says. „Luck!“ An' he rides on.

„Didn't like the look o' that hombre,“ Burt says, „we better ride out o' here, an' not for Sundance!“ So we mounted up and took out south, holding east of Bald Mountain right along the Wyoming-South Dakota line.

Sure enough, Son, that gent was no good. He headed hisself right for Sundance, warning folks at ranches as he rode. The Bloody Tremaynes was riding, he said. We seen the first posse when we was heading to Lost Canyon, but there was no fight until they closed in on us from three directions at Stockade Beaver Crick. We fought her out there, kilt four of them and scratched up a few more, but we lost Burt. He had three bullets in him when he went down, kilt two men before he died. We buried Burt there on Stockade Beaver, and we made a marker for him, which you'll see if you ever ride thataway.

We rode south and west with that there posse setting in the brush licking their wounds.

We made the Hole-in-the-Wall and rode through and no posse would foller us. We'd no money, only the horses we rode. But we run into a short-handed cow outfit driving to the Buffalo Fork. They didn't know who we was and didn't give two boots in a rain barrel. We done our share like always, and we stuck to our ownelves. The hands, they was friendly cusses, and the boss he only asked for a man a day's work. We drove to the Buffalo Fork and then the boss, he come over to us. „I'll be payin' you off in the mornin'. You boys better buy what ca'tridges we got,“ he says, quiet-like, „you won't find no place clost by to git 'em.“

„That's right friendly o' you, Boss,“ Lisha says, „we take it kindly.“

He stands there a mite, and then he says, „Never did b'lieve all I heerd, anyways,“ he said, and then he smiled. „We'll sure miss that music you boys make. Would you strike us up some singin' afore you leave?“

So we done it. Lisha, he sung *Greensleeves*, and *Brennan on the Moor*, an *On Top of Ol' Smoky* and some of the other old songs from the hills back yonder, songs our folks fetched from Scotland and Ireland. We sang for an evening, and then loaded up with grub and bullets, and took off. Southwest across the Blackrock and camped at Lily Lake, and then on to the Gross Venture and into the Jackson Hole country.

Son, your Pa's hands is mighty cold now. I guess this here letter's got to end up.

Johnny, he wanted to see Ellie Winters, and Lisha, he wanted to eat fresh melons from the patch, and I wanted to see your Ma again. I never knowed she

loved me. I never even guessed she cared or thought of me. I just figured I'd like to see her some.

One night we was setting by the fire and Lisha he looked over at me and he says, „Boys, the melons'll be ripe in the bottom land now, an' the horses will be headin' up from the flats for the high meadows.“ So then we knowed we was heading home.

We rode down the Snake to the Grey and down the Grey to the Bear, and we followed her south to the border, staying clear of ranches and towns. Of a night we built our fires small and covered them well, and then at last we come riding down to the hills near Durango.

Lisha, he chuckles and says to me, „You all sure been a-talkin' a lot in your sleep, boy. If 'n you ever said those things to a girl awake she'd sure be bakin' your corn pone from here on out.“

Me, I git all redded up. „Don't give me that,“ I say, „I never talked none. Anyway, it wouldn't matter. What woman would care for me?“

Both Lisha and Johnny looked up sharp. „You damn fool!“ they says, „they'd never git a better man, nowheres. An' that Marge, she's been eatin' her heart out for years over you!“

Me, I just stood there ... I never figured nothing like that. I sure thought they was wrong, but both them boys, they knowed a sight more about women than ever I would.

Lisha, he rides off to town, and he ain't gone an hour afore he comes back and then Ellie, she and Marge comes a-running, and with them is Betts Warner, Lisha's girl. Marge, she just stopped, took one look, and then run to me and went to crying in my arms.

We made her a triple weddin' just two days later, but folks heerd about it, and one morning Lisha come to the door for his horse and Dick Watson, his brother and four-five friends, they shot him down. Shot him down with him only getting one shot off.

Betts, she come a-running to warn us, thinking of us even when her heart was gone within her, her man laying dead back there full of Watson lead.

„Saddle up,“ I says to Johnny, „I'll be coming back soon.“ Me, I buckled on my guns.

„I'm goin' with you,“ Johnny says, and I told him no. He'd have to git us packed and ready. Marge, she just looked at me strange and soft and proud. She says, „You go along, Boone, I'll saddle up for you, and I'll be a-waiting here when you get back.“

Never a mite of complaining, never a word agin it. She was a man's woman, that one, and she knowed my way was to ride for the man who fetched this trouble down upon us.

It was bright noonday when I fetched up to town. I swung down from the saddle and I asked old Jake. „You go along,“ I said, „and you tell that Dick Watson I'm here to put him down.“

Standin' there, I wondered if it was I'd never have me a home, or see the light in my baby's eyes, or see the sunlight on the green corn growing, or smell the hay from my own meadows. Them things was all I ever wanted, all I ever fixed to have, and now it seemed like all my life I toted a gun, shooting and being shot at.

All I ever wanted in this here world was a bit of land and peace, the way man was meant to live. Not with no gun in his hand a-killing folks.

I seen Dick Watson step from a door down the way, and I seen him start, and I pulled down my hat and stepped out, stepped out and started walking to kill a man.

Then Watson stopped and I looked across the forty paces at him and I made my voice strong in the street. „Dick Watson, you brung hell to my family. You was sore because that black mare beat your horse! You lied about us stealing! You made us into outlaws and caused my brothers to be kilt and some other men too. It'll be on your conscience whether you live or die.“

He stood there staring at me like he'd looked right in the face of death, and then he slapped leather. His gun came up and I shot him, low down in the belly where they die slow and hard. God forgive me, but I done it with hate in my heart. And then ... I should have knowed he'd framed it, a half dozen of his friends stepped out and opened up on me.

Son, what come over me then I don't know. I guess I went sort of crazy. When I seen them all around me, I just tore loose and went to shooting. I went up on the porch after them, I followed one up the stairs and into his room. I chased another and shot him running, and then I loaded up and turned my back on both the dead and the living and I walked down that street to my horse. I was halfway home before I knowed I'd a bullet in me.

When I was patched up some we rode on and Betts went back to her folks, a widow almost afore she was a wife. We fetched up, final, in the Blue Mountains of Utah, and there we built us a double cabin and we ketched wild horses and hunted desert honey, just the two boys of us left from the five we'd been. We lived there and for months we was happy.

Your Ma was the finest ever, Son. I never knowed what it could be like to live with no woman, nor to have her there, always knowing how I felt inside when nobody had ever knowed before. We walked together and talked together and day by day the running and shooting seemed farther and farther away.

Johnny was happy, too. Them days his mouth organ laughed and cried and sang sweet songs to the low moon and the high sun, and he played the corn out of the ground and the good sweet melons. We hunted some and we lived quiet-like and happy. How long? Three months, five months ... and then Marge comes to me and says Ellie's got to go where she can have a doc. She's to have a baby and something, she's sure, ain't right about it.

We knowed what it meant, but life must go on, Son, and you were to be born and I aimed to give you what start I could. The same for Johnny. So we gathered our horses and we rode out to Salt Lake with the girls. We sold our horses for cash money to some Mormons, and then we drifted north. The girls had to stay with the Doc awhile, so we got us a riding job each.

One day a gent comes into a bar where we was with a star on him and he sees me setting by the window. Marge's time is coming nigh and we're all a-waiting like. This man with the star he comes over and drops into a chair near Johnny and me. „Mighty hot day!“ he says. „Too hot to hunt outlaws, especially,“ he says, „when they size up like good, God-fearin' folks.

„Like t'day,“ he says, „I got me a paper says them Tremaynes is hereabouts. I'm to hunt 'em up an' arrest 'em, what do you boys think about that?“

„We reckon,“ Johnny says, very quiet, „them Tremaynes never bothered nobody if they was let alone.“

He nods his head. „I heard that, too,“ he says. „Leastways, if they've been in town they sure been mighty quiet an' well-behaved folks. Worst of it is“—he got up, wiping the sweat-band of his hat—„I took an oath to do my duty. Now, the way I figure that doesn't mean I have to go r'arin' out in the heat of the day. But come sundown“—he spoke slow and careful—„I'm gonna hunt them Tremaynes up.“

That sheriff, Son, he looked up at Johnny and then over at me. „I got two sons,“ he said quietly, „and if the Tremaynes left family in this town, they'd be protected as long as me and my sons lived.“

We didn't take long about saying goodbye, although we never knowed it was our last. We never guessed we was riding out of town and right to our death.

It was fifty miles east that we passed a gent on the trail. We never knowed him but he turned an' looked after us. And that done, he hightailed it to the nearest town and before day a posse was in the saddle.

At noon, from a high ridge, we drew up and looked back. We seen four separate dust clouds. Johnny, he looked at me and grinned. „I reckon we ain't in no hurry no more,“ he said, „they got us agin the mountains.“ He looked up at them twelve, and thirteen thousand foot peaks. „I wonder if any man ever went through up there?“

„We can give her a try,“ I said quiet. „Not much else we can do.“

„Horses are shot, Boone,“ he replies, „I ain't goin' to kill no good horse for those lousy coyotes back yonder.“ So we got down and walked, our saddlebags loose and rifles in our hands.

Then we heard them on the trail behind and we drew off and slipped our saddles from the horses and cached them in the brush. Cow Hollow, Son, and that's where we made our stand. We had a plenty of ammunition, and we weren't wasteful, making shots count. We hunkered down among the rocks and trees and stood them off.

Morning left us and the noon, and the high hot sun bloomed in the sky, but it was late fall, and as the afternoon drew on, a cold wind began to blow.

They come then, they come like Injuns through the woods after us, and we opened up, and then suddenly Johnny was on his feet, he's got that old Winchester at his hip and he shoots and then he jumps right into them clubbing with his rifle. He went down, and I went over the rocks, both guns going, and that bunch broke and ran.

I fetched Johnny back, and he lay there looking up at me. „Good old Boone!“ he said. „Get the girls and get away. Go to Mexico, go somewheres, but get away!“

He died like that, and I sat right there and cried. Then I covered him over gentle and I slipped out of Cow Hollow and started up the trail toward the high peaks.

It was cold, mighty cold. The sun came up and touched those white peaks and ridges ahead of me, then the clouds covered her over and it began to snow. I walked on, and the snow stopped but the wind blew colder and colder. We was getting high up, I passed the timberline here on Tokewanna and crawled into this here place.

Son, I can't see to write no more, and there ain't no more to say. I guess I didn't say it well, but there she is. You can read her and make up your own mind. This here I've addressed to your mother, care of that sheriff down there. I even got a stamp to put on so's it will be U.S. mail and no one'll dare open her up. Be a good boy, Son, love your Ma and do like she tells you. And carry the name of Tremayne with pride. It was honest blood, no matter what you hear from anyone.

He was stiff from the cold, but he rolled over carefully and folded the letter and tucked it into an envelope. On it he placed his stamp, and then scrawled the name of his wife, in care of the sheriff. From his throat he took a black handkerchief and fastened it to a stick so its flapping would draw attention. Near it, held down by a rock, he left the letter.

Then he crawled out and using his rifle as a crutch, got to his feet. He still had ammunition. He had no food. He discarded the almost empty canteen. For a long time he looked down the cold flank of the mountain into the dark fringe of trees. Far away among those trees flickered the ghostlike fingers of fire, where men warmed themselves and talked, or slept.

Something blurred his eyes. His head throbbed painfully. His side gnawed with pain and his leg was stiff. For how long he stood there he did not know, swaying gently, not quite delirious and yet not quite rational. Then he turned slowly and looked up, two thousand feet, to the cold and icy peak, gleaming, silver and magnificent in solemn grandeur.

He stared for a long time, and then he began to climb. It was very slow, it was very hard. He pulled his old hat down, put the scarf lower around his ears. To the left there was a ridge, and beyond the ridge there would be a valley.

He climbed and then he slipped, lacerating his hands on the icy rocks. He got up, pushing himself on.

„Marge,“ he whispered, „Son...“ He continued to move. Crawling ... falling ... standing ... he felt the snow, felt his feet sink. He seemed to have enormously large feet, enormously heavy. „Never aimed to kill nobody,“ he said. He climbed on ... wind stirred the icy bits of snow over the harsh flank of the mountain. He bowed his head, and when he turned his face from the wind he looked down and saw the fires below like tiny stars. How far he had come! How very far!

He turned, and looked up. There was the ridge, not far, not too far ... and what was it he had thought just a moment ago? Beyond the ridge, there is always a valley.

