

The Humours of Whiskey

Sierra Nevada Mountains, California, 1868

The night brought cool air through the valley. It caused the embers of the campfire to glow.

"D'ye no' want to join us tonight?"

Scotty was returned from washing enamel plates in the stream. There was a slur to his words.

"What are you doing?" asked Francis.

"Watkins been working through those bottles of rye White brought up. Keeps losing at cards."

Scotty winked.

"You could make some money there."

"I'll stay down this end with the sheep."

"Suit yerself," said Scotty. "Boring company they tend to be."

Another night alone under the stars, the sound of his flute practice mingling with the stream.

Francis woke late again. No sign of anyone. After another scant breakfast he rushed out to the flock. Several had wandered from the valley to a neighboring grove. Whistling to Vicky, he ran after the miscreants. A group of sheep stood sniffing at bushes with bright waxy leaves. They skittered off at his approach. Francis inspected the tiny black berries under the leaves, making a soft oath to himself. He ran for the other men, the dog barking in confusion behind him.

Francis banged on the door of the cabin. No response came from inside but muffled curses. Francis pushed the door open

"Poison laurel," he shouted. "The flock's got into a bunch of it."

He had spoken before he could take in the debauched scene before him. The single room was in disarray: a chair on its back, bottles and cards all over the floor and table where Scotty's harmonica glinted at him. Men lay half-clothed on the floor grousing and stirring themselves. A rifle with a tarnished brass receiver was propped by the door. Watkins rose from the one bed in the corner.

"Hellfire," he thundered. "What you doin' waking us, Nancy boy."

Francis was taken aback. He stepped back over the lintel, unsure of himself. Watkins reached for his knife and stood up in a drunken fury.

"I'll have your blood, Irishman! I'll teach you to disturb real men."

A part of Francis wanted to turn and run, down the mountain and far away. Curse the sheep and these drunks. Instead he reached into the corner for the rifle, cocked it and pointed it at the advancing Watkins.

"It's a fight you want?" he asked. "Come on."

Watkins sobered at the sight of the rifle. He stood there, considering. Scotty rose from the ground. He pulled back the murderous Watkins.

"Easy now. The lad's only trying to save the sheep."

The others were standing now. Watkins's eyes were wide and rolling as he railed against the cussed Scots and Irish. Francis did not falter, staring down the barrel at him. All at once, the fight went out of the Kentuckian. His jaundiced face slackened and he dropped the knife.

"Put that sixteen shooter away, kid. You might hurt yourself."

Watkins collapsed onto the bed. Francis pointed it at the ground.

"Leave him," Francis said. "We've got to get those sheep out of the laurel or they're all dead."

The other men stumbled out after him. Francis did not return the rifle. After some frenzied herding, they gathered into a pile the corpses of four poisoned sheep, their tongues distended and black.

"I will tell Salter the cost is to come out of Watkins's packet," said White.