

MORE THAN GOLD

Gold fever has taken its toll on some extraordinarily fine men. The physical sense is often plain enough—grizzled faces that haven't felt a razor in two seasons past; clothes and boots half-eaten away by the strange combination of sweat and mineral dust; hacking coughs that seem forever entrenched from too many damp holes. The mental metamorphosis, though, turns perfectly reasonable, competent, and hard-working individuals into fodder for the inner depths of the earth, which consumes them with more glee than the already downtrodden. What follows is the story of Randolph P. Stratsworth, a prominent Boston attorney, as told to me, a reporter for the Newville Gazette, by Jake Muldoon, a not-so-prominent claim jumper. I pass it along to you verbatim so individual character nuances can be fully captured.

There we was, me and Beany Wilson, sittin at a wobbly table in Lucy's Place. As we looked

out the winder overlookin Mud Street, we seen this here fine lookin carriage pull up in front of the Ascott Hotel. Me and Beany both stopped chewin when we seen the man that got outta the carriage. He looked lily white and all duded up in his Sunday-go-to-meetin suit. And it weren't even Sunday. Bout the only other time we ever seen anything like that come when somebody got laid to rest. So's we naturally got a little curious. Hastily payin our bill with Miss Lucy, we moseyed on over to the hotel. Unfortunately, Deputy Calhoun was sittin in a rockin chair outside the hotel, and since we done had our share of run-ins with him, we didn't bother to hang round.

Two weeks later we thought we seen that same feller again out in the hills. Only this time he weren't wearin no fancy suit, at least not from what we could tell. Course, with all the dirt he wore, ya couldn't really tell nothin more about him. Since he was by hisself, me and Beany decided to stake him out. We tied our horses to an ol log and moved in a little closer on foot. When we seen him disappear into a cave, we parked ourselves behind a ledge where we could keep a good watch on the cave entrance.

After about four hours of waitin and watchin while the sun went down, we seen him come out again. Grabbin a sleepin roll outta his wagon, he went back into the cave. Figurin he was abedding down for the night, we decided to do the same and have a closer look in the morning. When the sun come up, we made our move. Sneakin down to the cave entrance, me and Beany kept our guns cocked just in case. Hearin no commotion, we stepped inside the cave. After goin bout twenty feet, we realized we couldn't see nothin without some light. We went back outside to see if there was an extra lantern on his wagon. Luckily, we found another one, so's we kept movin in. After bout ten minutes of goin round twenty corners and past a coupla dozen side paths, we commenced to getting a little scared, even with the lantern. Two more turns and Beany stopped. Holdin the lantern high, Beany shone it toward a recess to the right. What we seen was that there feller diggin away agin the back wall.

When he saw us, he grabbed his shotgun, pointed it at us, and hollered, "This is my gold. You can't have it."

Well, before me and Beany had a chance to say anythin, the ground started ashakin and rocks

started a comin down. Beany and me, we told that feller he better get outta there, but he wouldn't budge. All he kept sayin was, "This is my gold. You can't have it."

Then one big ol pack of rock come down betwixt us and that feller. Beany and me, we wasn't gonna hang round any longer. That feller got to keep his gold, cept it didn't seem like it were gonna do him any good bein buried with it. We turned round and run to get ourselves outta there. I figure we musta been bout half-way out when another big rumble come down. Beany fell and the lantern he had broke all apart. There we was, crawlin round in that dark cave, not sure which way to go. It seemed like we crawled for near half a day, when all of a sudden we seen a shaft of light up ahead. When we finally made it to that last bend where the light come from, we saw the openin to the cave. Beany and me, we stepped out into the fresh air and just took in one breath after nother.

After a while, me and Beany got to feelin poorly bout that feller. We went into town and told the sheriff bout the cave-in and the feller inside.

At first, he didn't believe us, but then he said, "Well, knowin you boys, if you had done something you shouldn't have, you probably wouldn't be in here tellin me about it."

Then we took him out to the mine to show him. The sheriff and his deputies figured there warn't nothin they could do at that point. It was just too dangerous to try and go back in.

"It looks like the stranger won't be needin the undertaker," said the sheriff. "I'll see if the reverend wants to come out here."

The reverend did come out to the man's tomb and held a little service. Me and Beany was the only other people there. All the rest of the week, me and Beany kept thinkin bout how close we come to dying in that cave with that feller and all his gold that we'd come to steal. We'd made it outta the cave with our lives, worth far more to us than all that gold. Beany and me, we been changed men since that day, a comin to a better understandin with our Maker. We even saved up for Sunday-go-to-meetin suits. And to think it neer wouldn't ahappened if we hadn't ... seen the light.