

*It isn't often a man
can inspect his own
grave when he's going
to be murdered—and
old Hugh Baldwin
didn't like the
prospect*

Curran struck from behind

The Trap

By WILLIAM MERRIAM ROUSE

LAFE CURRAN blinked patiently in the spring sunshine, while at the touch of his knife long shavings curled up from a pine splinter. He had waited months to find out a certain thing about the raw-boned old man who sat on another bench against the house wall, untangling a snarl of fish lines.

"If I hadn't been too cussed lazy to take keer of them lines," said Hugh Baldwin, "I wouldn't have to onsnazzle 'em now. The Lord ain't got but one law, and that's enough. Cussedness bounces jest like a rubber ball!"

"Uh-huh," agreed Curran. From the first it had been part of his plan to agree with everything Baldwin said. He had to keep friendly with him. Inwardly Lafe sneered, but no hint of what he thought appeared on his weathered, sharp-eyed face.

The clank and rattle of an old car suddenly smote the stillness of the mountains. It grew louder for all of a minute before the dirt road, forest grown to the very edge, yielded a steaming automobile that ran doggedly although it seemed to be little more than scrap iron.

A fat man, wheezing, climbed out from under the wheel and nodded at Curran and Baldwin as he came up. He fairly radiated haste.

"Hugh," he said, "I got to be in Port Thurman at ten o'clock this morning with as much money as I can get in cash to close a deal for some land. I ain't got

time to go to the bank at Valeboro. Yesterday I had a sick boss and couldn't go. You know my check's good. I was wondering if you could let me have a hundred dollars on a check?"

Baldwin put down the snarl of lines. His clear blue eyes with their bland expression that was never ruffled dwelt on the face of the visitor. The old man rose to his feet—a powerful, easily moving figure, although his hair and beard were white.

"Gabe Tompkins' check is good," he said. "Don't you want two hundred, Gabe?"

Tompkins wiped perspiration from his suddenly beaming face.

"Two hundred would just exactly fix me up, Hugh!" he exclaimed. "I was going to try to pick up another hundred somewhere along the road! Didn't want to ask for so much!"

"If a man ask thee to go a mile go with him twain," said Baldwin, "and from him that would borrow turn not away. You jest wait here a minute. I'll be right out."

Curran was so stunned by his sudden good fortune that he had remained, from the first words about money, with his knife motionless in the wood. Now he remembered that he must not appear interested. He turned up a perfectly curled bit of wood.

"Don't see much of you, Curran," said Tompkins, cheerfully. "Ain't seen you around the Corners store for a long time."

CURRAN grunted, while he strained his ears to catch sounds from within the house. He had kept to himself ever since he had suspected that Baldwin had a lot of money, because he did not want visitors. There would come a time when visitors would be very unwelcome. People must get out of the habit of going to his house.

"I see Baldwin a lot," he said. "He's nearby. Take a man that wants to work he can keep busy the year around. I don't have no time for the store. Chopping, hunting, trapping, spring work. Haying. Gosh!"

"I know it," agreed Tompkins sympathetically. He was filling out a check on the doorstep. Baldwin came out with some bills folded in his hand. Tompkins exchanged the check for the money, shook hands, and sprang into his car. It rattled out of hearing. Baldwin was already back at his work.

"None of my business," said Curran, choosing his words carefully, "but ain't it dangerous to keep a lot of money around the house?"

"Everything is dangerous," answered Baldwin, "if a man thinks so. After the banks had that spell of sickness I thought I'd better keep my money at home. The Lord helps them that help themselves. So I took care of my own money. It don't seem as though anybody around here would be mean enough to rob me."

He was a simple old fool, thought Curran. The time had come now. Lafe knew to a certainty that there was money in the house. That was what he had been waiting for. There must be a good-sized roll if Baldwin could peel off two hundred like that.

Since he didn't trust the banks he must have it all somewhere in that time-beaten little building behind them.

"Nobody that knows you would rob you, Hugh," said Curran. "I was thinking of strangers. You've kind of stuck yourself with a check now, ain't you? You don't save them things?"

Baldwin shook his head.

"I'll go to Valeboro tomorrow and get it cashed. Gabe was in a hurry and I ain't. No reason why I shouldn't make a trip for him. He's a neighbor, ain't he?"

"Sure," agreed Curran, tolerantly. He rose and stretched. "I got to go along home and hoe my young corn. When I get that done I'm going to put a cement floor in my cellar. I'll want you should see it."

NOTHING was more natural than that a man should put a cement floor in his cellar, if he could afford it. Lafe Curran hired a man to draw his

cement and sand and then he went about the actual labor in a leisurely fashion.

He put the cement down in strips across the cellar, each four or five feet wide, and at the end of a week he had it all done but the last strip and a place about six feet by three under the plank stairway that led up into the house.

It was dark in the cellar anyway and it was very dark under the stairs. Not even a gasoline lantern, hung from one of the floor beams, lighted that space.

Everything was ready. Curran went down the road to Baldwin's place on a fine clear morning and found the old man sitting out in front mending a basket.

"Want you should come up and see my cellar bottom," said Curran. "I got it 'most done."

"I guess I better not," Baldwin told him, with a shake of his head. "I planned for strawberrying today and it's the only day I can take the time this week. They're prime right now."

"Golly, I need advice!" Curran let his head and voice droop. "I was depending on you to help me out. The last strip of cement didn't set right and I knowed you could show me how to mix it better."

Hugh Baldwin sighed and rose.

"All right, Lafe," he said. "If a man wants me to help him I figger it's a call from the Lord. I'll go, and mebbe the berries will be better this afternoon."

They walked along up the dirt road together, Curran busy going over each step of the plans he had made and Baldwin enjoying the fresh, bright green of June. He drank of the air, as though it were stout draughts of ale.

Curran led the way into the kitchen and opened a door.

"You go right on down, Hugh," he said, "and I'll be coming behind with the gasoline lantern. Can you see all right?"

"Can't see nothing much," replied the old man, chuckling, "but I can feel with my feet!"

Instead of the lantern that sat ready to light on a table Curran snatched a smoothly whittled club from the woodbox. He

stepped into the cellarway behind Baldwin. The white head was a gray blur two steps below. He swung the club and brought it down with all his strength.

WHEN Hugh Baldwin opened his eyes he was decidedly uncomfortable. There was a dull ache in his head, a shooting pain across his chest, and a general feeling of discomfort that was as keen as pain.

He blinked in a strong light and shook his head. The gasoline lantern hung from a beam in front of him, a matter of ten feet away. He was in Curran's cellar, brilliantly revealed except for a dark space under the stairs.

Baldwin remembered that he had started downstairs to look at Lafe Curran's new cement floor. What had happened? Maybe he had fallen in the dark and cracked his head. He tried to move and found that he could not.

It came to him then that he was standing up. A moment before he had been sagging, although in an upright position. Slowly it dawned upon him that he was tied. One ache was from a rope that ran under his arms and across his chest. His wrists were tied together in front of him.

This was utterly bewildering. He stared around. He was standing on earth, against a wall.

A few feet in front of him the cement began and strips in graduated states of hardness ran to the opposite wall.

A faint scratching noise under the stairway caught his ear. He saw something stir there, and then the head and shoulders of Lafe Curran appeared against the cement floor. Lafe seemed to be crawling out of a hole. He stood up and brushed earth from his clothes.

"Lafe!" called Baldwin. "What in tunket's going on?"

"It ain't started yet," replied Curran, with a vicious grin. "It's going to start in a minute."

"What's the matter! Have I been having a fit or something? What be I tied up for?"

"You're going to have a fit, all right!" Curran told him, and he laughed.

"Was you the one that tied me up? Lafe! You must of hit me when I wasn't looking!"

"That was the easiest way to do it," Curran said. "You're a tough old bird and I didn't know if I could handle you easy or not."

"But look here, Lafe!" cried the old man. "I thought you was my friend. What you done this for?"

"You'll find out!" Curran reached to the stairs and took up what was known in that neighborhood as a bullwhip—a long whip of braided leather with a knotted lash at the end.

"What you got against me?" demanded Baldwin. "Ain't I allus treated you the way a man ought to treat a feller man? If I ain't I'll make it right!"

"Listen, you crazy old coot!" exclaimed Curran. "You're going to tell me where you keep that money of yourn! Now hold on. Don't talk afore I get through. You'll say you won't and I'll give you a taste of this whip. If that don't make no difference then you're going into the grave I got ready for you under the stairs."

"If anybody comes down here looking for you, which they won't, there'll be fresh cement where you're standing and if they happen to see this patch under the stairway it'll look natural. And the grave is six foot deep."

"I'm telling you so you'll know I mean business. If I have to bury you I'll tear your house apart and find the money anyway, and get out. But I druther stay right here. You hand over the money and I'll let you go as soon as I get my hands on it."

THERE was a moment of silence. When Baldwin spoke his voice was low, controlled.

"Lafe," he said, "you're making an awful mistake."

"The only one that's got a chance to make a mistake is you," Curran told him.

"What say? Where's the money?"

"I don't believe I'll tell ye, Lafe."

Curran drew back his arm. The whip whistled through the air. The lash, cutting like a knife, flecked against the old man's cheek dangerously close to the eye. A little red gash appeared. Baldwin flinched and caught a groan between his teeth. Curran laughed.

"I handled one of these here things in a medicine show once," he said. "I ain't out of practice so bad."

His arm drew back again. A three-cornered piece of flesh was lifted from Baldwin's jaw. Another red brand appeared over his eye. The old man braced his quivering body back against the wall and closed his eyes.

"Lord! Lord help me!" he muttered.

"The Lord helps them that helps themselves," mocked Curran. "Made up your mind to tell?"

The tip of Baldwin's ear was suddenly crimson. The hissing leather marked the backs of both his hands. His neck stung unbearably. Each touch of the lash was like branding with a red-hot iron.

"I guess I better tell ye, Lafe," he said, thickly. "It don't seem that money's worth what you're doing nor what I'm standing. I had to take a minute or two to get light on it."

Curran struck a final blow for good measure and rested his arm.

"All right," he said, "where you got it hid?"

"Go into my bedroom and move the bed," Baldwin told him. "You'll find a new piece of board about a foot long set into the floor. It's painted over and looks like it was nailed down, but the nails is stuck into gimlet holes. You can pry it up easy with your knife."

"All the money there?" asked Curran.

"Every dollar I got is down there, Lafe," answered Baldwin. "I wisht you'd leave some. I need a little."

"Listen," said Curran, "I'm going to see if you told the truth. Then I'm coming back. What you going to do if I let you loose?"

"Go home and put some lard on these here cuts," Baldwin told him, "so's they'll

heal up. Would you jest as soon gimme a drink of water afore you go, Lafe?"

"When I come back," Curran said. He flung down the whip and went up the cellar stairs two at a time. Baldwin heard the house door slam. Then there was silence for a long time.

The lantern still filled the cellar with light. The old man looked down at his hands. The wrists were crossed and securely bound with manila rope. But the fingers were free and at the expense of pain there was a little play under the ropes.

Baldwin worked his right wrist forward half an inch. Then he curled his fingers up to the sleeve of his left arm. He set his teeth while his fingers struggled there, reaching, and finally the first and second fingers found the hard object that he sought.

With infinite care they drew it down. A small, sharp kitchen knife appeared. He worked the handle down to his palm and twisted the blade up between his fingers until the edge was against the ropes. Then with great patience he began to move the blade back and forth.

WHEN the ropes fell away from his wrists he was as good as free. He slashed the rope that passed under his arms and across his chest, and stood away from the wall. A ringbolt above his head held him suspended.

Baldwin crossed to the stairs, hesitated, and went for the lantern. He held it under the stairway and peered down. There was his grave.

"And Lafe calculates to put me there soon as he's got the money!" exclaimed Baldwin, wagging his head. "That's an awful thing for a man to do."

He went up the stairs and out of the house. The old man did not hurry as he walked down the road. He even stopped to bathe his face and hands in a brook and his step did not quicken as he drew near his own doorway. A groan came out from the bedroom as he entered the kitchen.

Hugh Baldwin stopped in the bedroom doorway and looked down. From a crouching position on the floor Lafe Curran stared up at him with glassy eyes. His face was drawn with pain, and now the greenish pallor of terror spread over it.

Curran was on his knees with one arm extended through a narrow opening in the floor. His other hand, clenched into a fist, began to beat against the boards. His lips twisted back and words left them in a scream.

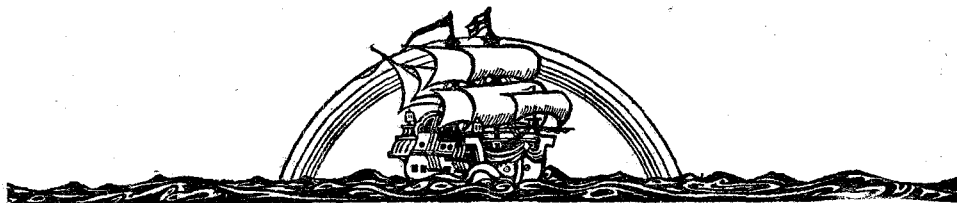
"Let me go!" he begged. "Or shoot me! I can't stand it!"

"Wait a minute, Lafe," said Baldwin. "You ain't got nothing worse than a broke wrist, anyway. That ain't half as bad as being buried under the cellar floor. While they's a chance of it sinking in I want to tell ye something.

"I never had no idee of being afeerd about my money until you said it was dangerous to keep it around. So I fixed me a knife up my coat sleeve in case I got stopped on the road when I was carrying my money, for I never did leave it alone in the house very long. It was that knife cut me loose jest now. And I set a steel trap down there big enough to hold a bobcat.

"If you hadn't got me to suspecting folks you might jest as well had that money, and me buried. I'll be gol-durned if I don't feel kind of sorry for ye!"

THE END



A 5-7

Rusty dropped prone on the
ground



*Rusty Sabin, who had grown up with the Cheyenne
Indians, knew fierce loyalties that his more civilized
white brothers could not understand*

The Sacred Valley

By MAX BRAND

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

BORN of white parents, Rusty Sabin was known among the Cheyenne Indians as "Red Hawk." One day while the resourceful Rusty is buying supplies in the town of Witherell with gold which he had mined from the Sacred Valley of the Cheyennes, he calls at the house of Richard Lester. Charlie Galway, who happens to be passing by, notices the nuggets of gold and, during his attempt to steal them, murders Lester, escaping apparently unseen. Lester's daughter,

Maisry, who is in love with Rusty, is prostrated by grief.

The inhabitants of Witherell, aroused by the murder, accuse Standing Bull of the crime. Standing Bull is a Cheyenne, who was with Rusty at the scene of the killing. Rusty pleads for a fair trial, and when he sees that the whites are not treating his friend squarely, he and Standing Bull manage to ride off on Rusty's white stallion. But Standing Bull is severely wounded in the escape.

Not long after Rusty's return to the Cheyenne encampment, Running Elk, tribal Medicine Man, declares that the Sky People have ordered a sacrifice for Standing Bull's recovery. Rusty is taken to the Valley of Death to die, but Sweet Medicine, in the guise of a huge owl, leads him to a cave through which he escapes to the Sacred Valley.

The Cheyennes, now suffering from drought, decide that a further offering should be made to Sweet Medicine. So the young, beautiful Blue Bird, who is enamoured with Red Hawk, is led to the Valley of Death. Red Hawk chances to meet Blue Bird. Overjoyed at seeing each other,

This story began in the Argosy for August 10