

# THE MYSTERY OF PIÑON CAMP

BY JOSEPH IVERS LAWRENCE

AUTHOR OF "THE SCALPEL OF DAMOCLES"

LUKE and Sam were good pals—at least, quite as good as the average. They worked their claim, ate, smoked, and drank together with no more friction than could readily be dissipated by a few well-enunciated curses and threats. They had no sensitive anxiety about anything like incompatibility of temperament.

Nothing more serious than verbal skirmishes disturbed the peace of the cabin until a day came for the division of the rich spoils they had wrested from mother earth. Then it was discovered that some rather nice points of equity were to be considered.

It did not take the two miners long to exhaust their rather limited vocabularies. When words fail, men must have recourse to the next thing available in the storehouse of their comprehension; and it took little thinking to bring them to that free use of the strength and cunning which enabled the primitive man to use to best advantage the weapons nearest to hand. Their dog, with a nice appreciation of the insignificance of mere canine emotion in the face of such Olympian warfare, fled from the cabin as the air became thick with flying plates, frying-pans, pokers, and various articles of furniture and hardware.

In the belts which hung from pegs on the wall were guns and knives, but neither man was willing to let the other gain access to such advantages. Though the effect of noise and disorder was prodigious, little was accomplished by the shower of mining and camping paraphernalia through the lurid haze of panting, gasping profanity, until Luke won his way to a crow-bar which stood against the wall. The first swinging blow of that ponderous instrument broke one of Sam's legs, and he sank down, groaning and cursing.

Luke did not neglect to follow up this

advantage with a vigorous application of the same treatment to his adversary's head. The tranquillity of the establishment having been restored by this radical process, he set about the restoration of order and neatness. He threw such broken crockery and glass as were no longer fit for use out of the window; gathered up the skillets and housekeeping utensils, and arranged them in something like their normal order; and then, with the reluctance of one who hangs back from an uncongenial task, approached the inert remains of his ex-colleague.

A man feels some regret for an old dog that he has killed because of its suddenly acquired viciousness, and Luke allowed his memory to run over the days in which he and Sam had toiled together and furnished each other with the only society they were able to enjoy. He shook his head and sighed as he dragged the thing out across the mountain road and pushed it over into the cañon, where the coyotes—the coroners and undertakers of the region—could be depended on to act without official delay. On returning to the cabin, he bandaged his bruised limbs and head; and as some of his wounds gave sharp darts of pain, he smiled a little grimly as he thought of the other man's eternal euthanasia.

As the day grew older, Luke tried to accustom himself to the new order of things. Sam was a thing of the past, and he must prepare to live a life of solitude, with none but the dog for company. No more divisions of ore; the claim had become his property solely.

He took a pull at the whisky-bottle, and sat down at the table to smoke and think. On the floor the wide blood-stain had turned brown, dyeing the wood to mahogany. Luke tried to smile as he looked at it; but when the dog crept in and sniffed at it inquiringly, he rose up and kicked the animal away.

Sitting down again, he scowled at the stain, and decided that he did not like the effect; the boards would have to be taken up and replaced with new ones. Reaching for a pipe, he picked up Sam's old corn-cob, and raised the stem to his lips before identifying it. Discovering what he had done, he laughed harshly, and cast it out of the window. Then he took Sam's tobacco-pouch and threw it after the pipe.

With these things accomplished, he shifted his chair so as to remove the stain from his field of vision. Then, taking his own pipe, he carefully filled it from his own pouch. He leaned upon the table and puffed vigorously, filling the room with the heavy vapor of the clear perique. There was a gorgeously colored poster on the wall, showing a gaily caparisoned cavalier mounting up to the battlements of a castle, with a banner upon which the merits of some special brew of beer were emblazoned. Luke tried to keep his eyes glued to this masterpiece, but ever and anon they would stray to Sam's hat and reefer, which still hung on the wall.

It was just like Sam to pester him like this, he reflected. He remembered with scorn what a mean nature the fellow had; once he got a spite against any one he would never let up. Luke lighted another pipe and surrendered himself completely to gloomy reflections on the hateful and sinister spirit of his late partner.

A vagrant breeze, suddenly leaping in at the window, moved the coat upon the wall and caused one of the sleeves to raise itself almost menacingly. Luke started nervously, but he sat back and laughed again. Even the wind, it seemed, was up to tricks to bother him.

This carried him back to a foolish conversation he once had with Sam about ghosts. On that occasion Luke had stoutly maintained that he held no sympathy with mystic beliefs and superstitions, but Sam held a brief for the opposite side, and went so far as to claim intimate acquaintance with sundry emissaries from the other world. The controversy becoming somewhat morbid, he had declared that, should any fellow mortal assist him in leaving his earthly husk before his time, he would take special pleas-

ure in revisiting his old haunts, in order to enliven the remaining days of his enemy. Indeed, Sam declared that he would do his best to take his foe down to hell in company with himself.

Strange how that talk all came back! It made Luke laugh again, but he got up and put the hat and reefer into a chest, and locked the cover over them.

The sun was well down in the west now, and the last red rays were coming in at the open door. As Luke turned around, he saw that they lit up the brown stain as a light searches out some special spot upon a stage. He swore fretfully, and took a little more whisky; then he clapped his hat upon his head and strode out of the cabin and down the mountain road toward the mining-camp.

## II

THE evening air was cool and refreshing, and he felt lighter-hearted as he swung along. He would go to the hotel and tell the boys how poor old Sam had fallen over the cliff and killed himself. With that done, he would undoubtedly feel better. He tried to whistle as he walked, but it took a decided effort. Two or three times he was sure he heard a step upon the road behind him, so he was glad when the buildings of the camp appeared around a turn in the road. Smoke came out of several chimneys, and figures moved in and out of the doorways and across the street. Surely this camp life was better than being a hermit up there on the mountain! Forthwith Luke decided to engage quarters at the Mansion House, a commodious hostelry of six rooms, built of logs.

Although in a much more cheerful mood, he slackened his pace as he approached the borders of the colony. He bethought him that his story of the unfortunate accident which had bereft him of his partner had scarcely been rehearsed. He should be prepared for all the questions of the morbidly curious. He sat down upon a rock and went over the story carefully, and at last it seemed that he could almost picture Sam staggering along the road and falling over into the cañon as Luke looked on in vain horror.

Feeling not a little pride in his clever

work of fiction, he got up to resume his course; but on looking at the camp again it occurred to him that the story might better be told on the following morning. It would be more plausible for Sam to get drunk at night and fall in the dark. This was borne in upon Luke so strongly that he hastened to put distance between himself and the camp. His own cabin seemed the logical place for him to spend the night.

All at once he remembered that it was the day for the mail-coach to come through, and that it must already be some hours late. Old Simon, the driver, always stopped at the cabin for a drink, and even now he might be curiously examining the stain on the floor. Luke redoubled his pace, and made good time back to the seat of his uneasiness. It was quite dark when he came in sight of the cabin, but the lights of the coach were nowhere to be seen.

As he pushed open the door, something touched his leg, and he leaped to one side and cried out like a woman; but it was only the dog, and Luke laughed heartily at his timidity. After lighting a lamp on the table, he hastily spread a blanket over the stain, against the coming of the stage-driver; he would explain that Sam had not yet returned from a trip to the next camp.

The evening moved on, and the stage did not come. Luke lighted the fire and fried some bacon, which he tried to eat; but his appetite seemed to have left him. Giving up in disgust, he threw the scraps to the dog, who ate them cagerly, and for his own sustenance he once more had recourse to the whisky-bottle.

He lighted his pipe and pulled his chair close to the table, where the lamp burned dimly. Not liking the deep shadows in the far corners of the room, he turned up the wick; but the lamp only smoked and the room grew more dismal. Two candlesticks stood upon the shelf, and Luke lighted the candles; but it gave the room an unusual aspect. The furniture cast strange, uncanny shadows, and he fancied he heard queer rustlings and murmurs all over the place.

Toward nine o'clock there came a low rumble of thunder, and presently the lightning was flashing vividly. To Luke the storm sounded ominous and super-

natural. He crept from his chair and closed the door, and hung a blanket over the window, to shut out the weird light of the electric flashes. Then came the wind and the rain, and Luke thought he had never heard rain pelt so angrily or wind moan so dolorously.

With lips set tight, eyes wide open without winking, and the color fading from his face, he sat tight in his chair and shivered. His pipe went out repeatedly, and when he relighted it he could hardly hold the match, so violently did his hand shake.

The bottle already showed the inroads he had made in it, but he fetched it to the table and took several deep gulps of the fiery liquor. The dog, seeming to share the man's fear, crept timidly to his feet and crouched there. The storm was violent, but it steadily grew more so. The thunder was a steady rumble and roar like the artillery of giant armies; the lightning-flashes were like sheets of ghastly blue flame that fairly scathed around the cabin, penetrating and almost scorching the smallest interstices of the frame.

As Luke sat there, gripping the arms of his chair as if fearful of being torn out of it, and starting in alarm at every fresh blast of wind and rain against the rattling door, a new sound was heard through the pandemonium. At the close of a stunning peal of thunder there came to his ears a far-off, moaning cry. His hair started from the roots, and awful tremors passed in waves from his head to his feet. Gripping the chair yet tighter, he leaned forward with open mouth and staring, watery eyes.

While he sat thus, a mountain-lion on the hill above shrieked wildly. Though he had heard the sound many times before, he gave an answering cry and threw himself upon the floor, covering his face with his hands. As he groveled there, he started to mutter some long-forgotten prayer; but suddenly the cabin was bathed in white light, and the ensuing thunder-clap seemed to rend the roof.

Luke groaned piteously, and rolled under the table, pounding the floor with his heels. After the thunder, in a brief interval of silence, there came the moaning cry again, and this time it was articulate and unmistakable.

"Lu-u-u-ke—Lu-u-u-ke!" it said, from somewhere in the darkness.

The man under the table stiffened in a paralysis of terror. It was not like the voice of the Sam he had known, but it sounded like a call from the pit; and his victim's threat to return and drag down his enemies sounded in Luke's ears as if it had been uttered but yesterday.

"Lu-u-u-ke!" came the awful cry again, and now much nearer.

He drew himself up on his knees, and peered with insane eyes into the dark corner by the door. Something touched him, and he shrieked with terror; but again it was only the dog. He seized the animal by the neck, strangling it, and dashed it against the opposite wall, where it fell and lay moaning.

"Lu-u-u-ke! Lu-u-u-ke!"

The cry sounded nearer still, and like the wail of a damned spirit. The poor, maimed cur set up a dismal howl. Luke rose and seized the lamp, and hurled it at the beast, silencing it, but leaving the room in complete darkness, so that the lightning-flashes made it look yet more like a den of the inferno.

Half dead with terror, Luke staggered along the wall and groped until he found his six-shooter. He drew the weapon from the holster, and moved slowly toward the window. There was now no sound but the thunder and rain and wind. With a dead heart, and no breath in his body, he crept forward until he touched the casement. His palsied hand fumbled a moment with the blanket, and then he drew it back fearfully.

All the light in the world flared in his face, blinding him; but yet he saw in the road, at the point where he had flung the corpse over the cliff, a thing from hell. It was in human form, and it had a wet, gory head. It dragged itself over the ground as if it had no legs.

The vision was but of the duration of a lightning-flash, but that was enough. Luke saw the awful eyes of the thing look into his, and it held its arms out to him and cried his name again, in that damning, sepulchral voice. He staggered back against the table, and must have fainted for an instant.

When he became conscious again, he was sitting on the floor, with his back against the table. The revolver was on

the floor beside him. The room was dark, and he felt dazed; but there was a sound as of something dragging itself over the ground toward the door.

Another fit of ague seized him, and every hair on his head stood erect. He weakly picked up the gun, and was barely able to cock it; then he waited, with his dead eyes fixed on the door.

Presently something lurched against it, and it slowly swung open. At the same instant the mountain-lion screamed again like a demon, and the lightning flared, showing the thing drawing itself to its feet, while the blood dripped from its garments.

With a horrid scream, Luke thrust the gun into its face and fired, almost blowing the head from the shoulders. Without a sound, the creature hurtled forward and threw itself upon him, fairly embracing him, and bathing him in blood. Simultaneously a bolt of lightning struck the cabin with a crackling sound like a machine-gun, and tore the roof-beams asunder.

Thoroughly insane, Luke dragged himself from beneath the thing and fired the remaining five cartridges into its awful body. Then he rushed from the house, and, without halting, hurled himself headlong into the inky blackness.

### III

THE mail-coach mystery of Piñon Camp has never been solved, nor can any one suggest even a probable guess.

On the morning after the memorable storm which swept that region a searching-party found the wrecked coach abandoned by the roadside; the horses had been driven away, and the treasure-box and mail-bags rifled. The greatest mystery, however, lay in the discovery of the driver's mutilated body in a miners' cabin nearly a mile away. The cabin was partly burned, having been struck by lightning, and the bodies of its two owners, badly mutilated, were found at the bottom of the adjacent cañon.

The first explanation was that a wholesale robbery had been perpetrated by road-agents, but this was exploded by the finding of the miners' full ore-sacks absolutely undisturbed. The miners bore a fair reputation in the community as peaceable, law-abiding men.



PRESIDENT TAFT AS A BASEBALL "FAN"

A ROW OF INTERESTED AND INTERESTING SPECTATORS AT THE BASEBALL MATCH BETWEEN THE PITTSBURGH AND CHICAGO NINES OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUE, PLAYED AT PITTSBURGH, ON MAY 29—ON PRESIDENT TAFT'S RIGHT IS A SECRET SERVICE OFFICIAL; ON HIS LEFT ARE SECRETARY OF STATE KNOX, PRESIDENT HADLEY OF YALE, AND CHARLES P. TAFT, THE PRESIDENT'S HALF-BROTHER