

*2005 D.K. Brookie Fiction Contest Honorable Mention*

## THE SPELL OF FOOLISHNESS

*By Rodello Hunter*

**O**URS WAS A PEACE-LOVIN' FAMILY. I'VE HEARD Pa say more than once that he didn't hold with arguin' with women folks. It was more fun lovin' 'em than fightin' 'em. So when I waked up that first night and heard voices, forced low, but soundin' quick and sharp like a stick dragged across a slat fence, I knew somethin' uncommon was afoot.

It went on this way for a week. My room bein' right next to my folks and me bein' the oldest, I was doin' a pert piece of worryin'. My little brothers and sisters went right to sleep soon as their heads hit the pillow, but I lay there, waitin' for the words to start, and as soon as the folks figgered we'd all be asleep, it began.

I couldn't tell the words. Pa seemed like at first he was gentle, explainin', and then his voice got deeper, and he didn't say much at all, but Ma talked and talked, and then she'd cry. I thought of how Missus Talbot broke right down in our kitchen one mornin' and sobbed over her old man steppin' out with old Billy Petrie's young widow.

Old Billy had struck it rich in his mine over Barrel Mountain way, and one weekend he took himself off in his best clothes and came back married to this woman with the corn-yellow hair. Then the mine filled up with water and couldn't be worked. Billy spent all he had stowed against a rainy day tryin' to dry up his mine. I guess the Petries would have starved if Pa hadn't sent over garden truck and beef and flour.

Old Billy died about two years after the mine went, but he was one to pay his debts any way he could. He left my pa a deed to half his mine, and he left the other half to the widow.



*RODELLO HUNTER was the author of A House of Many Rooms and A Daughter of Zion, both published by Knopf. Both were also National Library selections and have been translated into several languages through the Reader's Digest Book Clubs. Hunter passed away 19 August 2005 at age 85.*

Pa was always sayin' that he was goin' to give that mine a go when he got some extra money.

Ridin' home on the hayrack, them long jaunts from the north field, Pa'd tell me a lot. It used to puzzle me how a man could know so much as Pa. He told me about old Billy Petrie.

"You have to believe in people," Pa said. "Bill was an honest man, and if he said that mine was worth somethin', it is. He gave me that deed in good faith, and 'til I get time to see that it's no account, as folks say, I'm goin' to believe I was well paid."

I knew that it was worth more to Pa to believe in old Bill than to believe the mine could make him rich. It was worth lockin' up the deed in the strong box and makin' like it was worth something.

Pa told me about the Talbots, too.

"Most fellers hit a spell of foolishness near the middle years," Pa flicked the mares' rumps with the reins. "Spect that's what happened to Roy Talbot. That widow's got mighty pretty hair!" He looked at me straight, like I was a man grown, and said, "It's my belief a man can get all the warmth he needs in his own bed, if he don't lose sight of how his woman feels, and not think like old Roy, that he's some kind of two-legged stallion."

"There's a sight more'n Roy visits to the widow, Pa. The other night I was comin' home from Selly's barn raisin', and I saw Clyde Very slippin' out her back door. The fellers down at the livery stable talk some. Why, Clyde Very's old enough to be her father, Pa. Is he havin' a spell of foolishness, too?"

"Clyde hasn't had what you might call a happy home. His woman's got a disposition like a pint cup of vinegar, and she nags old Clyde somethin' fierce. Remember this, son. You can tell a lot more about a woman from what she says and how she says it than you can from her face and figger. A feller never tires of a gentle voice, but a real beauty don't seem so when she's forever spittin' spite. That little widow

talks soft and looks soft, and sometimes a feller hankers for a bit of softness so much he don't care much about anythin' else." I could tell Pa didn't blame old Clyde much.

"And I guess you can't really blame the widow. She don't have no strings on her. A sweet smile seems like an easy way to get a bushel of potatoes."

Thinkin' about what he said, while I heard them arguin', though Pa was nearin' fifty, I couldn't see him bein' foolish. I couldn't see him with his arms around no other woman but Ma.

Things had been tight of late. We'd lost quite a few steers on the summer range, and the drought had been bad. Wheat didn't head up, and Ma had been cannin' all the garden truck like she could see that we wouldn't have much else to live on. Usually, she let us each have a little garden patch to sell for hard money to the wagon trains and the prospectors when they came through town. I missed havin' it. I'd been savin' to buy a rifle that Charlie Coles had hung in his dry-goods store.

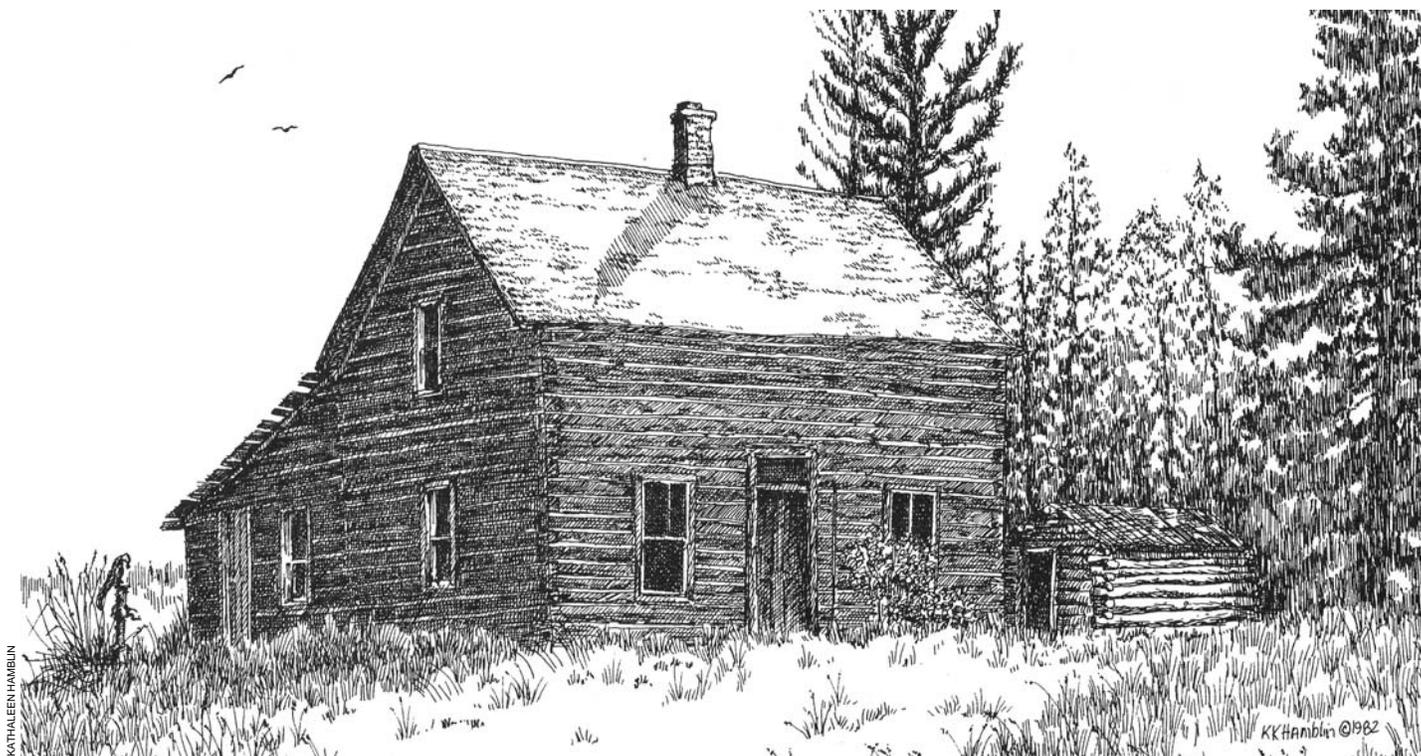
Pa always gave Ma a steer of her own to sell for calico and ribbons for her and the girls, but I'd heard him tell her that they'd have to kill her steer to feed the family this winter. She hadn't made no fuss, then. I saw her reach out and pat

Pa, and he pulled her real tight to him and kissed her. I was always glad to happen on to them this way. I was sure goin' to gentle my wife like this when I found one.

The arguin' went on at night, and durin' the day, Ma wouldn't speak to Pa. Then finally, she wouldn't even look at him much. He took to bein' late with the chores, and soon as supper was over, he'd saddle up Pigeon and ride into town. I tell you I was nigh onto bein' sick, I worried so.

**T**HEN ONE NIGHT I was comin' home late from Ben Selly's. Ben was with me, comin' to spend the night and go rabbit huntin' in the mornin'. I'd been over to his house helpin' him make a cradle for his little sister for Christmas. I'm right handy with my hands. Pa says he'd like me to take some kind of carvin' course at the Academy if they teach anything like that.

We had to go past the widow's on our way home. Just as we passed, her lamp went out and then the back door opened and a man came out. Old Roy or old Clyde, I thought, but then I saw the man's shoulders—sort of picked out in the moonlight—and I knew it was Pa. There wasn't no other man in the county had shoulders like my dad, except Ma said I would, maybe, when I got filled out. I knew



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that Ben had seen, too, and Ben wasn't known for havin' a tight lip.

"Old Clyde," I said, and felt dirty. But everybody in town knew about old Clyde Very. Maybe the moonlight was just playin' tricks. Maybe it wasn't Pa. But it was.

When Ben and I got home, Pa was sittin' in the kitchen unlacin' his shoes.

"Sorry, I'm going to have to spoil your rabbit shoot tomorrow, Son. We're goin' to take a load of flour over to Silver City. It's a right good price there now and worth the risk, I think." The risk he meant was the road agents.

For two years, those road agents hadn't let a honeybee get through without drainin' her. But the vigilantes had pretty nearly cleaned them out, and if a feller was handy with a team and a rifle, he could make himself a nice bit of money 'cause prices were still high.

"There's sixteen wagons goin'. It's a good chance for us, son. We can sure use a little hard cash. We won't be bothered with that big a train."

We set out the next morning. The trip was rough, just ridin' them buckin' wagons and greasin' wheels and beddin' down at night so sore and tired I thought I'd never sleep 'til suddenly it was daylight and Pa was shakin' me to get up to breakfast.

Pa didn't sleep much. "Watchin' for hostiles," he said. "Never can tell when a load of white flour like this would be a prime target." His eyes got red-rimmed, and his face gaunted down. I knew it wasn't hostiles worryin' him. The vigilantes had done a good job, cause there was nothin' on that trail but magpies and sage hens and some quimps, or ground squirrels. He was worryin' about makin' ends meet at home. I took some shots at the quimps, but though Pa didn't speak about it, I knew that he was countin' the bullets wasted. It bothered me 'cause Pa ain't tight. I only shot sage hens after that and got enough to roast over the fire for supper two, three times.

When I got toughened up a little and I wasn't quite so tired, I would have enjoyed the trip if it hadn't been for the way I felt about Pa. I kept thinkin' about the spell of foolishness. I wondered why my folks had been arguin', and I wondered, sick-like inside, why Pa had visited the widow. Ma sure hadn't seemed very soft lately.

But Pa couldn't say the things he said to me and still be seein' the widow. Take the thing about women.

At night, the fellers joked kinda rough and sang around the fire. They talked about the women in Silver City, and I thought once Pa was goin' to send me away from the fire. But it would have made me seem a boy, and since I'd broke my first horse, Pa'd always treated me like a man. He just got up and rolled in his blanket, and half sitting against the wagon wheel, he shut his eyes. I laid down on the other side of the wagon.

"Pa?" I knew he wasn't asleep.

"Are there women in Silver City, like they say . . . that you can buy?"

"Yep." He waited until he knew I'd rolled the thought

around pretty good in my mind. "There've always been women that a man could buy. You don't find 'em all in the saloons either, boy. The dance hall girls are the cheapest . . . to pay for . . . the others can cost a man everything he makes his whole life. But there are those, like your mother, if you look for them, who come to you clean and free like God's pure air or a deep drink of spring water. They couldn't be bought 'cause there isn't enough gold in the world to make up their price. I'm hopin' you'll find one of those."

He didn't say any more. I tried to wipe the thought away that he knew about these women that cost everything a man had.

The stars were big and thick and so close I thought if my fingers were only a mite longer, I could pluck one out of the velvet. There were so many of them they clotted together like curds, and they made a noise a long way off, high like a woman singing or screaming maybe, like Ma that last minute before she had Max William. The stars quieted, and I slept.

We drove into Silver City, and as soon as we unloaded the wagons, the rest of the men went to the Red Wing, but Pa went up to the hotel. He said we'd had a hard drive and we'd rest up a day before goin' back. He dropped his shoes heavily on the floor.

"Boy, I'm bone tired, I'm goin' to rest up. If you want to go see the sights, you have my blessin'. This might be the only time you get up this way, so you better make the most of it." He handed me some silver and I left.

While Pa was sleepin' the day away, I had myself a time. I watched the fellers with their arms around the fancy girls. I wondered what my ma would say to see all that nakedness. They swished their skirts, I thought, just to make a feller look at their ankles. I looked. And I was grown enough to like the lookin'. But I couldn't see any woman what looked to me like fresh air smelled or spring water tasted, so I just watched the other fellers.

The next day Pa settled up for the flour, and it was sure a come down. With the road agents cleared out, things weren't nearly so tough in Silver City as we'd been led to believe, and we didn't make wages for the trip over. We left right after the settlin', and the trip back was pretty much the same, 'cept the fellers didn't sing and joke as they had comin' over.

Pa was real quiet. He didn't talk to me and explain things. He just sat up on the wagon seat clackin' the reins and broodin'. His eyes were dark, and his shoulders weren't straight and wide as usual. He reminded me of old Willy-Wish-for-God, who always sat in front of his open-chinked log cabin, hunched and broodin' and wishin', day after day.

When we drove the team into the yard, the little kids came flyin' out, but Ma didn't. She was frying dough gods when we went in, and she kissed and patted me, but she just sort of let Pa peck at her cheek, and she turned back to the stove.

"Supper's about on. You'd better wash up."

The shadowy sickening thing that was tearing at our

family grew big and filled the room, and I wasn't hungry. I went down to the barn to see how Bess was. She was about to foal, and Pa had said that I could have the colt.

I dreaded the night to come because I knew the arguin' would start again. And it did. But this time, the voices were louder, and I heard enough to know that Ben Selly hadn't kept his mouth shut. Pa didn't say much, but I heard the door close and then the kitchen door, and I knew that Pa had left the house.

**F**OR THE NEXT two weeks, Pa was all-fired busy. He went into town at night to the pool hall, and Ma slammed the weavin' frames 'til almost dawn. The quarreling at night had almost stopped. Sometimes Ma slept alone, just turnin' down her side of the soft feather bed. Pa'd stay down at the barn. I slipped down there one night, thinkin' he'd like my company, but he shooed me out like he would a pig in a melon patch. He was writin' and figgerin' by the light of a lantern. I guessed Pa was more worried than I thought, even.

The women came to visit Ma with sympathy on their faces, and I knew why. Pa walked in and out of the widow's front gate as bold as he did our own. The widow was struttin' around town dressed fit to kill and chargin' things and sayin' my Pa would pay the bills.

I never suffered so much when old Whitey rolled on my leg when she fell crossin' Sheep Creek, as those weeks watchin' my Pa slip his harness.

Ma was heartbroke. She housecleaned just like it was spring. She put a chair up on the big, old, round oak table, and two of the little girls held it steady. Then she climbed up and cleaned every little curlicue of the carved round fresco that the milk glass chandelier hung from.

She rubbed her finger gentle over the round little bellies of the cupids, and she cried and my little sisters cried. When I offered to clean it for her, she said she'd do it herself and pushed me out of the room.

When Ma asked me to saddle up and ride over to the Bishop's to ask him to call, old as I was, ready to step out on my own almost, I was sick. I felt like I had when Jack Simmons and me had tried smokin' corn silk and cedar bark. I thought of Jack's folks, how they argued all the time. His ma sulked, and a feller didn't feel right steppin' in to Jack's house 'cause the air was thick and dark even on a sunny day. My kid sisters wouldn't know how to act if Ma sulked or Pa should go away.

Pa was down in the barn rubbin' Bess when I finished the last of the milkin'. Milkin' was no chore nowadays: one of our best Jerseys died of the bloat, and one was dry, so I only had a couple, barely enough milk for the kids.

"Pa," I said, "what's goin' on between you and Ma? I hear you arguin' at night. If it's money, I got fifty dollars put by against goin' down to the Academy, and I got about seven dollars in the sugar bowl, saved for that gun at the drygoods. If it'll help you any, you're welcome. And Pa, if it's that spell of foolishness you told me about, Pa, you're too smart to be

took in by corn-colored hair."

Pa gave me that considerin' look he has and said, "So that's what you've been thinkin', too. I guess you're entitled to know, son. Come up to the house. I think we're goin' to have a stockholders' meetin'."

We're the stockholders. Pa and Ma and me and the rest of the kids, nine of us all told.

On the way up to the path to the house, Pa stopped as always to load up with wood.

"Never go past the woodpile empty-handed," he'd say. "I don't want Ma and the girls runnin' out of firewood. Never go in the house empty-handed. If you're out in the hills and you can't get a rabbit or a sage hen, pick an armful of autumn leaves, or some lupin or some paintbrush. Ma prizes 'em to put on the mantle."

I've seen him come in the door with a hat full of brown eggs, or crab apples, or wild red currants. Sometimes even a baby rabbit for the little ones or shiny brown chestnuts. But he never came home from his day's work without somethin' in his hands.

Ma'd sit, flounced down in her sprigged skirts and show us, "Little Amy's got three horse chestnuts. You have five. How many more do you have than Amy has?" The little kids played with 'em 'till the nuts got old and wrinkled.

Pa stacked the wood in the woodbox while I strained the milk and poured it into the big flat milk pans, and put them in the milk safe. Ma'd skim the cream off real careful now for butter. She used to leave flecks of cream on the pans and they'd fill the hollows made by the melting brown sugar in the breakfast oatmeal.

We could hear voices in the parlor.

"It's the Bishop," Pa said, and his mouth stretched narrow and lipless under his mustache. "Your mother's brought him in to talk to me."

I hung back at the door, but he beckoned me in. I could see by the set of Ma's chin that she didn't approve my bein' there.

The Bishop shook hands with Pa and me, and then he didn't beat around the bush.

"You want the boy here, Abijah?"

I thought Pa grinned a little.

"Yes."

"What's all this noise about you and Bill Petrie's widow?"

Ma looked hard at the Bishop's shoes, and I was shamed. I looked at the old clock in the corner. The pendulum swung so slow it was a mystery how it could keep up with the little one out on the kitchen shelf. The kitchen clock clacked away lickity split. This old clock savored time like the little girls savored a peppermint stick.

"That's what it is, Bishop. Noise. I haven't been to see the widow for carnal reasons." He looked at Ma hard as she raised her blue eyes quickly. They had tears in them, but she believed him.

The Bishop knitted his fingers and twirled them, index finger to thumb, thumb to little finger. It teased me.

"You've been seen comin' from her house."

“Yes.”

“She’s run up quite a few bills around town, got her chimney patched, and hired Olie Wood to come and clean up her yard. You paid all the bills, and then sudden she comes into cash to pay for the chimney and the yard and fancy duds and so forth. She’s told folks you gave her the money.”

“Yes.”

“How come? That widow don’t have but one thing men around here are about to pay for.”

Pa snorted. “She did have. She had the other half of Billy Petrie’s mine!”

I never felt so relieved since Max William, our littlest, fell into Red Creek. Pa couldn’t swim, but he waded in that roily water up to his neck, sweepin’ his arms wide to keep his balance. He seemed to know just where the current had pulled Max William under ‘cause he reached down by the beaver dam and pulled him out, limp and dripping and dead.

Pa had put his mouth over Max William’s and breathed in and out, in and out. I was almost fifteen then, but I bawled like a girl, and finally I pulled at Pa and said,

“It’s just no use, Pa. Max William’s dead.” Pa said real fast in between breaths, “Who’s goin’ to tell your mother that?” He kept on until Max William whimpered, and then even Pa cried. Pa wrapped him in my shirt, and we carried him home, and no one ‘cept me and Pa ever knew how nearly we came to losin’ him. Max William and me are twelve years apart, but he tags me everywhere Ma will let him, and it seems like nothin’ he could do would nuisance me.

I felt just like I had when Max William drew in the first croupy breath. I was ashamed, too, that I hadn’t trusted Pa. That I’d been thinkin’ what I had about him and the widow.

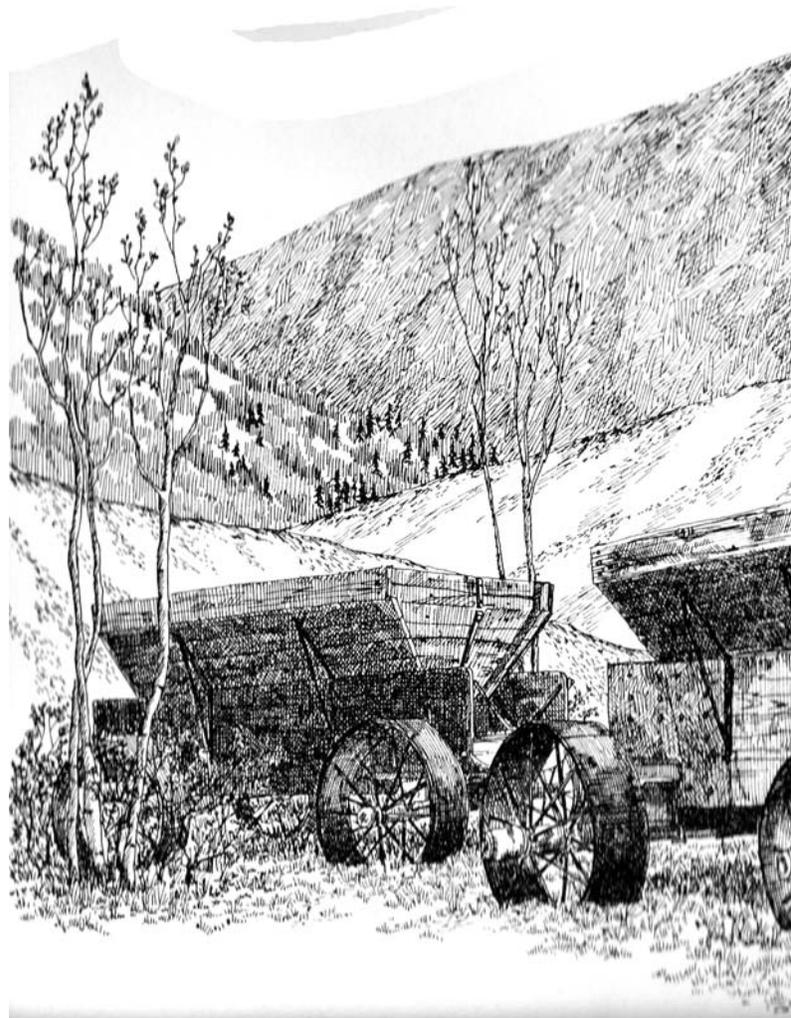
The relief was so great I hadn’t been listenin’, and then I heard Ma, her usual soft voice risin’ to a high wail.

“Abijah, no! Not the house!” And the bishop’s, “You mortgaged your property to buy that washed-out mine? Abijah, where’s your common sense!”

Pa nodded. “Yes, I’m gonna work that claim Bill Petrie deeded me. I been workin’ on an idea, and I believe I can make it pay.”

“But what if you fail, Abijah? Then what’ll your family do? You had a house free and clear and enough to feed you this year. Next year, probably the drought will let up, and provided so, you’d have land enough to make you a rich man in time.”

“No sir,” Pa said, and his mouth thinned. “I’m goin’.” I’ve already got the mortgage money from the bank, and I used it to buy out the Widow Petrie’s share of the claim. I kept quiet about it til it was set, ‘cause I knew Art Huntsman and Jude Coop both would have liked to bought it if they’d known she would consider sellin’. She wasn’t goin’ to, you know. She believed in Billy, too. I paid her a fair price, and it took most everythin’ we got. I would have told Amy when she was jawin’ at me, but I knew that she wouldn’t be able to keep from tellin’ people that I wasn’t really steppin’ the widow, that it was just business. And I didn’t want Art and



**“You mortgaged your property to where’s your common sense! What**

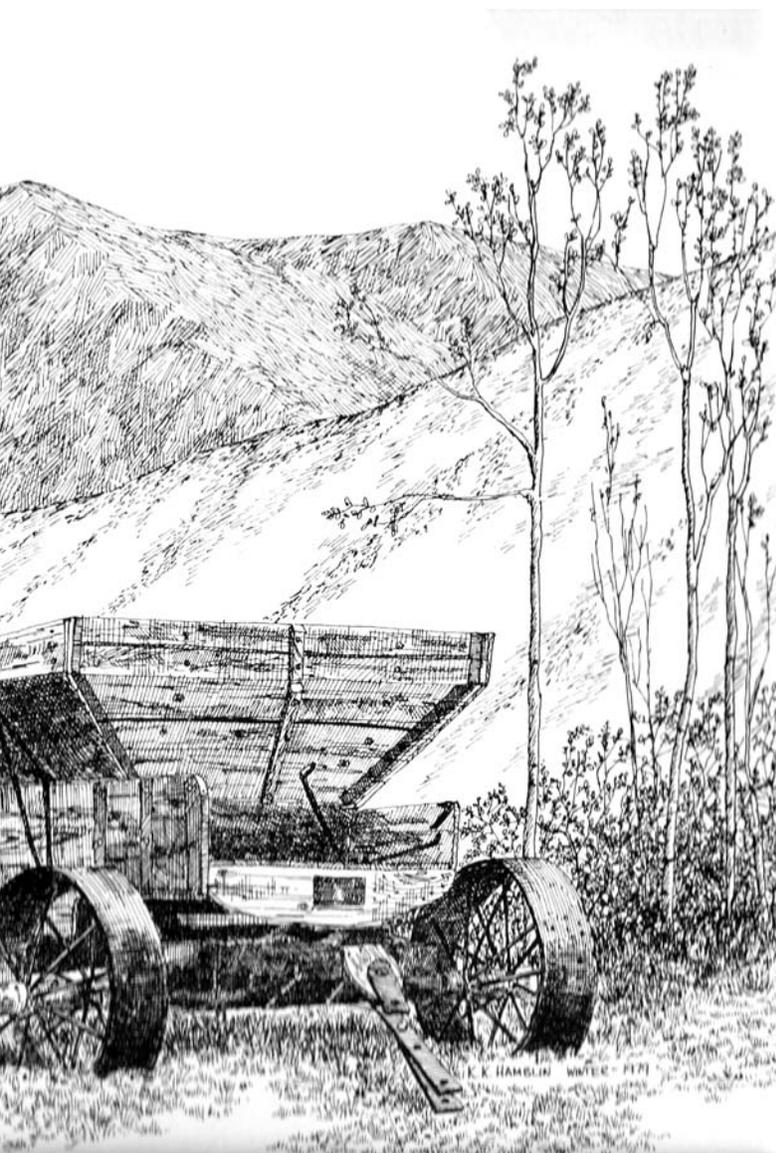
Jude to get the jump on me.”

“You aren’t thinkin’ clear, ‘Bije,” said the bishop. You’re actin’ like a middle-aged fool.”

“Soon as Riley Owens gets in the supplies I’ve ordered, I’m takin’ off. And I promise you this. My family won’t have to be beggin’ the town council and the bishopric for succor, I’ll see to that.”

Ma covered her head with her apron and sobbed.

The Bishop patted her on the shoulder. “Don’t take on, Amy,” he said. “I’ve known Abijah for a good many years, and he isn’t often too far off the track.” But he shook his head doubtfully even as he tried to calm her.



## buy that washed-out mine? Abijah, if you fail? What'll your family do?

I WAS SHOOK deep. Pa had always been the smartest man I knew. He was a sight smarter than Addie Wilcox, who had graduated at the Academy and taught the older grades at school. He was smarter than Mayor Hilbreth, who was forever a'comin' round and askin' Pa's advice on who'd be good for watermaster, and would Pa take charge of the Fourth celebration and such. But I knew that Ma and the Bishop were right. This was downright tomfoolery. Pa was thrown' good money after bad.

I thought suddenly of the spell of foolishness in the middle years. It didn't always have to be a woman. Pa had been more worried than I thought about the drought and losin' the cattle and killin' Ma's steer. He'd gone daft like old

Banker Forbes had when he loaned so much money to the farmers and they couldn't pay him back. The bank just closed its doors, and when he pulled down the blinds in the bank, he pulled them down over his mind, too. When anybody tried to pass the time of day with him, he cried, the tears dripping down over cheeks that bagged like Ma's old, brown crepe shirtwaist. He was a trial to his family, I can tell you. And the shame finally drove 'em all out of town, though everyone knew he was honest as the day is long and it wasn't his fault 'cept maybe he was too soft-hearted for a banker.

Pa's daftness didn't show, only in the thinnin' of his lips and the set of his jib.

The worst blow up came when Pa said quiet-like at the dinner table that he would need to take me along with him to the mine. Ma yelled. The first time in my life, I ever heard her yell. All the kids bawled, and I came near to it.

"You've mortgaged everything we've got and given it to a silly woman!" Ma stood at the foot of the table and beat with her fist until the plates bounced. "And now she's running around in flounced skirts and fancy bonnets, and I don't know what we're coming to."

Pa stood up at the head of the table, and he said real clear, "Dry up, Amy."

Ma dried up. She was as shocked as we were that he'd lifted his tongue to her. "I'd leave the boy here with you, but he's as good help as a full-grown man. It's taken most of the mortgage money now to pay for the men I'm going to need. Son, you're goin' along."

From that night on, til we pulled out of the yard, Ma seemed to make up her mind to accept Pa's will. She never said a cross word. She fixed Pa's and my favorites for dinner. She helped pack the wagons. She acted as though she'd never had a worry, and though I listened at night, I never heard more than the usual gentle murmurs or Pa's snores as he slept.

The night before we left, we had a whopping big dinner in the dining room under the cherubs and flowers that Ma had scrubbed so careful.

We had lemon pie, Pa's favorite. And I knew that it had taken all the little hoard that Ma had put away for a new waist for Christmas to buy those lemons. Only toney folks could afford lemons.

"This is the finest pie I ever ate." Pa looked at Ma with his eyes shining like they had before all the ruckus had started. The little kids giggled and laughed and everything seemed like it used to. Then Ma stood up. She spoke real gentle and soft, but the courage it took for her to speak her piece made each word seem to mean a lot more than she said.

"Children, I must apologize to your father. He is a fine man, a good husband, and a good father. I took away my trust, but I'm giving it back now. I know that he loves us and that he is doing what he thinks is wise. I know that he will do what he has set out to do. And may the Lord bless us while we are apart."

Pa wiped his mustache with his napkin. He looked like he might be going to say something important. We stopped

eating to listen.

“Yep, finest pie I ever ate!”

When we set out the next morning, I was sorry I couldn't have Ma's faith. There went all our ground, the barns, the livestock, the big cool house built with nana-kilned adobes, Ma's chandelier. I thought she was mighty brave as she waved to us.

Pa had hired ten men. They were all good workers, fellers that had been hit hard by the drought and were glad of a chance for a little work. Three of them had hired out their teams and wagons, too. Old Jimmy Wilson, who had cooked for Petrie's mining camp, was there, drivin' a loaded chuck-wagon.

I was real surprised at all the fuss Pa had gone to. There was food for about a month. One wagon we loaded with picks and shovels and lumber, one was filled with bedrolls and tents, and one was loaded high with beans and bacon and flour and the like. Pa drove the lead wagon, with the bedrolls, but tucked inside was a box of dynamite. I drove our hay wagon at the end of the line.

It was quite an undertakin'. Five wagons and a white top rolled out the gate. Pa had built benches in the white top where the fellers sat when they weren't drivin' one of the teams. Behind the white top trotted two little mules that some broke miner had traded to Pa for the price of a ticket to St. Louis. They were the cutest little cusses.

Everybody on the way waved goodbye to us. But I could see that Pa was a big joke, even to the fellers who were goin' with us. As we rolled out of town, I felt the bitterness of my sudden growing up and knowing that my pa wasn't as wise as I'd always thought. It tasted like the chicken gall old half-blind Maggie Olsen had left on a piece of fried liver she once gave me.

**I**T TOOK US three days to get to Petrie's mine. Pa didn't say much, and I couldn't get over the hurt of knowin' that Pa wasn't so special. I remembered how Old Billy Petrie had come to talk to Pa when the mine filled up the last time. He'd spent every cent he'd made hiring engineers and drillers and buyin' pumps to get the water out of the shaft, but it was hopeless. And he died broke and livin' on my pa's charity when once he'd been the richest man in town. Now Pa was doin' the same thing, throwing everything he owned away.

I didn't really mind that part so much. It was just that I couldn't stand to have him called a fool. The thought burned a hundred times worse than Ma's old mustard plasters.

I guess Pa knew how I felt. He didn't try to explain anything, and I was glad.

The last day getting to the mine was a rough one. We had to move each wagon up a little at a time, putting chocks under the wheels to hold them. Ten years before, when Old Billy's mine was runnin', the road had been passable, if steep, but washouts and rock slides since had just about wiped it out.

We got the last wagon to the mine just about dusk. It was

drizzlin' a mite, and Barrel Mountain reminded me of Old Billy in his burial shroud. The clouds were black and hung around the mountain like vultures around a carcass.

I piled out of the hay wagon and hiked up the stretch to the mine. The skeletons of the equipment Old Billy had bought were lying around the shaft, and even before I got real close, I could smell it. The water was deep and black and smelled of earth and drowned rats and failure.

**W**E SET UP camp in the rain, but before Jimmy had supper ready, the rain stopped. The clouds still threatened heavily, and so we ate and went to bed. Nobody sang or joked, and I listened from my bed in the white top, but none of the fellers were even talkin' to one another.

It had all been pretty awful up to now, but I swore the next few days, Pa had gone stark ravin' mad. Some of the pumpin' equipment could still be pieced together and used, but Pa told the men to just move everything away from the entrance and heap it up on the side of the hill. They hitched the teams to some of the heavier pieces and dragged them aside.

He told us to load the picks and shovels on the mules, and Jimmy put us up a lunch apiece, and Pa had us hike around the side of the mountain. It wasn't a hard pull, but I got some bruises as big as my fist from slippin' on the shale. Those men weren't cussin' men, or I bet it would've been a noisy trip.

We dug a portal on the side of the hill opposite the mine and about a hundred and fifty feet below. Pa blasted out the surface rock, and then down a ways it was dense clay. We dug for a week. Pa built a cart from lumber he'd brought, and the little mules hauled the clay out of the tunnel about as fast as the men could dig it. My job was to guide the mule cart. I lost count of the hundreds of trips I made, and all the time, I was thinkin' that Pa was crazy as a bedbug.

The tunnel got deeper and longer, and I heard the men jokin' to one another about Pa's diggin' the wrong way. One of 'em said that if they'd been diggin' straight down all this time, we'd have hit either China or hell by now. And he preferred hell on account a little heat would be welcome. It was still cold and wet on the mountain.

At night we'd slog over the hill again and feed the horses and mules, and we'd go to bed. I had never felt like this before. So useless. Diggin', luggin, sloggin' day in and day out. And for what?

About the ninth day of diggin', the clay began to get wet, and Pa was grinnin' like a chessy cat. He called all of us out of the tunnel, and he drew on the ground.

“I didn't want to explain all this before because if I was wrong, I would have looked more a fool than you already thought me. But now I'm goin' to tell you what my plan is.

“I got to thinkin' a while ago that maybe the reason they couldn't pump that mine out was that the water was leakin' in from an underground stream or such. If it was comin' from a rock fissure, then maybe it could be drained. It was a

hunch, boys, but that wet clay tells me I was right. We've been diggin' the drain."

That was the first I found out what all those nights that Pa had been figgerin' out in the barn were for. He'd figgered out a way to drain that shaft! I listened to him talk, and with each word he said, the old pride and respect I'd always had for him came flooding back. I knew then, that no matter what Pa did from that time on, I'd trust him.

"This is where we are," Pa drew in the dirt "Now if we slanted this tunnel up-hill just a mite as we've been doin', we should hit that water, and then instead of seepin' into the mine, it'll drain out this way. From now on, we're goin' to have to dig careful and shore up in places, 'cause I don't want that water breakin' loose and drownin' any of you fellers."

I guess everything I've learned, I've learned the hard way and sometimes twice over. That's the way I learned now. Pa told me what to do, and I did, working in the muck and grime knee-deep. It was messy work, but all of us did it willingly now. The sun had come out.

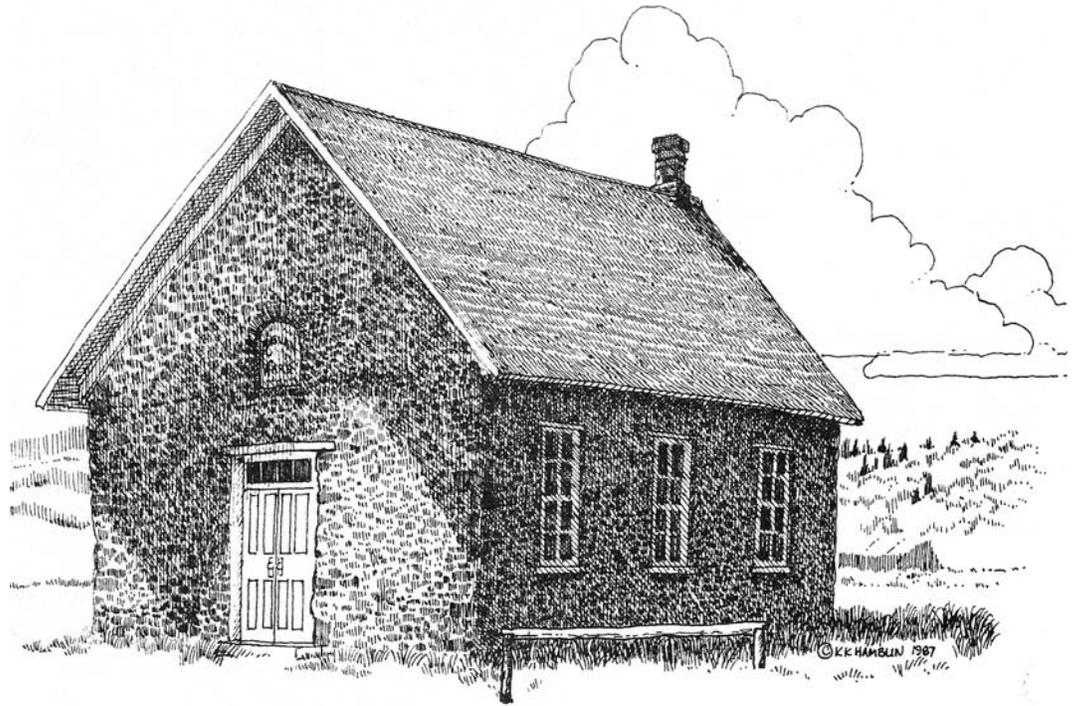
We dug a couple more days, taking longer now because we had to stop to shore up the tunnel to make it safe. Finally, Pa wouldn't let none of us go in except him. The last few loads he brought out himself.

The last day, he brought the dynamite over, and I watched him lay the fuse, taking care to keep it out of the wet. He took in a fuse that I thought was awful short. But he said it had to be or else the damp would have more chance to put it out. He tied up about ten sticks of dynamite, and he told us to get up on the hill.

That last few minutes were as near to hell as I'm ever goin' to come. It was worse than hearin' the quarrelin', worse than the gossip, worse even than when I thought Max William was dead. Pa went in that tunnel, and he didn't come out.

It hit me sudden just what I'd lose if I lost my Pa, and I started down the hill, but one of the men held me back. I was prayin'. Beggin' and promisin' the Lord everythin' he ever wanted of me, if only Pa came out of that tunnel.

There was a long "therumph" from the bowels of the



**Pa didn't make no million, but he made enough so that the tithing he paid near supported the Church for as long as he lived.**

mountain, and I saw Pa runnin' out of the portal. His old legs were stretchin' for every inch they had in 'em. Right behind him, lickin' his heels came the water. He scrambled up on the mountain where we were, and he grabbed me and hugged and slapped me on the back as the water poured out of the tunnel and down the mountainside.

The men were glad as Pa and me. We went back to the chuckwagon, and you never saw such a feed as Jimmy put on. Spuds deep-fried in butter, pieces of ham thick and covered with gravy, sourdough biscuits, and somehow, Jimmy baked us a cake, and we had a birthday party for the mine.

We named it the Golden Hunch.

When we got back to town, the people waved us in, and the look on their faces was some different. The same folks that had snickered at him came up to Pa and said,

"We always knew you had it in you, Abijah."

Pa paid off the mortgages, and I went to the Academy, and Ma didn't have to kill her steer. Pa didn't make no million, but he made enough so that the tithing he paid near supported the Church for as long as he lived.

I learned to trust. I've been wrong plenty of times, but most times I've been right, trustin' people, I mean. Like Pa trusted old Bill Petrie with his mind, and like my Ma trusted Pa with her heart.