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A Short Walk and a Long Drop

by Juliet Robinson

‘Put on your boots, strap on your gun, come on let’s ride.’

Abner, always with a sense of the dramatic.

The posse crossed the border in darkness, horses blowing hard, my hands numb on the reins. We hit the snowy plains as the sun rose, its glare fierce on the white world, but it did nothing to warm me.

Round noon we reached the pass, where Decker and I rigged the cliffs with dynamite. We hid them best as we could, the train would have to slow here as the tracks make a steep curve, we didn’t want an attentive engineer spotting anything. Then all we had to do was wait.

Lopez, Red and Decker played cards, I saw to the horses and the twins Laird and Kit heated up some foul-tasting coffee. Abner, he sat apart and made notes in that book he keeps. A thinking man, or at least that’s what he wants us to believe.

We heard the train long before we saw it, the shrill piping of her whistle and the chug of her engine reverberating off canyon walls. A ripple of excitement flowed through the posse. Decker hurried to the detonator, the fire was kicked out, I brought the horses up, girths were tightened, guns were checked and we mounted. Bravado and swagger were high, today would see a big pay out. The train below belonged to Archibald Wallace and our sources assured that a back dated payroll was onboard.

On Abner’s signal Decker blew the dynamite. The cliff walls heaved, as if taking a deep breath then blew outwards and tumbled onto the tracks. The whistle cried again and brakes screamed. All along the train windows fluttered open and guards poked their heads out.

Kit and Laird opened fire, their Winchesters cracking loudly as they picked off guards and enginemen. Then we were away, hooves kicking up muck and rocks as we bore down on the train. The plan was simple. Abner and I would take the armoured car, we had bolt cutters and dynamite, but we hoped to pick up a guard on the way and force them to open the car. Easier, quicker, less likely to damage what was inside. While we did this the others would subdue the guards and rob the passengers.

Things went smoothly, we met less resistance than expected, far less. The vault was as promised, a treasure trove. Alongside the payroll we picked up ten gold bars. Abner strutted as if he had laid them himself, while I wondered about the ease of the robbery.

Lopez's horse dragging his lifeless body along the tracks alerted us to the arrival of the Pinkertons. For a moment the world stilled, then they were on us, guns firing. A set up and we had fallen for it.

Saddlebags bulging, we scrambled back to our mounts and flew. Our horses weren't fresh, they didn't have the legs for a race. Decker chose to face the Pinkertons. Laird's mare went down and Kit turned to help his brother. Red, we lost in the woods. Abner and I raced on. Not far from the border, with freedom in sight he turned, aimed his colt at my horse and shot her out from under me.

Down we went, a tumbling mass of horse and rider, a flurry of bank notes, snow, and dirt. I watched Abner cross the river and disappear.

The Pinkertons brought me in. They gave me a choice, a short walk and a long drop, or information on Abner. I ratted my brother out; I spilled my guts.

Red danced on the line while I waited to see if my information brought Abner in. I wanted to live, but my information proved worthless.

A story can only end one of two ways: truthfully or artfully. On a fine spring morning I was taken to the gallows, a crowd had gathered to watch me drop, the mayor and other dignitaries. Just before the gallows man dragged a sack over my head a well-dressed gentleman who stood next to the mayor doffed his hat to me and smiled with satisfaction, Abner.