

Partners

by **Frederick Faust, 1892-1944**

Published: 1938
in »The American Magazine«

AFTER September, no one takes Caldwell Pass because, although it is the shortest way west from Bisby, it is so high, so threatened with avalanches of snow and rubble. It has a bad name, also, for the northwest wind which, once it sights its way down the ravine, can blow frost even into the heart of a mountain sheep.

This was a December day, but Tucker was spending the early afternoon in Caldwell Pass, sitting behind a stone with his rifle across his knees. Once a bird shadow slid over him. As it moved beside the rock it touched Tucker with a finger of ice and forced him to shift his position. But he waited with the patience of a good hunter until he heard the footfall come down the pass toward him. Then he slid the rifle out into the crevice of the rock. He waited till he could hear the man's breathing. Then he said, „Hands up, Jack!“

Huntingdon turned his back sharply. Seen from behind there was no trace of middle age about him. He looked as trim and powerful as a young athlete.

The echo in the ravine had fooled him. „Well, Harry?“ he was saying.

„Keep your hands up. You'll get it straight through the back of the head if you don't,“ said Tucker to the big man.

He went out and laid the muzzle of the rifle against the base of Huntingdon's skull. He held the gun under his right arm and patted the clothes of his partner

with his left hand. He found the fat lump which the wallet made, and drew it out. There was no weapon.

„All right, Jack. Turn around,“ he said.

Huntingdon turned. He was a bit white on each cheek, below the cheekbone. He kept on smiling.

„How much did you take?“ asked Tucker, with his gun still threatening.

„I cleaned out the safe.“

„You left me flat?“

„I left you the house, the office, and the good will,“ said Huntingdon.

„I had the house and the office and the good will before you came,“ said Tucker.

„You had a mortgage on the house; nobody ever came to your office; and where was the good will?“ asked Huntingdon.

Tucker frowned. He had been telling himself that he was the mere executor of justice; but he might have known that the tongue of Huntingdon would turn this execution into murder.

„Kind of surprised to find me here, aren't you?“ asked Tucker.

„I'm surprised... a little.“

„Why, I've always seen through you,“ said Tucker. „I knew about you and Molly right from the first.“

He laughed, without letting the laughter shake his body or the gun in his hands.

„You never knew a wrong thing between us,“ said Huntingdon.

„Maybe there wasn't anything wrong enough to get a divorce for,“ said Tucker.

„Molly's dead,“ said Huntingdon. „For God's sake, Harry... she's dead!“

Tucker licked his lips. It pleased him to see the pain in Huntingdon's eyes.

„There's more things than bedtime stories in the world,“ he persisted. „There's a sneaking into a man's life and taking his wife away from him. There's a holding together of eyes, when the hands don't touch. There's a way of just silently enduring the poor damned fool of a husband. There's...! Oh, damn you! You rotten...!“ He got out of breath and took a deep inhalation through his teeth. „I wish she could see you here, with the stolen money!“ said Tucker.

Huntingdon smiled. „I think you're going to kill me.“

Tucker looked at that handsome face with a dreadful amazement; for he saw that his partner was not afraid.

„Before you put the bullet into me, though,“ said Huntingdon, „I want to speak about the money. I've worked for ten years for you. Slaved. You called me a junior partner. But I was only a slave. At the end of that time, I had nothing.“

„You know the kind of expenses...“ began Tucker.

„At the end of ten years,“ said Huntingdon, „I find eighteen hundred dollars in the safe, and I take it. It's the only way I'll ever get a share. I take the money and get out. I thought I was going ten thousand miles to have elbow-room between us... But this way is about as good. It will put the greatest possible distance between us.“

„Now, what in hell d'you mean by that?“ asked Tucker.

„You couldn't understand.“

„It's too high for me to understand? It's above me, maybe?“ All at once Tucker screamed, „Take this, then! And this!“

He fired as he was shouting. And the rifle went crazy in his hands. It missed twice. The third bullet hit Huntingdon between the knee and the hip. He sank slowly to the ground. The blood came up in a welter of dark red. It soaked his trouser leg at once and began to trickle down over the rock.

„You're too high for me, are you?“ yelled Tucker. „Well, what you think now...? Another thing, damn you, and you listen hard to it. What you ever do with your life before you hooked up with me in the partnership? Just a bum. Just a rambling bum. Never did a thing. Isn't that true? Speak out!“

„It's true,“ said Huntingdon.

„Never a damn' bit of good to yourself or anybody else till you hooked up with me,“ said Tucker.

„That's true, also,“ said Huntingdon. He looked away from Tucker and smiled at the sky. „In a sense, I suppose, we needed each other; in a sense, perhaps we were ideal partners,“ he said.

Tucker began to laugh, and then a chill gust of wind stopped his breath, quickly, like a handstroke. It was not a mere breath of wind. It was the true northwester which had found the ravine and was sighting down it as down a gun barrel.

He withdrew himself from his passion and, looking about him, saw that the sun was about to set. It was more than time for him to start back home. In spite of his fleece-lined coat, his teeth would be chattering long before he got out of the pass. He turned with the rifle toward big Huntingdon. His face was blue with cold. Tucker had lifted the gun butt to his shoulder, but now he lowered it again.

„I've got to leave you, Jack,“ he said. „But it'll be thirty below in half an hour, with plenty of wind to drive the cold through you. You're going to have a few minutes to think things over, and then... you'll get sleepy!“

He saw Huntingdon's eyes widen; and then he was calm again.

„Good bye, then,“ said Huntingdon.

„Ah, to hell with you!“ snarled Tucker.

He whirled, determined to run the entire distance down the pass in order to keep from freezing, but with his first springing step his feet shot from beneath him, because he had stepped in the blood that ran from Huntingdon. He came down heavily on his right knee, and heard the bone crunch like old wood.

For an instant the pain leaped out of the broken bone and ached behind his eyes; then he forgot all about it because he realized that he was about to die. The northwest wind pitched its song an octave higher, and right through the heavy, fleece-lined coat it laid its invisible hand on the naked flesh of Tucker.

Huntingdon's voice said, cheerfully, „If you finish me off now, and take my clothes, the warmth of them will do you less good than the warmth of my body... But if we haul to the windward of that rock and lie down close together... Sam Hillier comes through the pass tomorrow morning with his pack mules. We might last it out.“

„Lie close together? You and me?“ said Tucker, in a sort of horror. And then he saw that it was the only way.

Moving was bitterest agony, but both he and Huntingdon got to the shelter of the big rock, and the salvation from the wind was like a promise of heaven that they still might live. Tucker lay flat on his back, his teeth set with a scream

working up higher and higher in his throat. The cut of the wind grew less and less. He opened his eyes and saw that Huntingdon was piling smaller rocks on each side of the boulder so that the icy eddyings of the gale might not get at them.

Afterward, Huntingdon lay down beside him, gathered him close.

„What chance is there?“ asked Tucker. „What chance, Jack?“

„One in fifty,“ said Huntingdon. And then, as he felt the shudder pass through Tucker’s body, he added, „Yes, or one in five. The thing to do is to keep on hoping, and talking.“

„Ay, and we’ve things to talk about,“ said Tucker.

„We have,“ answered Huntingdon.

The warmth of Huntingdon’s body began to strike through Tucker’s clothes. He blessed God for it.

„But man, man,“ said Tucker, „what a fool you were to come up into Caldwell’s Pass on a December day without a heavy coat! Take the fleece-lined thing off me and put it over us both. And hope, Jack. It’s hope that keeps the heart warm!“

