

GOLD-MOUNTED GUNS

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“How much better is it to get wisdom than gold!” writes Solomon in Proverbs 16:16. How is “Pecos Tommy’s” generosity worth more than money to Will Arblaster?

Evening had fallen on Longhorn City, and already, to the south, an eager star was twinkling in the velvet sky, when a spare, hard-faced man slouched down the main street and selected a pony from the dozen hitched beside Tim Geogehan’s general store. The town, which in the daytime suffered from an excess* of eye-searing* light in its open spaces, confined its efforts at artificial lighting to the one store, the one saloon, and its neighbor, the Temple of Chance; so it was from a dusky void* that the hard-faced man heard himself called by name.

excess: overabundance

eye-searing: i.e., burning

void: empty space

“Tommy!” a subdued voice accosted* him.

accosted: spoke boldly to

The hard-faced man made, it seemed, a very slight movement—a mere flick of the hand at his low-slung belt; but it was a movement perfectly appraised* by the man in the shadows.

appraised: expertly judged

“Wait a minute!” the voice pleaded.

A moment later, his hands upraised, his pony’s bridle-reins caught in the crook of one arm, a young man moved into the zone of light that shone bravely out through Tim Geogehan’s back window.



“Don’t shoot,” he said, trying to control his nervousness before the weapon unwaveringly trained upon him. “I’m—a friend.”

For perhaps fifteen seconds the newcomer and the hard-faced man examined each other with the unwinking scrutiny* of those who take chances of life and death. The younger, with that lightning draw fresh in his mind, noted the sinister* droop of a gray moustache over a hidden mouth, and shivered a little as his gaze met that of a pair of steel-blue eyes. The man with the gun saw before him a rather handsome face, marred, even in this moment of submission, by a certain desperation.

scrutiny: study

sinister: suggesting trouble

“What do you want?” he asked, tersely.*

tersely: without unnecessary words

“Can I put my hands down?” countered the other.

The lean man considered.

“All things bein’ equal,” he said, “I think I’d rather you’d first tell me how you got round to callin’ me Tommy. Been askin’ people in the street?”

“No,” said the boy. “I only got into town this afternoon, an’ I ain’t a fool anyway. I seen you ride in this afternoon, an’ of course I knew. Nobody ever had guns like them but Pecos Tommy. I could ha’ shot you while you was gettin’ your horse, if I’d been that way inclined.”

The lean man bit his moustache.

“Put ’em down. What do you want?”

“I want to join you.”

“You want to *what*?”

“Yeah, I know it sounds foolish to you, mebbe,” said the young man. “But, listen—your side-kicker’s* in jail down in Rosewell. I figured I could take his place—anyway, till he got out. I know I ain’t got any record, but I can ride, an’ I can shoot the pips* out of a tenspot* at ten paces, an’—I got a little job to bring into the firm, to start with.”

side-kicker: close friend

pips: (slang) spots

tenspot: playing card

The lean man’s gaze narrowed.

“Have, eh?” he asked, softly.

“It ain’t anythin’ like you go in for as a rule,” said the boy, apologetically, “but it’s a roll of cash an’—I guess it’ll show you I’m straight. I only got on to it this afternoon. Kind of providential* I should meet you right now.”

providential: fitting

The lean man chewed his moustache. His eyes did not shift.

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “What you quit-tin’ punchin’* for?”

punchin’: cow punching, i.e., taking care of cattle

“Sick of it.”

“Figurin’ robbin’ trains is easier money?”

“No,” said the young man, “I ain’t. But I like a little spice in life. They ain’t none in punchin’.”

“Got a girl?” asked the lean man.

The boy shook his head. The hard-faced man nodded reflectively.

“Well, what’s the job?” he asked.

The light from Geogehan’s window was cut off by the body of a man who, cupping his hands about his eyes, stared out into the night, as if to locate the buzz of voices at the back of the store.

“If you’re goin’ to take me on,” said the young man, “I can tell you while we’re ridin’ toward it. If you ain’t—why, there’s no need to go no further.”

The elder slipped back into its holster the gold-mounted gun he had drawn, glanced once at the obscured window and again, piercingly, at the boy whose face now showed white in the light of the rising moon. Then he turned his pony and mounted.

“Come on,” he commanded.

Five minutes later the two had passed the limits of the town, heading for the low range of hills which encircled it to the south—and Will Arblaster had given the details of his job to the unemotional man at his side.

“How do you know the old guy’s got the money?” came a level question.

“I saw him come out of the bank this afternoon, grinnin’ all over his face an’ stuffin’ it into his pants-pocket,” said the boy. “An’ when he was gone, I kind of inquired who he was. His name’s Sanderson, an’ he lives in this yer cabin right ahead a mile. Looked kind of a soft old geezer—kind that’d give up without any trouble. Must ha’ been quite

some cash there, judgin' by the size of the roll. But I guess when *you* ask him for it, he won't mind lettin' it go."

"I ain't goin' to ask him," said the lean man. "This is your job."

The boy hesitated.

"Well, if I do it right," he asked, with a trace of tremor in his voice, "will you take me along with you sure?"

"Yeah—I'll take you along."

The two ponies rounded a shoulder of the hill: before the riders there loomed, in the moonlight, the dark shape of a cabin, its windows unlighted. The lean man chuckled.

"He's out."

Will Arblaster swung off his horse.

"Maybe," he said, "but likely the money ain't. He started off home, an' if he's had to go out again, likely he's hid the money some place. Folks know *you're* about. I'm goin' to see."

Stealthily he crept toward the house. The moon went behind a cloud-bank, and the darkness swallowed him. The lean man, sitting his horse, motionless, heard the rap of knuckles on the door—then a pause, and the rattle of the latch. A moment later came the heavy thud of a shoulder against wood—a cracking sound, and a crash as the door went down. The lean man's lips tightened. From within the cabin came the noise of one stumbling over furniture, then the fitful fire of a match illumined the windows. In the quiet, out there in the night, the man on the horse, twenty yards away, could hear the clumping of the other's boots on the rough board floor, and every rustle of the papers that he fumbled in his search. Another match scratched and sputtered, and then, with a hoarse cry of triumph, was flung down. Running feet padded across the short grass and Will Arblaster drew up, panting.



“Got it!” he gasped. “The old fool! Put it in a tea-canister right on the mantelshelf. Enough to choke a horse! Feel it!”

The lean man, unemotional as ever, reached down and took the roll of money.

“Got another match?” he asked.

Willie struck one, and, panting, watched while his companion, moistening a thumb, ruffled through the bills.

“Fifty tens,” said the lean man. “Five hundred dollars. Guess I’ll carry it.”

His cold blue eyes turned downward, and focused again with piercing attention on the younger man’s upturned face. The bills were stowed in a pocket of the belt right next to one of those gold-mounted guns which, earlier in the evening, had covered Willie Arblaster’s heart. For a moment, the lean man’s hand seemed to hesitate over its butt; then, as Willie smiled and nodded, it moved away. The match burned out.

“Let’s get out of here,” the younger urged; whereupon the hand which had hovered over the gun-butt grasped Will Arblaster’s shoulder.

“No, not yet,” he said quietly, “not just yet. Get on your hawss, an’ set still awhile.”

The young man mounted. “What’s the idea?”

“Why!” said the level voice at his right. “This is a kind of novelty* to me. Robbin’ trains, you ain’t got any chance to see results, like: this here’s different. Figure this old guy’ll be back pretty soon. I’d like to see what he does when he finds his wad’s gone. Ought to be amusin’!”

novelty: new thing

Arblaster chuckled uncertainly.

“Ain’t he liable to—”

“He can’t see us,” said the lean man with a certain new cheerfulness in his tone. “An’ besides, he’ll think we’d naturally be miles

away; an’ besides that, we’re mounted, all ready.”

“What’s that?” whispered the young man, laying a hand on his companion’s arm.

The other listened.

“Probably him,” he said. “Now stay still.”

There were two riders—by their voices, a man and a girl: they were laughing as they approached the rear of the house, where, roughly made of old boards, stood Pa Sanderson’s substitute for a stable. They put up the horses; then their words came clearer to the ears of the listeners, as they turned the corner of the building, walking toward the front door.

“I feel mean about it, anyhow,” said the girl’s voice. “You going on living here, Daddy, while—”

“Tut-tut-tut!” said the old man. “What’s five hundred to me? I ain’t never had that much in a lump, an’ shouldn’t know what to do with it if I had. ‘Sides, your Aunt Elviry didn’t give it you for nothin’. ‘If she wants to go to college,’ says she, ‘let her prove it by workin’. I’ll pay half, but she’s got to pay t’other half.’ Well, you worked, an’—Where on earth did I put that key?”

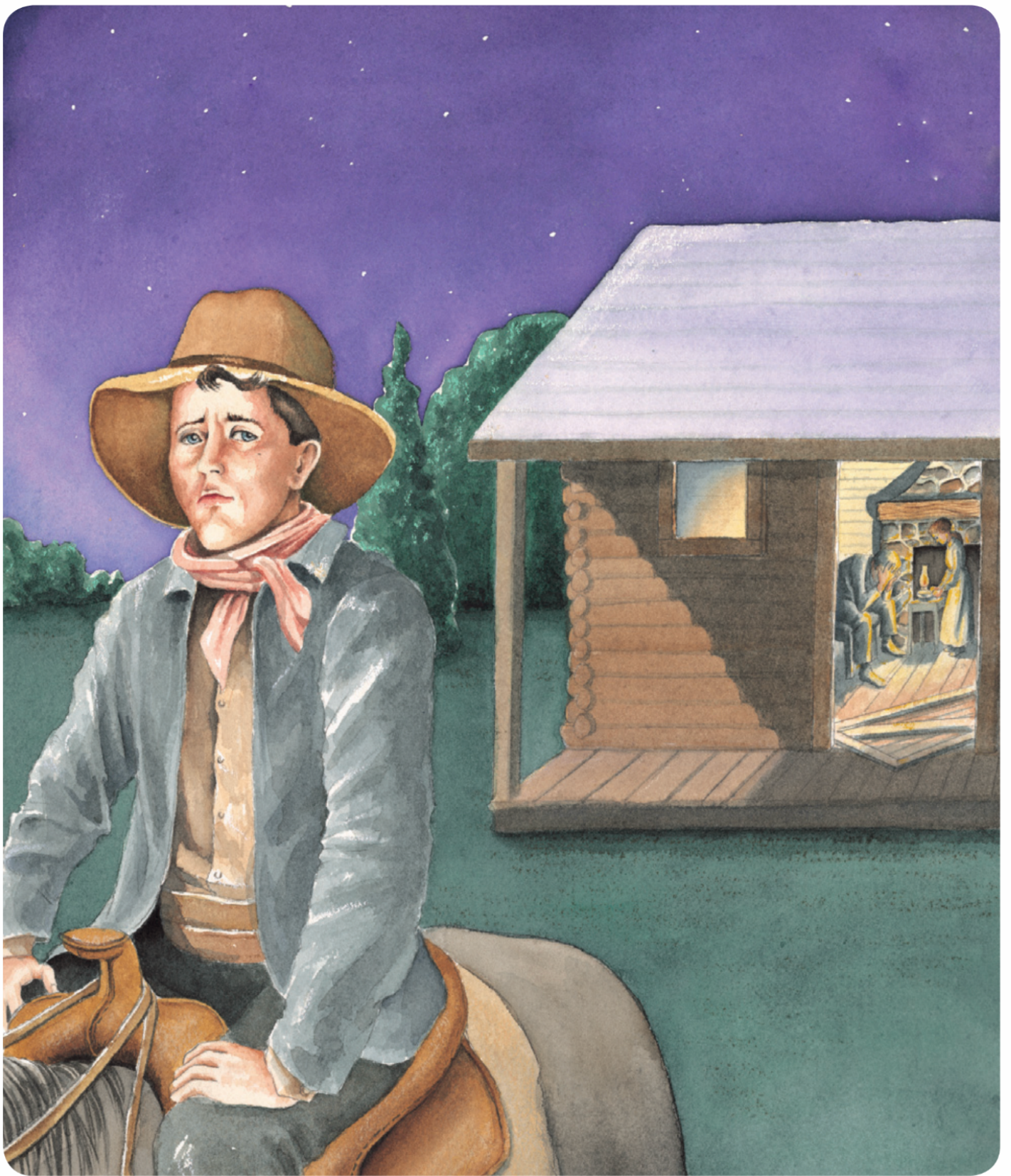
There was a silence, broken by the grunts of the old man as he contorted himself in the search of his pockets: and then the girl spoke: the tone of her voice was the more terrible for the restraint she was putting on it.

“Daddy—the—the—did you leave the money in the house?”

“Yes. What is it?” cried the old man.

“Daddy—the door’s broken down, and—”

There was a hoarse cry: boot-heels stumbled across the boards, and again a match flared. Its pale light showed a girl standing in the doorway of the cabin, her hands



clasped on her bosom—while beyond the wreckage of the door a bent figure with silver hair tottered away from the mantelshelf. In one hand Pa Sanderson held the flickering match, in the other a tin box.

“Gone!” he cried in his cracked voice. “Gone!”

Willie Arblaster drew a breath through his teeth and moved uneasily in his saddle. Instantly a lean, strong hand, with a grip like steel, fell on his wrist and grasped it. The man behind the hand chuckled.

“Listen!” he said.

“Daddy—Daddy—don’t take on so—please don’t,” came the girl’s voice, itself trembling with repressed* tears. There was a scrape of chair-legs on the floor as she forced the old man into his seat by the fireplace. He hunched there, his face in his hands, while she struck a match and laid the flame to the wick of the lamp on the table. As it burned up she went back to her father, knelt by him, and threw her arms about his neck.

repressed: held in

“Now, now, now!” she pleaded. “Now, Daddy, it’s all right. Don’t take on so. It’s all right.”

But he would not be comforted.

“I can’t replace it!” cried Pa Sanderson, dropping trembling hands from his face. “It’s gone! Two years you’ve been away from me; two years you’ve slaved in a store; and now I’ve—”

“Hush, hush!” the girl begged. “Now, Daddy it’s all right. I can go on working, and—”

With a convulsive* effort, the old man got to his feet. “Two years more slavery, while some skunk drinks your money, gambles it—throws it away!” he cried. “Curse him! Whoever it is, curse him! Where’s God’s justice? What’s a man goin’ to believe when years of scrapin’ like your aunt done,

an’ years of slavin’ like yours in Laredo there, an’ all our happiness today can be wiped out by a thief in a minute?”

convulsive: violent and involuntary

The girl put her little hand over her father’s mouth.

“Don’t, Daddy,” she choked. “It only makes it worse. Come and lie down on your bed, and I’ll make you some coffee. Don’t cry, Daddy darling. Please.”

Gently, like a mother with a little child, she led the heartbroken old man out of the watchers’ line of vision, out of the circle of lamplight. More faintly, but still with heart-rending distinctness, the listeners could hear the sounds of weeping.

The lean man sniffed, chuckled, and pulled his bridle.

“Some circus!” he said appreciatively. “C’mon, boy.”

His horse moved a few paces, but Will Arblaster’s did not. The lean man turned in his saddle.

“Ain’t you comin’?” he asked.

For ten seconds, perhaps, the boy made no answer. Then he urged his pony forward until it stood side by side with his companion’s.

“No,” he said. “An’—an’ I ain’t goin’ to take that money, neither.”

“Huh?”

The voice was slow and meditative.

“Don’t know as ever I figured what this game meant,” he said. “Always seemed to me that all the hardships was on the stick-up man’s side—gettin’ shot at an’ chased and so on. Kind of fun, at that. Never thought ‘bout old men cryin’.”

“That ain’t my fault,” said the lean man.

“No,” said Will Arblaster, still very slowly. “But I’m goin’ to take that money back. You didn’t have no trouble gettin’ it, so you don’t lose nothin’.”

“Suppose I say I won’t let go of it?” suggested the lean man with a sneer.

“Then,” snarled Arblaster, “I’ll blow your . . . head off an’ take it! Don’t you move, you! I’ve got you covered. I’ll take the money out myself.”

His revolver muzzle under his companion’s nose, he snapped open the pocket of the belt and extracted the roll of bills. Then, regardless of a possible shot in the back, he swung off his horse and shambled,* with the mincing gait* of the born horseman, into the lighted doorway of the cabin. The lean man, unemotional as ever, sat perfectly still, looking alternately at the cloud-dappled* sky and at the cabin, from which now came a murmur of voices harmonizing with a strange effect of joy, to the half-heard bass of the night-wind.

shambled: shuffled

mincing gait: i.e., short steps

cloud-dappled: spotted

It was a full ten minutes before Will Arblaster reappeared in the doorway alone, and made, while silhouetted* against the light, a quick movement of his hand across his eyes, then stumbled forward through the darkness toward his horse. Still the lean man did not move.

silhouetted: outlined

“I’m sorry,” said the boy as he mounted. “But—”

“I ain’t,” said the lean man quietly. “What do you think I made you stay an’ watch for, you young fool?”

The boy made no reply. Suddenly the hair prickled* on the back of his neck and his jaw fell.

prickled: tingled

“Say,” he demanded hoarsely at last. “Ain’t you Pecos Tommy?”

The lean man’s answer was a short laugh.

“But you got his guns, an’ the people in Longhorn all kind of fell back!” the boy cried. “If you ain’t him, who are you?”

The moon had drifted from behind a cloud and flung a ray of light across the face of the lean man as he turned it, narrow-eyed, toward Arblaster. The pallid* light picked out with terrible distinctiveness the grim lines of that face—emphasized the cluster of sun-wrinkles about the corners of the piercing eyes and marked as if with underscoring black lines the long sweep of the fighting jaw.

pallid: pale

“Why,” said the lean man dryly, “I’m the sheriff that killed him yesterday. Let’s be ridin’ back.”

THINKING ZONE

As every Sherlock Holmes fan knows, detective and mystery stories are appealing because their writers are often experts at contradicting reader expectations. An unexpected happening at any point in the story is known as a **plot twist** because it differs from what the reader may have anticipated. Often a plot twist occurs at the crisis or the climax of a story—but not always. Plot twists occurring at the end of stories may be referred to as **surprise endings**. Sometimes an author chooses to end a story with a circumstance that no

one could have seen coming—an ending very manipulated and highly improbable. Many “happily-ever-after” fairy tales fall into this category. However, the best surprise endings are based upon the facts and details of the story. You realize that you would have seen the ending coming if only you had interpreted the facts differently. In “Gold-Mounted Guns,” the protagonist, Will Arblaster, makes several assumptions about the man he calls Tommy that help to bring about the surprise ending.

1. Why do you think the sheriff draws his gun when he hears Will say, “Tommy”?
2. Why does the sheriff make the boy commit the robbery? Why does he insist on waiting for Sanderson to get home?
3. What does “Pecos Tommy” mean when he says, “Yeah—I’ll take you along”?
4. How is “Pecos Tommy’s” generosity more valuable than gold?
5. What indications are there that Will Arblaster may not be cut out for the life of an outlaw?
6. Where is the **plot twist** in “Gold-Mounted Guns”?
7. What is the **surprise ending** in the story?
8. What facts or details of the story might have helped you see the ending coming had you noticed them at first reading?
9. Read the following portions from the story of Gideon’s battle against the Midianites: Judges 7:19–21; 8:10–12, 18–21. What is the surprise ending in this story? How does it contribute to the story’s message?