

The Blackguard

(The Tale that the Old Soak Told)

by George Albert Leddy

*We meet strange things in the walks of life, 'mid the moil, the toil, the hardships and strife;
And I always have found, as I trod the rough road; that a heartbroken wretch,
seeks the mine camp abode.*

*And such is the tale that you're going to hear, of a man who had lived in the camp for a year.
He was toil-worn and hardened, grisly and old; and this is his story, as I heard it told.*

A drink? Well, I never refuse it—'though, I haven't the money to buy.
I'm now what I once deemed a Sponger; a cheap, drunken rum-soak, am I.
There once was a day I'd refuse it, without I'd the means to repay;
And I'd do it now with a shame-face, but thirst takes that feeling away.
Failed in all claims I've prospected, and yet, I don't feel it in vain.
If someone will blow for a grubstake—tomorrow, I'll try it again.

The Gold? No, 'twas not Gold that brought me; I sort'o fell in, don't you see.
I lived, and I had to live somewhere; so I wandered up here to be free.
Free from the Hounds and their servants, Hounds of a civilized Law;
Hounds who would tear you to pieces, lapping the blood from their paw.
Law! That's not Law by a damn-sight; it's Hell, and no judgment is known.
But I blocked them; yes, damn them, I blocked them—when they came for my hide, I had flown.

Yes, that was a long time ago, boys; but to me, it is only a day.
This haggard old face was a boy's then, this heavy old heart was gay;
This gray knotted mat on my head was, a cluster of golden brown curls;
Those horny old bunches of knuckles, were as soft and as white as a girls;
And the voice was so soft and so airy, and the smile was so sweet and so kind.
God! It don't seem that time could have changed so, such a life—to a wrecked life like mine.

We lived in a small country village, where people are few but all friends;
Where a man's life is built upon merit, and a girl's life on honor depends.
There came into my life in my school days, a face I now see in my dreams;
A face so like that of a fairy's, a grace so like that of a queen.
Together, we'd bundle our books up; together, we'd stroll down the lane;
To the little old school on the hillside; and together, we'd stroll back again.

I oft' tried to tell her, I loved her; she would smilingly push me away.
But I read in her eyes the whole story, and I patiently waited the day.
Waited the day when in manhood, I would tell her the story again;
For the day she would lie on my bosom—Oh God! but I waited in vain.
And the years have passed by all unnumbered, since the heart was crushed out of the child;
And my heart has grown hard with the hardships, in the heart of the Great Silent Wild.

She was only sixteen when it happened; you see, in the spring of the year;
The folks of the city would come there, and stay till the autumn was near.
One cottage was built on the hillside, where a Master and servants did dwell;
His rich summer-home in the country, but his home in the future is Hell.
With his fine city ways and his money; his ponies, his dogs, and his gun;
And the stories he often would tell us; oh, we thought him a wonderful one.

A change had come over my Darling, she'd pass me with never a smile;
My heart, it would pound like the windlass, a-hoisting the muck to the pile.
My young blood flowed swift as the Yukon, my heart felt like sixty-below;
My thoughts were as wild as the mountains, and then came the terrible blow.
He had gone, and had taken her with him; gone, and I couldn't tell where;
Gone, and no good-byes were spoken; gone, but left love everywhere;

A love that was hell in its burning, a love that gnawed into the soul;
A love that was maddening, stinging, bitter, damning, and cold.
Like the wretch that rots with scurvy, the man rotted out of my breast;
A fiend filled with fires of vengeance, my hatred was never at rest.
Dead to my ears was her laughter, dead to my heart was her smile;
Dead to my eyes was her beauty, but the hated-love clung all the while.

I took to the lone-trail to find her, a trail filled with hardship and pain.
Till a spirit-crushed broken-down hobo, I returned to the old Home again.
She'd returned, she was there—Did I see her? Ah no—but I knelt by her grave.
The hatred that burned in my heart then, was a hate that was cowardly brave;
A hate that's not quenched by murder, a hate that must glory in pain;
Must list' to the moaning and groaning, must lash in the blood of the slain.

To search him it meant, I must leave her; but I stayed by her grave for a day.
I kissed the green sod and I whispered, "Oh Loved One, just show me the way . . ."
I passed down the streets of a city; to me, 'twas a wild raging sea;
The turmoil, the hurry, the worry; the crowding as if to be free.
Each face seemed the story of trouble, that rode on the restless wave,
Then vanished away like a bubble, a mass moving on to the grave.

As I thought of my Love that was sleeping, in that little green grave far away;
I was caught in the whirl and jostled, through the door of a swell cabaret.

Well I sank to a chair by a table—Oh God! but I'll never forget;
I sat face-to-face with my victim, o'er my brow came a cold clammy wet.
He smiles as he passes the bottle, I grin with a devilish glee;
My plain haggard face is a disguise, my hatred my victim can't see.

I laugh as I fill up the glasses, I laugh—see his head's sinking low;
I laugh and I laugh as I take him—to his cab that is waiting below.
Now I whisper "Home" to the driver: we are there, we are entering in;
Entering now where she entered, to a beautiful Home-of-sin.
I search out the silks and the laces, she bought with her honor and life;
And wore for a while as his Mistress—Ah no, she was never a Wife.

I've found them, I don them, I'm waiting; he moves, see he opens his eyes:
Ah! 'Tis her that he sees, how he trembles; how wild are the rum-reddened eyes.
His breath, see he chokes, he is frightened; his voice, yet no words, just a moan;
He wreaths like a snake, he's a serpent; he growls like a dog with a bone.
He swoons, then the smell of the brandy; his eyes, they are opened again;
He sees her still standing before him—a victim of immoral sin!

He tears out his hair in his anguish; see him gnash at his flesh, see the blood;
He is mad, see a wild-raging madman; now he falls to the floor with a thud . . .
And that is a long twenty-years, boys; he's never known naught since that day;
There he grovels and crawls like a serpent, and snarls like a panther at bay.
And that is the reason I'm dodging—a Law that would sentence me tight;
If vengeance was mine in the reck'ning—please God—I have done naught but right.
