

Sandy's Ghost

By Anonymous

“Commerdations fer the night, stranger? Waal, yes; I reckon we can fix a place fer you. Hey a cheer an' set you down.”

“Thank you. Don't you find this rather a lonely place—no neighbors, no nothing, that I can see? How came you to settle here, so far removed from other habitations?”

“Waal, perhaps it's best not ter ask too many questions ter once.”

“Beg your pardon. No offense was intended, I assure you. Simply idle curiosity.”

“Don't say 'nuther word, stranger, but come in an' we'll hev a snack fer supper. Polly, bring on the victu'ls. Yer jes' in time.”

Polly at once obeyed. She was a typical western girl—tall, lithe, graceful and limpid-eyed. She was clear-skinned and high-spirited, too, and in this case ignorant through no fault of her own. John Barr's eyes scanned her intently, and a flush came to her cheeks. For the first time in her life she was unpleasantly conscious of her bare feet. It may have been this that made her stumble and spill some of the contents of an earthen bowl over the guest's knees as she placed it on the table.

Her eyes flashed and a tear of anger twinkled on the lashes. She stopped, half meaning to apologize, but an oath from her father caused her to set the bowl down heavily and to hurry from the cabin. A moment later Barr saw a flutter of pink calico from behind a pile of rocks. Old Kit Robinson saw it, too.

“Don't wonder at yer sayin' 'tain't right. She's a sma't gal, and a good looker, too, as should hey been sent away frum here ter school ter be eddicated. But she won't leave her no 'count dad. I orter be shot fer cussin' her. But I ain't what I use ter be. Settin' here an' keepin' guard makes me narvous.”

Barr's eyes asked the question his lips refused to speak. Supper eaten, the men went outside and sat with their chairs tilted back against the cabin. Something in the younger man's frank face had softened old Kit into a reminiscent mood and made him strangely inclined to gratify an idle curiosity.

The soft evening winds sighed through the branches of the tall spruce pines, and the declining rays of the setting sun caused the shadow of the rude home to stretch out longer across the greensward. From its shelter where he sat John Barr looked out on the grand ranges of the Rockies and wondered where in their vastness he would find the man he sought—the finding of whom had brought him out into this wild and almost forsaken mining camp.

“Stranger, I've took a hikin' ter you. Ye've a sumthin' about you thet reminds me of sum one I know, an' you look like an honest chap. Say, do you b'lieve in ghosts?”

He put the question very suddenly, and a look of disappointment crossed his face when Barr told him that he did not believe in spooks.

“Waal, I've seen 'em!”

A thought connecting the pink calico with something in the past came to Barr's mind.

“Can't you tell me about it?” he asked.

“I'd like ter if you'll sw'ar, on yer derringer, never ter blab. Will you sw'ar?”

The solitary guest started to smile, but the smile faded at the thought of unshed tears in Polly's eyes. It might make it easier for her if he humored the old man.

“I’ll swear,” he said. And he did.

“Do you see yan old spruce at the turn of the trail an’ the cliff jes’ above? Waal, thet’s the spot I’m watchin’ an’ guardin’ till the owner cums ter claim it. I’m quick ter burn powder an’ a pretty sure shot. I know a man when I sees him, an’ I ain’t easy fooled. Waal, ter begin with, I had a pardner once, an’ he wuz a man, sure ‘nough. He wuz frum the State of New York. I never axed him as ter how so fine a gent cum ter be diggin’ an’ shov’lin’ in the Rockies, though ter myself I said thar wuz sum good reason. He had light hair, an’ we called him Sandy, fer short, an’ he wuz jes’ erbout as gritty as sand. We wuz as unlike as any two fellers you ever saw. He wuz quiethike aim’ steady, an’ I wuz sorter wild an’ reckless an’ liked mounting dew mos’ too well. Waal, when we had a little dust scraped together, we would divvy, an’ I tuk my share way down ter the station on the other side of the cliffs an’ sent it off ter the bank in Helena. But I allers left sum hid whar the gal would find it. Old Sandy ded a bank of his own thet no one knew erbout, ‘cepting hissself, an’ ev’ry time we divided he’d carry part of it ter his hidin’ place, an’ then give the rest ter rue ter send ter his boy, thet he said wuz bein’ eddicated in sum college way up in Boston. He seemed ter think a heap of thet boy. Arter awhile my old woman give out, an’ soon we laid her away on the hillside. It wuz hard, stranger.”

Old Kit’s voice failed him for a moment, but he quickly regained his composure and continued:

“But when old Sandy, my good old pard, give up I didn’t keer fer nothin’. We buried him in style. All the boys frum round the diggin’s wuz thar, an’ many an eye wuz wet. We didn’t hey nary a preacher, but the gal she prayed at the grave. Fer the life of me I don’t know where she larnt it. Reckon the old woman nmst hey told her. Next mornin’ the gal showed me a letter thet Sandy give her jes’ afore he died. It wuz ter his boy, an’ she wuz ter give it ter him if he ever cum out this way, an’ she’s got it yet.

“Thet same evenin’ after supper, feelin’ kinder glumisli an’ like thar wuz sumthin’ in my throat I couldn’t swaller, I tuk a stroll up the gulch. I went on out ter the top of the edge of the big rock an’ got ter studyin’ whar I’d find another pard like Sandy. All ter once I felt a hand touch my shoulder kinder light once or twice. I jumped up, half expectin’ it wuz Sandy, but it wuz only the gal. Waal, I wuz all tuk back at fust, an’ then I got mad.

“ ‘What air you doin’ up here?’ I axed, kinder rough. She hed tears in her eyes as she looked at me, an’ said:

“ ‘Pap, don’t git mad. I wuz lonesum. I seed you cumin’ up this way, an’ I follered you, ‘cause I wanted ter tell you thet Sandy said ter give his boy his pile when he cums.’

“ ‘Waal,’ says I, ‘you might hey waited till I cum back ter the house.’ An’ then I sent her back.

“Arter she wuz gone I sot ter studyin’ whar in the world Sandy’s pile wuz. I tried ter think whar could he hev hid it. But it warn’t no use. All ter once I noticed it wuz plum dark, an’ as these mountings ain’t a he’lthy place fer a man ter roam in arter nightfall, especially if he ain’t got his shootin’ irons on, I cut a pretty swift gait fer the shack.

“Jes’ as I cum round the bend thar at the pine I happened ter look up terward the chift, an’ thar sot Sandy. Yes, sir. It wuz him sure as yer born. My feet felt heavy as lead, an’ I couldn’t move frum the spot. I tried ter holler, but it warn’t no go. Finally I gave a sudden jerk an’ made a step terward him, an’ as I did so he disappeared. Then I made tracks fer home. But I kept num, ‘cause I knowed the boys would say thet mounting dew wuz lickin’ up my brains, an’ I would be seein’ snakes an’ sich things afore long.

“The next night sumhow er ‘nuther I thought ter go an’ see if he wuz thar ag’in, an’ sure nough, thar he sot, lookin’ kinder sad an’ making marks on the rocks with his fingers. I hed my

hand on my gun this time, so I got a little closter than afore. But, by hookey, he got away from me ag'in, nor did he cum back.

"I could hardly wait fer the next night ter cum round. At the same time I wuz on hand good an' early, jes' as it begun ter git dark, an' the trees looked like long spooks a-stretchin' out, their arms. I looked terward the chift, an' thar he sot a-markin' an' a-scratchin' on the rock with his fingers an' still looking sad. Now₁ this bein' the third time, I kinder got bold, an' I went a little closter, an' says:

" 'Sandy, wha-what's the ma-mat-matter with you? Didn't the boys do the plantin' right fer you?"

"Then as luck would hey it I thought of sumthin' else right quick, an' I said:

" 'Or is it the dust you hey hid whar yer sittin'?"

"Waal, he looked up then, an' the happiest smile cum ter his face, an' all ter once he disappeared ag'in An' since then I hev sot here an' guarded the place till the right one cums along ter claim it."

"Let's see. What did you say yer name wuz?"

"Pardon me. I thought I had told you. My name is John Willett Barr."

"Polly, oh, Polly! Cum hyar, gal. What wuz Sandy's full name? I plum fergot."

"What you want ter know fer?" she asked.

"I ain't a-goin' ter tell you now. Thet's my own secret."

"Cum, cum, gal. Tell me ter once, or it won't be he'lthy fer you."

"Waal, then," she answered stubbornly, "it's John Willett Barr."

At her reply the younger man's face grew deathly pale, and he started up from his chair, but Kit thrust him back into his seat, saying:

"Bring me the letter, Polly."

"What are you goin' ter do with it, pa?" she inquired, cautiously.

"I promised old Sandy on my oath ter keep it till the right one cums erlong ter claim it, an' I mean ter keep my word. The right one is here, gal. Thar he sits. So trot thet letter out, an' don't parley long with me if you knows when yer well off."

Polly stared at the younger man in utter bewilderment for a moment. Then, turning slowly, she stepped quietly into the cabin after the precious document; an unusual gleam of joy lighted up her face and a suppressed excitement shone in her eyes. Under her breath she said:

"Sumhow er ruther I felt he wuz the right one." Too truly, John Barr realized in that painful moment that he whom he sought was now dead to him; that the father from whom he had been parted so many years was sleeping that long, dreamless sleep in the clay mound on the hillside, which marked his last resting place. As he turned to look at the face of old, honest Kit, who had been his father's friend during those long years of forced exile, a happy smile lit up the old miner's rugged features as he pointed with his finger to the rock cliff near the old spruce vine, and said, in an exultant, trembling voice:

"Thar he be, stranger—jes' as I hev seen him many a night—yer dad—my pard—pore old Sandy!"

With an eager voice John Barr sprang forward, and the mountains echoed and re-echoed the plaintive cry of "Father! Father!" But his outstretched arms clasped only emptiness and the darkening shadows of the rapidly approaching night.