

The Town Drunk

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One man's advancement

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Dave was a slight man, looking years older than his actual age, and showing no vestiges of prosperity, even looking quite shabby, which led to the name almost everyone knew him by, Shoddy. He didn't seem to mind as he never corrected anyone, but when asked would tell them his name, which didn't happen very much. Sometimes a newcomer to town might inquire, but newcomers didn't happen very much, either. He was known as the town drunk, and I suppose he was, as he did like the bottle too much. But he was never seen lying in the gutter as many of the outlying ranch hands were when they came to town. Whenever he could get a bottle, or part of one, he would retire to the rear stall of the livery, where he had a hideaway, to drink as much as he wanted and fall asleep, cuddling the remains. Larry, the liveryman, allowed Dave to have a little home back there, in exchange for helping clean the stalls, which he did very competently. He had a narrow cot, a shelf, a hook to hang the few extra pitiful castoff clothes he possessed and a few odds and ends. He made his meager living by doing small chores around the town that no one else cared for, such as emptying the spittoons in the taverns, or cleaning up the excess of horse dung in front of some of the businesses. No one seemed to notice, or really care, how fastidious he was about his person. In the warmer seasons he would wash his clothing and himself in the creek, even shaving in the icy water no less than once a week with a piece of broken mirror and an old straight razor he'd found. In the Winter the livery blacksmith would let him heat a little water aside the forge for his ablutions. He may not have washed as much then as during the balmy times, but no one noticed if he was a little wiffy, when, in those times many people didn't change their undergarments until Spring. And there was always horse effluvium in abundance to counteract any odors he may have emitted. All of this description of Dave is leading to a peculiar fact. Being such an unprepossessing fellow has led to people treating him as beneath their notice, therefore they didn't. He was privy to whispered conversations as if he were a coat rack when sweeping the floors of the bars. He saw actions between men and women that were not their spouses as if he were invisible. He most probably knew more about the town and its secrets than anyone else, even the town marshal, Chet. Chet was one of Dave's few friends and they always treated one another with proper respect and amity. Normally, Dave kept the town's secrets filed away in his brain and didn't blab them about, even when in his cups, except when he knew it would lead to serious harm to someone, or had done so, when he would drop a hint to his friend, Chet. To illustrate

this, there was, one evening, when Dave was emptying the slops behind one of the bars, when he saw a notoriously shady businessman handing something to a notoriously nasty gunman. They were startled when they saw him, but when they realized it was only old Shoddy, continued their conversation. Dave filed it in his memory and, when a few days later, one of the business man's rivals was found with his throat cut, decided to act. Later in the day, as Dave was shoveling dung in front of a store, Chet approached, but stopped when Dave threw a sharp glance at him. "Good afternoon Dave, how are you feeling?" "A whole lot better than I did this morning, marshal, maybe I caught a little flu last night 'cause I sure felt rotten earlier." Chet grinned and replied, "Sure Dave, did that flu bug come in a bottle, by any chance?" while looking around to see if anyone was in hearing. "I suppose that's a slight possibility, Chet. I do remember a bottle in the vicinity just before I started to have symptoms. I got part of a bottle from the trash in the Cinch Ring saloon where I noticed a fella with ivory pistol grips, do you know who I mean?" Chad rubbed his chin and responded, "Yeah, I do recollect a gunny like that with a fancy hand shooter, should I take notice of him?" "How would I know, that has nothing to do with me. I just noticed he had a very sharp belt knife, Chet. I'll bet he could cut through almost anything with it. Well, have a nice evening, marshal," and he picked up his bucket and left. A week later they hung both the gunman and the businessman. As the years went by Dave managed to squirrel away quite a nice nest egg, which would have surprised everyone, even his friends. He did it by spending almost nothing, as he ate most of his meals at the back doors of restaurants he did chores for in exchange for leftovers or a rare full meal when he did an outstanding job for them. He also received tips from time to time when he held an unruly team or other small favors. The pennies, dimes, quarters, even the rare dollar added up over time. Add that to the low paying jobs he did and you'd have to say he was quite a bit better off than most of the poor people in town. Dave took great delight in his hobby of gathering information about the residents of the town. One of his best resources was going through their garbage when he took and disposed of it. Very few people took pains to guard their mail when they were done with it. Dave learned of many lucrative deals well before they took place. One of his best sources was the bank. When it closed Saturday at noon Dave would be there to help clean up and take out the trash to be burned. The banker, Mr. Burns, was very meticulous as to how it was burned. Only one sheet of paper at a time was to be fed to the flames, so as to not take a chance on anyone digging through the ashes for unburned pages and gaining information. After watching Dave a few times he was reassured that Dave would follow his instructions. Dave was more than happy to do so. He would hold a stack of paper in one hand, quickly scan the top one, and if it had something he wanted to study more, put it on the bottom, but sticking out to be read. Maybe only one sheet out of many stacks would give him anything of what he was looking for. If not, into the fire it went. After reading the held out one, it too would go into the flames. One afternoon, as Dave was walking the back alleys, scavenging for whatever he might be able to use, he came across a passed out ranch hand with an almost full bottle of joy juice. When the ranch hand would roll around he'd spill some of the delightful nectar. Dave, figuring it would go to waste, slipped it from the gent's arm and went home to the livery. Upon entering the back of the barn he noticed a friend of his entering the front, leading his jackass. Dave smiled and called, "Hey,

Emmett, when'd you get to town, you gonna be here long?" "I don't know, Dave, might be forever, depends on if I can get another grubstake. Things are gettin' pretty slow in the prospecting business. I haven't hit a pocket of payin' grade gravel in weeks." Dave comforted him with the statement, "Emmett, c'mon back here and share a drink with me, maybe we can figure somethin' out." Emmett put his 'ass in a stall and brushed him down, fed him, and joined Dave back in his cubbyhole. "What did you have in mind, Dave," he took a healthy pull from the bottle, and continued, "I don't think anybody's goin' to stake me again. There hasn't been any color found around here for quite a while, you know." Dave scooted a little closer to Emmett and in a low voice revealed, "That's where you're wrong. There's been a good find down on Coopers Creek, and they've staked a claim, but they're only panning, not looking for the mother lode. They're hobby prospectors and don't know what they're doing. You could probably go down there, go upstream, and find where it's coming from. You'll have to hurry before somebody else finds out and jumps on it." Emmett exclaimed, "What! How do you know? Are you sure?" Dave shushed him, "Keep it down, never mind how I found out. I know they went to the bank to borrow some money to set up an operation there. The bank's not too happy with the idea and is thinking about it, 'cause they figure there's no rush when no one else knows about it. Here, take another drink and think about how big a stake you'd need to do it up first class." Emmett sipped some and thought some and replied, "I could get by with not much just to check it out, but to do it right I'd need some blasting powder, tools, and maybe another jackass to carry it all," and after another few moments gave Dave a figure. Dave asked, "If I can get you a stake how much would you give as a share to them?" "Well, if it's a good find, just to be fair, I'd give you a quarter for the information and finding a stake and a quarter for the staker, That'd leave plenty for an old rummy like me to drink himself to death right quick with some left over for the girlie parlors, What the hell else would I do with money?" Dave snorted and said, "I could tell you a lot of things, but right now, see if you can get a head start on your death with the rest of that bottle, I'm going to get another one. We'd need a case to satisfy your thirst, but I can't afford that. I'll be back in a while." Knowing that Emmett would soon be snoring, Dave went out in the woods, found the rock his cache was under, rolled it over and retrieved the large glass bottle that held it. He removed the amount that Emmett had specified, and a little more, and a even more for another bottle. It still left a considerable amount. After buying the whiskey he returned to his cubby to find Emmett sprawled across his cot. With a wry grin he pulled down some straw, made himself a pallet and joined Emmett in slumber. Upon awakening he went down to the creek, washed, and returned to find Emmett fumbling around looking for a drink. He pulled the bottle out of it's hiding place, allowed Emmett a small drink and had one himself, just to get their hearts pumping again. Then he apprised Emmett, "Alright, I've got your stake, never mind who from, they don't want anyone knowing 'til he sees if it pays off. I've got a contract from him, so we're all covered. Get what you need. Here's a map showing where their claim is, the rest is up to you. If you don't have a rifle, get one, these people may not want anybody else around. Spread your purchases around town so no one knows you're going out after a big one." Emmett went about town, buying here and there and returning to the livery with his purchases until he was ready to leave. Dave helped him pack the two jackasses and then Emmett turned to Dave, "I don't know how

you did it, Dave, but I'll never forget it, even if it doesn't pan out. You've always been a good friend, and I hope this works out for you as well as me." Emmet left by the back door and out through the woods so as to not be observed. Another fact about Dave that would have surprised most everyone was that he had a lady friend. She was a seamstress who had a small shop just off the main street of town. She was a very talented designer or could copy the fashion magazines from the East to fit even the most unsuitable women to them. She was also extremely shy, which didn't bother her much as she had very little contact with men. She had asked one of her customers if they knew someone who could help her with the heavy bolts of cloth when they arrived, and the lady had arranged for Dave to stop by to see if he would suffice. When Dave tapped on her back door one sunny morning it was answered by this small, pale, slightly stooped early middle aged lady dressed in the beautifully cut dress that didn't flaunt her figure but didn't completely hide it either. Her hair was coiffed in a very neat 'do that accented her quite pleasing facial features although it showed the gray strands in her rather mousy hair. She had a delightful, bright, smile as she asked, "Can I help you, Sir?" Dave stood, cap in hand, and answered, "Yes ma'am, I was told you needed help with some heavy goods when you receive them. My name is Dave. Maybe I could help." "I could certainly use the help, thank you, but I was thinking of a boy, I can't pay very much." Dave answered, "That's alright, ma'am, whatever you can afford will be okay, I don't need much." She said, "Then, you're hired, Dave. I can use some help now if you have time, come in, by the way, my name is Catherine, or Kate, if you'd like." Dave went right to work as the packages had piled up when Kate couldn't handle them. Although small, Dave was quite strong and by noon had things pretty well arranged to Kate's satisfaction. They had exchanged conversation while tidying things, and both were taken by the other's quiet voice and mannerisms. At noon, Kate offered, "I'm sorry Dave, I can't offer you lunch, but would you care for a cup of tea?" "Thank you, Kate, I surely would, it's a little dusty in here from stirring up all these bolts, after the tea I'll clean some of it up." Kate made the tea on a little burner, and they sat and chatted for quite a while. Kate was surprised and impressed at how neat and tidy Dave was even dressed in such shabby and ill fitting clothes he wore and how well he spoke. Dave was impressed how well read and intelligent Kate was, as Dave had been well educated when young and still read anything he could get his hands on. Dave tried to keep thinking of things to do to extend his time with this fascinating lady but finally came to a point he couldn't. "I think we've done about as much as we can, Kate, so I'll be leaving now." "Oh, Dave, must you? I've enjoyed our conversation. I very rarely get a chance to talk to men. Stop by when you can for a cup of tea." Dave did, taking any plausible excuse to stop and talk with Kate. Over time their friendship flourished into a deep ardor, although still platonic. He even tapered off some on his drinking, as it was mostly driven by boredom from having few friends to talk with. As the days and weeks went by and advanced into more than a month, Dave was first concerned and then worried about Emmett and his mission. Then one night, as he lay sleeping, he was awakened by a large hand over his mouth. A voice whispered, "Dave, don't make any noise, it's me, Emmett, come out in the woods where we can talk." Dave arose, had a little snort of whiskey, just to wash the sleep from his mouth, of course, and tiptoed into the woods. "Hsst, Dave, over here." Dave followed the sound and found Emmett standing aside the donkeys with a rifle in his

hands. "What the hell do you need a rifle for? You're not planning on shooting me, are you?" Emmett snickered and said, "Of course not, but both these animals are loaded down with gold and I'm not taking any more chances. Dave, we're rich, I found the vein and it's a yard wide, I staked the claim, but have to register it in the morning. "I buried it again, too, so no one should be able to jump it. It's a long ways upstream from the other claim, so they can't claim it either, but what the hell am I going to do with all this gold. I can't take it into town or every son of a bitch is going to want to know where it is and we'll be in trouble from all the crazy bastards that'll try to make us tell." Dave thought a moment and said, "You must have a little dust, we'll take that to register the claim, you're always doing that and nobody will think anything of it. The rest, let's go into that ravine and hide it, we can roll some big rocks down over it and they won't be moving big rocks easily if they suspect anything. Hold out all the dust and we'll bury the nuggets and still have plenty to get by." After burying the gold they returned to Dave's and Emmett said, "I know you've got a some whiskey here somewhere, dig it out, I need a little drink after what I've been through." "Okay, Emmett, here it is but only one drink, we've got some thinking to do, and we've got to remain steady. We can't leave it out there long, we've got to get it in the bank, and once in there what do we do then, got any ideas?" "Dave, I've already figured out you're a better thinker than I am, you think and I'll drink." Dave pulled the bottle from him and asserted, "Like hell you will, I know you, Emmett, you'll get drunk and start babbling about the big find you hit. But you're right about thinking, you're lucky if you can find your boots in the morning." "That's why I don't take them off at night. Look at all the time I save." Dave sat and thought for awhile and said, "Okay, we'll file your claim and go see the banker, just follow my lead, Emmett, when I talk to him. Remember, I'm the thinker." They filed the claim, the assayer checked and weighed the gold dust, and paid them for it. There was no fuss made as small transactions were an everyday thing. Then they headed for the bank. When they entered Dave asked the teller if they could see Mr. Burns, the president of the bank. The teller went into Mr. Burns' office and returned, followed shortly by Mr. Burns. "Oh, it's you. What do you want, Shoddy, I'm very busy, I'm afraid I can't extend you pay for work you haven't done yet." He started to turn away. "It's not that, Mr. Burns, this fella' wants to open an account, and we're not sure how. It's quite a bit of gold." "Well, in that case, come into my office Mr. uh, what is your name, sir. You can go now, Shoddy, I'll take care of him." Emmett spoke up, "My name's Emmett Wolf, but Dave here is sorta my partner and he's the talker for us." "Ah, of course Mr Wolf, will you follow me, and you too uh, Dave." and led them to his office, and invited them to sit. "Now, Mr. Wolf, how much gold are we speaking of and why didn't you just bring your poke with you?" Dave took over, "It's not like that Mr. Burns, we haven't weighed it but we estimate it at somewhere over seven hundred pounds." "WHAT! Seven hundred pounds! And you're a partner, Shoddy, I mean Dave. What is your full name, sir." "My last name is Meyer, but I'd be just as comfortable with Dave, or even Shoddy, it makes no difference. The problem is getting it in the bank without the whole town knowing, we don't need trouble. But if you don't have a way, we'll just leave it where it's at. I know that you're discreet and won't blab, but what about the teller?" "No, no, you can't just be leaving it out there somewhere, Mr. Meyer. The bank carries large payrolls and gold all the time. We can send our armored wagon with a guard to get it and no one need know who's it is. As far as the teller, he's my

nephew and he knows his job depends on a closed mouth. You yourself know how careful with information we are when you burn our records." Dave was not exactly reassured about the records when he reminded him about them as that's where he learned about the gold in the first place. He also noticed how he'd grown in respect from Shoddy to Mr. Meyer in less than ten minutes. Arrangements were made to pick up the gold and advice was given to them about how to set up a company to exploit the mine to the best advantage. The banker recommended a lawyer and promised to do all he could to help when he was apprised by Emmett just how big the find was. He even asked if they were looking for investors but was politely declined as they sure as hell didn't need more money. When they left the bank Emmett asked, "Now what, Mr. Meyer, your highness, sir, where do we go from here?" "I gotta tell you something, there wasn't another staker, Emmett, it was me all along. I've saved for years, hoping I'd find something to invest in, and you were it, my friend, so now we are equal partners. What do you say about that?" "Well, I'll be tickled to China, I'm right happy about that, Dave. I'm just a good friend picker, I guess." "Emmett, give me some of that cash you got for the rest of the dust. I'm going to the barber shop first, get a hot bath, a haircut, and a shave. Then I'm going to that fancy haberdasher down town and buy some clothes and maybe you should too. If you don't want to do that, go to the best hotel in town and rent a suite, one with two bedrooms and a bathing room." Emmett thought a moment and said, "You haven't turned me wrong yet, partner, lead the way." When they left the clothing store, both resplendent in new suits Dave requested, "Will you go to the hotel now, Emmett?" and then, "I have to see a lady." David Meyer and Catherine Bigelow were married a month later. Emmett was their best man. Mr Burns gave the bride away.