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The Hanging

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Morris hurried across the street, his polished boots now splattered brown by the pools of mud. The snowfall of 2 nights ago had been transformed into a shallow sea of muck by the late May sun. The mountain peaks surrounding Leadville were still covered with deep snow. Morris hardly noticed. His eyes were fixed on the store at the end of the block, where he hoped to see his friend, David May. Morris was the typical small-town doctor—overwhelmed by the number of sick people and always trying to catch up. This morning was no different except that he was on a mission to stop a hanging.

It had all begun a month earlier at Mannie Hyman's saloon, the favorite watering hole in town. Sam Kafka was drinking and playing faro and losing heavily. Mannie, standing behind the bar, shook his head and frowned. He liked Sam but the change in the man upset him. Until now a hard-working miner, a good family man, and a devoted member of the new Jewish congregation, Sam had unexpectedly turned into the town's ne'er-do-well.

Sam launched into one of his frequent arguments, the cards he held in his hand now ignored—convinced that the others at the table were cheating. Sam leaned back in his chair, a defiant glare on his face, his mustache bristling with the rage overtaking his soul. Suddenly his face turned dark and wild, his gun was in his hand, and he was shooting. Mannie rushed across the floor and pulled Sam down as the gun dropped from his hand. As it turned out, 2 people were dead, including the dealer. Mannie was upset. A few weeks before, Doc Holliday nearly killed his old adversary, Billy Allen, in almost the same spot, and now this.

There was no doubt that Sam was guilty of murder. There were plenty of witnesses and they all testified at the trial. Guilty. That's how the town saw it, that's how the jury saw it, and that's how the judge saw it.

But it was not the way Morris saw it. To him, it was much more complicated. He had met Sam when they both first arrived in Leadville many months before. Sam had emigrated from Germany. New York, the usual first stop for immigrants, provided this determined young man with only menial jobs. He heard about the silver mines in Leadville—that

men were getting rich mining the ore. The existence of a German Jewish enclave in this western mountain town fascinated him and he wanted to be part of it. Never mind that winters lasted forever in the highest town in the Colorado Rockies.

Morris was a small boy when his parents immigrated to Chicago from Munich. His ambitious mother encouraged him to become a doctor. He was finishing his studies when, attracted by the excitement of the mining craze, he decided to come to Leadville. The German Jewish community appealed to his widowed mother, and the 2 came out together. As it turned out, they arrived the same week as Sam. The 2 men became friends.

Sam was a handsome, energetic man, devoted to his new wife, Hannah, and their small son. He had gotten a job in one of Horace Tabor's silver mines and quickly advanced to being a mine foreman. And equally important, he was a dedicated member of Temple Israel, the newly built synagogue in Leadville—at least, until the accident.

Morris was desperate for help and finally found his friend David May sweeping the floor of the Temple's sanctuary in preparation for the evening service. It was Friday, the one afternoon David was not in his department store on Harrison Avenue. He was vice president of the congregation, head of the building committee, and he took preparing the synagogue for Friday evening services as seriously as he did his store. David May liked to tell people that someday his department stores would be all over the American West, but on Fridays the Sabbath was just as important to him.

"David," Morris exclaimed, his eyes sparking with emotion, his voice laced with intense anxiety, "please help me stop the hanging. You're the county treasurer and a friend of the Judge. He won't listen to me. Maybe he will to you."

"More than you?" David replied, his face turning serious. "I don't know. He's got a lot of respect for you. Maybe more than anyone else in town."

"Well, he didn't listen to me this morning when I reminded him what a fine man Sam was before the accident. That he was a devout member of the congregation and that he didn't even own a gun. It all fell on deaf ears."

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Everyone in town knew about the tragic accident that had happened to Sam. It had been a roof fall; a small section of the rock ceiling gave way suddenly. Two miners died instantly and Sam was brought out unconscious with fractured ribs and a broken left arm. Setting the fractured arm in his office, Morris thought Sam would die of the head wound, but Hannah and her neighbors were constantly at his bedside. He was confused and violent, and caring for him was difficult. Morris was sure there were hemorrhages in his brain but, after 2 weeks, Sam began to slowly calm down and by the end of the next 6 months he seemed to have completely recovered. Everyone pronounced it a miracle.

But Morris knew long before everyone else—except for Hannah—that there was a new Sam Kafka in town. He had no interest in going back to work. The kind and caring family man no longer existed. Gradually he became known for his angry temper and slovenly habits. Sam became suspicious of everyone. He was sure those around him were cheating him. The sheriff had to arrest him twice for beating Hannah. She came to see Morris each time and he was shocked by the size of her bruises. And each time he talked with Sam and each time Sam was contrite. He knew he was wrong but he had lost his temper. He would try to do better.

When Sam bought a gun Morris knew bigger problems were on the horizon. The hours Sam spent honing his ability to rapidly draw the gun from its holster just increased Morris's anxiety.

David nodded, he had heard it all—over and over, every detail. What he hadn't learned from Morris he had picked up from friends and costumers.

"It's no use, Morris," David said. "I know you like him but even his wife has left him. She's taken the baby boy and they're living with her parents. All he's got is the bit of money you gave him and that little cabin you found for him. You're the last friend he has."

"Underneath everything, he's a good man," Morris said.

"Morris, you are the nicest, kindest man who ever existed," David said. "You see the best in everyone. Whoever Sam was does not exist anymore. What we have is an angry man who killed 2 people. He's going to kill more. The judge was right to call for a hanging."

"But it's not his fault," Morris's voice was filled with passion. "It was the head injury that changed him. Before that he was a real mensch. Who do we blame for that? The mine owner, Horace Tabor?"

David sighed. "We don't blame anybody except Sam. It's the way life is. The world keeps changing. We change and we are responsible for what we do."

Morris sat down, his shoulders sagging. He felt defeated. Morris was not a devout man but the words of

the prophet Micah had long ago become his personal philosophy. "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" was how he tried to live his life.

The judge's ruling seemed irreversible. David had been his last hope. As he left the synagogue he thought how difficult it could be to embrace both justice and mercy. Sometimes they were irreconcilable. The hanging would happen the next day and nothing could stop it. All he could do, Morris reflected as he went to bed that evening, was recite the mourner's Kaddish at the next Temple service.

The nighttime banging on the door awoke Morris immediately, as it always did. This had long ago become one of the expected routines of life. His mother's soft snores from her nearby bedroom continued uninterrupted. Morris pulled on his pants and reached for his boots. Somebody was sick, got shot, or was having a baby.

Morris recognized Sheriff Carson's new deputy immediately, his young innocent face now a mask of fear and horror. The cool night air erased the last traces of sleep. Looking east, he could see the early highlights of morning shining behind the snow-covered crests towering over the town.

"Doc, doc," the deputy sobbed, tears streaming down his face, "it's horrible. You've got to come. Something terrible is happening. Please help."

Morris grabbed his black bag. "Slow down, son, and pull yourself together," he said. "Tell me what happened."

"Doc, everybody's dead. I ain't never seen anything like it before," the deputy almost shouted the words.

"Stop a minute," Morris said. "Exactly who is dead?"

"I was getting ready to start the morning and went over to the jail," he stopped and turned to face Morris. "The sheriff, he's dead. He's just slumped over on his desk."

"And...?" Morris began.

"And the 2 deputies are dead too. They're just lying there on the floor. Dead. Just like Sheriff Carson."

Morris began to run the few blocks to the jail, his feet moving swiftly through the freshly fallen snow. The deputy followed close behind. Morris was sure this had to do with Sam's hanging in a few hours. Someone had gotten a gun to him or had shot the lawmen to free him. Sam had turned into an outlaw.

"What happened to Sam Kafka?" Morris asked. He had a pretty good idea what the answer would be.

"He's dead too," the deputy gasped out the words, "just lying there on the cell floor. It's like one of them Old Testament plagues has hit the jail."

They were almost there. It made no sense to Morris. Four men shot in the jail during the night. What was the killer after? And where were all the

town folks? The gunshots should have gotten people up. The only sound Morris heard was their boots crunching in the late spring powder.

As he stepped through the half open door of the jail, Morris expected to see pools of blood and signs of a fight. What he found was quite different. There were no broken windows, no overturned furniture, no sign of a battle. The sheriff at his desk and the deputies on the floor looked more asleep than lifeless. In the jail cell in the back of the large room, Sam looked like he was taking a deep nap. Morris examined each of the 4 men and quickly determined that they were all dead. As the deputy said, it looked like one of God's plagues.

"We need to talk to the sheriff's wife to tell her what happened," Morris said, turning to the deputy.

"I went to the house before I come to yours," he answered. "She was still in bed and said she was sick. Her body felt so heavy she couldn't get out of bed. She told me to wake you up and go straight to the jail."

The 2 men quickly hurried the 2 blocks to the sheriff's house. As the young deputy had reported, the wife was still bed. An idea began to kindle in Morris's mind.

"I'm so glad you come," she said, her whispery words slow and slurred. She could barely move her tongue. Her face, browned by years of exposure to the summer sun and the cold winter winds, sagged like the tired visage of an ancient crone. Her eyes were frozen in their sockets, their pupils like huge black olives. Her breaths were rapid and shallow and her arms and legs were limp—she could hardly move

them. The sparks in Morris's mind were now ablaze. He knew what had happened at the jail.

He found an old armchair and pulled it over to her bed. He clasped her hand in his.

"I'm so sorry to see you having all this trouble, Molly," he said. "We're going to take good care of you and you'll be better soon. I have just one question. Did you take supper down to the jail for the men and Sam last night?"

Molly nodded her head. It was the answer he expected.

"It was sausages and beans," her whisper was slow and her thick tongue slurred the words. "I made..."

"Shhh," Morris said. "You need to save your energy. Just tell me if you had some too."

"Only a little," she answered. "I wasn't very hungry. Besides the men ate most of it. They seemed famished."

"I think you'll be okay but the deputy will get a couple of your neighbors to help you," Morris said.

He had seen it before. It was food poisoning that had an unusual Latin name—botulism. It was probably the sausages, not properly cooked, that had caused the paralysis that often killed its victims by paralyzing their breathing muscles. Molly must have just had a small amount of the sausages. She looked like she would survive but it would take a while for her to recover. It had taken weeks, sometimes months, for other patients in the past to come back to normal.

It was Sam's last supper. Morris felt devastated for the sheriff and his men but, ironically, he was glad for Sam. Sausages and beans had been his favorite.

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