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C.O.D.
Gabriel Valjan

He appeared before them, a man to fear, a man in black. When he walked, one heard a soft sound, a clink, though there were no spurs and no horse. The crowd parted before him because death clung to him. He saw the sheriff and the sheriff saw him. The lawman Dempsey knew the stranger's name.

Midas Utter.

The rest gathered there, all employees of the great Anaconda Cooper Mining Company, didn't know Utter as Utter: they referred to him as Preacher because he'd mix his speech with words from the Bible. Midas Utter was neither a man of the cloth nor a man of peace. His holster displayed two Remington revolvers, one on each hip. Preloaded cylinders studded his belt.

His car rested on the side of the road behind him. The make and model of the vehicle was recognizable from ads in Life magazine. Mr. Henry Ford had discontinued the use of brass in the headlights that year because the price of the metal was on the rise, and the alloy of copper and zinc was destined for producing ammunition for the war in Europe. Even before the US committed to the conflict, Anaconda, the government, and Mr. Ford were selling munitions to both sides.

Utter's arrival that early in the morning in August suggested that he'd traveled overnight, as if he had raced the pale rider himself to the awful scene. When Utter had exited his Model T, before anyone became aware of his presence, the townsmen were in the throes of that time-honored tradition of having their picture taken around the deceased. The General Store in town would profit from the spectacle: a photograph of when a man's feet had not touched the earth. A man's life cost the two cents it took to mail the postcard.

The men stepped back as Midas Utter moved forward. He looked up at the spectacle.

Above him hung the battered and bruised body of a Wobbly, a labor organizer, a man who agitated employers wherever he traveled, from golden California to Middle America to his final destination, here in Big Sky Country. The victim had pamphleteered and roused the rabble, on matters of equality, fairness, and patience. He'd never suggested insurrection, but he implied Judgment was inevitable.

And there he swayed in a dry summer breeze. The violence visited upon his legs suggested that he'd been dragged. His face and body had endured a ferocious beating, and then there was the final insult of the trestle, and the hangman's rope.

"He was a troublemaker," someone in the crowd said to Utter.

Sheriff Dempsey hushed the voice. "I'll handle this. I'm the law here."

"And Ye have done all this wickedness: yet turn not aside from your work," Midas said.

The corpse twisted to reveal a message pinned to his nightshirt. It read: Others take notice, first and last warning, 3-7-77.

"Preacher?" a miner asked. "Are those numbers from the Good Book?"

"No."

"A riddle then?"

"These are words of prophecy, a tongue of fire. These numbers signify death."

The miner squinted. "A prophecy?"

Utter answered. "Three feet wide, seven feet deep, 77 inches long."

Dempsey asked Utter, "And how is that death?"

"Measurements for the gravedigger. Take the man down, Sheriff."

A burly man stepped forward. "Hold on there, Mister." The man held a Kodak Brownie in his hand. He was new to town, and slower than a beaver out of water in understanding how things worked. "Say what you will, but I intend to take more photographs."

"Even in death, you will not let this man rest in peace?"

A fellow elbowed the photographer. Others in the crowd understood what the lens man did not. When Utter said "this man," he may have meant himself.

Utter looked at the small box in the man's hand. "I met George Eastman once. An intelligent man, a wise man. He said, 'Embrace light. Admire it. Love it. But above all, know light.' I'd suggest you turn away from darkness and see the light."

"And if I don't? A man has a right to make a living, don't he?" The man searched around for support and found none. "Consider this matter historical then," he looked to Dempsey, "as evidence, ain't that right, Sheriff?"

There was silence until Midas Utter spoke again.

"One-seventeen film allows six exposures. How many have you taken?"

"Four. Why?"

Utter reached into his pocket and unclipped his billfold, and peeled off a crisp twenty. "This note equals two weeks' pay. I'd suggest you take it and surrender the camera to Sheriff Dempsey."

Utter inserted it into the man's shirt pocket.

"I didn't say I'd accept your money."

Dempsey extended his hand. "Hand me the damn camera, Reilly." He tilted his head, eyes on Utter. "Do as the man says."

"And if I don't?"

Midas Utter stepped away and faced the field on the side of the road. He sniffed the air and his eyes narrowed. In a flash, he drew and fired one of his Remingtons. The shot hit the dirt and kicked up a prairie rattlesnake, decapitated it, and threw the serpent's carcass several yards from where it had nested.

Utter holstered his weapon, approached Reilly, and stared into the man's eyes. "And so the serpent deceiveth the world, until he was thrown down to the earth with all his angels."

Reilly handed the Brownie over to Sheriff Dempsey.

Utter said to the sheriff, "I'll see you soon."

The sheriff sat down at his desk later, fortified against the evening hours with a cup of coffee that he had prepared before Midas Utter walked into his office. Dempsey had heard the man before he saw him, the one-two sibilant sound of silver heels against the hardwood floor.

Midas noticed the brand of coffee and said, "Good to the last drop."

"Wouldn't know it, would I, since you interrupted the pleasure?"

"Utter interrupted," Midas said with a smile. "Euphony."

"You're not a man I'd associate with the peaceful or the pleasant."

"Ah, an example of alliteration. Well, you're wrong, Sheriff. When the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took a harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed. I am here to help you resolve this foul affair."

“Here to refresh me, are you? I think I’d rather enjoy this coffee here.” Dempsey lifted his cup and toasted Midas Utter, and then sipped some of his dark brew.

Midas pointed to the canister. “Few people know Teddy Roosevelt coined the coffee company’s slogan, in Nashville, 1907, and in the former home of Andrew Jackson.”

“Thank you for that needless tidbit.”

“Needless?” Midas’s cold eyes stared. “Everything is necessary and needful, Sheriff Dempsey, given proper context and perspective.”

“Afraid you’re wasting your time. Perhaps, another quote from the Bible, something useful?”

“Useful?” Utter asked. “How about the Bard?”

“If you think it necessary.”

“Our rash faults make trivial price of serious things we have, Not knowing them until we know their grave. We are all before the grave, some closer to it than others.”

His mug banged against the wood. “What do you want, Mr. Utter?”

“As Mr. Gradgrind said in Mr. Dickens’s splendid novel, Nothing but facts, facts, facts. Tell me what you know, and don’t preface your history that this was a death foretold because the victim was a union man, an anarchist, and a member of the Industrial Workers of the World. The world outside of this town, no matter how well paid the newspapermen are, will find it hard to believe that a man, blind in one eye, and who walked with a crutch, was a threat. An orator of power, yes, but he was no William Jennings Bryan. What I want from you, Sheriff, are facts, facts, and more facts.”

Dempsey conveyed what he’d learned about the deceased’s last hours. The man had rented a room at a local boarding house. The landlady reported that three men had barged into her home in the middle of the night. Fearful, she confronted the men in the stairwell, where she noticed that they were all wearing masks. She believed them to be armed. They demanded to know the man’s room, and began to creep up the stairs, a promise of violence upon her if she didn’t cooperate. She provided the room number to the man who had demanded it of her.

“Did she recognize this man’s voice?”

“No.”

“Despite these masks, did she recognize the size and shape of any of these men?”

“Afraid not.”

Sheriff Dempsey continued. The cadre had roused the victim from his bed. They seized his person and directed him out of the house, in his underwear, into a waiting car. The lady remarked later that she had heard a car idling, but had forgotten this fact because of the commotion the intruders had created.

“She heard a car,” Midas said, his fingers touching his lips in thought. “Did she see it?”

“Yes. She peered through the curtains in a window at the end of the hall.”

“Recognize the car?”

“Ford Model T.”

“No, I meant, did she recognize to whom the car belonged?”

Dempsey looked up from his notes. “No. Ford Model T, black as they all are.”

“And where were you while all this was happening that evening?”

“In the saloon.”

“On a Wednesday evening?” Utter asked.

“The bar is across the street. There were witnesses.”

“And what else did she witness from her window?”

“The car drove a short distance and stopped. The men tied him to the rear bumper and dragged him down Main Street. You can imagine the rest.”

“A granite surface would explain the scrapes and abrasions. Down the town’s most traveled street, and nobody saw or heard anything?”

“Nothing.”

“Blindness,” Utter said. “He that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.”

“It’s all I’ve got until the doctor is done with the body. Unless you have any other questions, I suggest you wait.” The sheriff returned to his coffee.

“One last question. What can you tell me about Reilly the photographer?”

“Why?”

“In my experience, the man with the camera is often numbered among the perpetrators. He remains on the scene to document the deed. Proximity provides convenience and a demonstration of pride.”

“Reilly is new to town and, while that could make him a man of mystery, I doubt that he was party to the lynching. The only fact,” and the sheriff emphasized the word “fact”, “is that we have an unreliable witness, a woman.”

“I see.”

“See what?”

“The mystery of lawlessness is already at work.”

“Good day to you, Mr. Utter.”

Utter visited the town doctor. He found the man in the antechamber to the morgue, at his vanity. The physician took to heart the great Doctor Semmelweis’s advice. He washed his hands with chlorinated lime after an autopsy. The Hungarian physician’s wisdom had come at the expense of the death of a friend, after countless deaths of women in labor. Cadaveric fever, he’d conjectured, could be averted with hand hygiene.

These days Dr. Hoffmann tended to the ills and injuries sustained in the mines. He was a catchall man of the healing arts, animal and human. He helped cure the diseases that came with every season and he stood at the bedside of his brethren from cradle to grave. He saw Midas in his mirror.

“I’m surprised you cast a reflection, Midas.”

“I’m not that far gone yet, Carl.”

“Assume you’re here about the lynching?”

“I am.”

“Is it because you knew the man from Ludlow?”

The lynched man had been one of many Wobblies in Colorado that fateful spring of ’14. He’d survived the confrontation between strikers and the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company’s militia, formed at the behest of part-owner John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and the National Guard troops, ordered by President Wilson.

“I had heard the man might’ve been at Ludlow,” Utter said.

“Were you?”

“I had no part in the massacre. No, I was not in Ludlow.”

When IWW men and leaders of the strike had approached the tent to negotiate terms, Rockefeller ordered guardsmen to mow them down with machine guns. The body in the doctor's morgue had avoided the ditch and dirt, only to earn the rope and a crude gallows.

"Is there more to the man's death than the obvious?"

Hoffmann dried his hands and draped the hand towel on a small rack. He invited Utter to take a seat, asked if he wanted a drink. They'd opposed each other once, but he was civilized, a doctor, and not a barbarian. Midas Utter chose to stand.

"Your unionist sustained injuries and he'd been beaten to a pulp."

"Figured as much," Utter said. "Anything else?"

"Tortured."

"How so?"

The doctor didn't consult any notes. "Cigarette burns to the soles of his feet."

Utter nodded. "Hadn't thought to look there, though he was barefoot. Anything else?"

"His attackers rifled his pockets."

Utter squinted. "What pockets, the man was in his nightdress?"

"That might be the case, but his IWW Membership Card was crumpled and jammed into his mouth."

Utter considered the floorboards. Nice, treated pine. Maintained. He tapped a foot.

"Hanging him wasn't what killed him, Midas."

"Suffocated on the card?"

The doctor shook his head.

"The rope didn't break his neck," Utter said and shook his head. "He strangled slowly."

"Correct."

"How long?"

"Twenty minutes."

"While they watched," Utter said.

"Not that this matters, but the man suffered from chronic pain."

"The missing eye and his bum leg?"

"No, older wounds. Fractures that'd never been set. Splintered ribs. It's a miracle the man was walking around. There's another curious matter."

"Curious how? Utter asked.

"Ligature scar around his neck. Someone had tried to hang him before."

Utter weighed this revelation and said, "Though he walked through the valley of the shadow of death, he feared no evil."

Midas Utter thanked the doctor, wished him well.

Hoffmann asked him a question. "Why, Midas?"

"Why what?"

"Is it atonement, some penance for all those years we worked for Carnegie and Frick?"

Midas looked around the office. "Was becoming a doctor your way of making amends?"

"Touché," Hoffmann said. "You know those two are still alive."

"With any luck, and God willing, they'll jump into the grave together."

"I'd spend a handsome sum to have Henry Frick on my table."

"Alive, I presume," Midas smiled. "Good day, Carl."

Midas Utter walked the town, curious to have a conversation with the lady owner of the boarding house. The unexpected mention of the names Carnegie and Frick, and the comment about redemption, had surprised Midas.

They were younger than Frick, in their early fifties, whereas their boss, the King of Steel himself, was three decades their senior. Midas and Carl had acted as demons to Henry Clay Frick's devil. It was Clay, and not Jay Gould, who said that he "could hire one half of the working class to kill the other half."

As for reparations for a misspent life, Midas watched Andrew Carnegie seed libraries, the way grannies doted on their gardens. Frick, however, on the cusp of his seventh decade to hell, encouraged his friends to do likewise. Anything to not pay the tax man. He hid his money in the façades to buildings of charities and philanthropies.

Carl left first. Midas Utter parted soon thereafter. As limestone was the catalyst in the king's steel plants, the Homestead Strike provided the crucible. Twenty-five years later, Midas had never forgotten how Carnegie and Frick crushed the vote to strike for better wages. They'd hired Pinkertons, thugs, locked the gate, and set immigrants against each other, until shots were fired, dynamite was thrown, and the field bled red: until martial law was declared.

Though they'd left, it didn't get better.

The Haymarket Affair in Chicago had occurred before their Battle of Homestead in Pennsylvania, then there was that textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts and, most recently, the Ludlow Massacre in Colorado. Out of all of them, the only time workers triumphed with the vote against the captains of industry was in New England. Bread and Roses.

Midas remembered Lawrence as a hollow victory. The Haymarket Four had been hanged, and Joe Hill had been executed, shot against a prison wall.

Big Money couldn't count the bills and change fast enough, now that there was a war on, now that President Wilson had appointed George Creel as the head of the Committee on Public Information. Creel worked the loom of propaganda, and he stoked the fire, a hatred for all things German. Libraries were ransacked and books burned. It was only a matter of time, Midas thought, before they'd come for Dr. Carl Hoffmann.

Now was the time for war, a time to harvest and to count cash, a time for winners and losers, a time for the rich to become richer and the poor poorer, a time for money to be made. Caesar had taught Divide et Impera to centuries of kings and queens, and the robber barons had mastered the art of Divide and Conquer. Now, union leadership imitated them. At every turn, unions attacked each other, while a corporation like Anaconda Cooper slithered its way through the grass into Chile and Mexico, and the workers, whom a lynched man had tried to help, starved.

Frick had been right. 'You were either at the table or on the menu.'

Weathered from years of worry and drink, hers was not the face of a woman who'd grown into satisfaction with her life now that the sunset was on the horizon. The decades had etched into her countenance lines of bitterness, regret, and sadness. Midas Utter found in her eyes the nervous twitch of the trapped animal, and in her hands, the knit-one purl-one of fingers with a threadbare handkerchief.

"There's nothing I can tell you that I haven't told Sheriff Dempsey already."

"I understand, ma'am, but I'm not here to ask you what you saw that night."

"You're not?"

“No, ma’am. What interests me are the man’s belongings. What did he leave behind in his room?”

“Not much. He carried simple, as he lived his life. Nothing but the clothes on his back; but mind you, the man was no hobo. Dignified and decent he was,” she explained. “I showed the sheriff them clothes, and he thought nothing of ’em. Why would he? There was a pair of pants, shirt and vest, socks, and shoes.”

“Was there a billfold?” Midas asked. “The man paid for his stay, correct?”

“Indeed, and I shewed the sheriff the wallet, too. There was money inside of it. Anything else, Mr. Utter?”

“Any personal effects, something practical or sentimental—spectacles or a wedding ring?”

Midas recalled the dead man’s hands. His killers hadn’t bothered to tie his hands together. There was no band on his finger and no need for optics when he possessed one eye.

“Now that I think of it, Mr. Utter, he had on him a timepiece.”

“A timepiece?”

“One of ’em pocket watches a man might keep in his vest, except his lacked a chain. I remember it now because he’d taken it out and verified the time while I wrote his particulars in the ledger. He was a polite man, Mr. Utter, and this part I recall as clear as day. He laughed when he’d checked his sidewinder.”

“Laughed while he checked the time?”

“It was broken,” she said. “You said ‘sentimental’ and it was to him.”

“How can you be certain?”

“The watch belonged to his father, a doctor, and it was the only legacy he had from the man. He said it reminded him of his father and brother.”

“His brother?”

“They worked in the mines in California together. His name was Walter.” The woman’s face lit up. “The back of the watch bore his father and brother’s initials, which were the same: WL.”

“You’ve done well. I’m grateful.”

“I wish I’d told the sheriff about the timepiece because, of all the things left behind, the watch ain’t one of ’em. I hope that I’ve been of use to you, Mr. Utter.”

Midas Utter reached out, lowered his head and kissed the back of her hand. He paraphrased a verse from Psalms. “Your words are a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” She accompanied him to the door. She said that she’d tell the sheriff what she’d forgotten, and Midas agreed that she should tell Dempsey about the missing watch. Midas didn’t spend time reviewing what she’d seen from the window, but he did ask her if there were many Fords in town. She joked that even though Mr. Ford had bragged about lowering the cost of his contraption with each passing year, and he had delivered on that promise, few people in town could afford the \$500 to own a Model T. She told Midas that she could count on one hand those who possessed the vehicle, and there was even one man in town who owned two Fords.

“Two Tin Lizzies?” Midas said. “He must be a wealthy man.”

“He’s an Anaconda man, a manager. Anyhow, one of his cars ain’t even black.”

“What color was it?”

“Red as the fire brigade. Never knew there was such a thing.”

Midas explained to the old woman that the first models of Fords came in bright red, brown, green, dark blue, maroon, and gray.”

“You know automobiles, Mr. Utter?”

“It came with the job. About that man’s address.”

She gave it to him and asked, “You worked for Henry Ford?”

“Ford Service Department. You could say I helped speed up production.”

The afternoon was hot and drowsy with the scent of fresh-cut grass. The first sign of conspicuous wealth was that the house was on a hill, alone, and away from the other residences. A high wooden fence was another indication, important for what it contained inside and excluded outside.

Midas walked up a paved driveway, after he pushed the gate inward. He ignored the house and focused his attention on the garage, the open door, and the view inside. There were two Model T Fords. The red Touring Car, and the man tinkering with it, interested him. Midas didn’t care about the owner’s more recent model because he was certain that it had been the car that’d dragged the activist to his appointment with death: in fact, he was convinced that he’d find proof that a rope or a chain had been lashed to the rear bumper.

No, he was interested in the red car. An earlier version of his own car.

The car was crimson as a cardinal; Henry Ford had produced less than ten thousand of them. The vehicle cost almost \$900 to the customer, and the process at Ford’s River Rouge factory to make one was intense and expensive, this before Ford perfected his assembly line. Midas would bet all the money in his billfold that this one had a lever rather than a floor pedal for reverse. The man working on the car had his back to Midas.

“A fine machine you have there.”

The man said, “Why thank you,” and his face dropped when he had turned around.

“I couldn’t help but admire it. I was walking by.”

“You do know you’re on private property?”

“Point taken.” Midas placed his hands on his belt buckle. If the weather had been colder, he would’ve parted his jacket, but the man in front of him understood the message.

“People don’t walk around armed like that these days. This isn’t the Wild West.”

“But it is the west, nonetheless. Never can be too careful.”

“Do you really need all them cylinders? Last time I heard of them being used was during the War Between the States.”

“War is a state of existence. Haven’t you heard?”

“I won’t argue with a man with two revolvers.” He wiped a wrench down with a rag.

“I do have one question for you, though.”

A car jerked to a stop behind Midas. He heard Sheriff Dempsey’s voice behind him.

“Afternoon,” the sheriff said. He said softly to Midas, “I didn’t expect to find you here.”

“And why am I not surprised that you are here?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The car owner approached. “Ain’t you the fellow asking questions about the incident south of town? You said that you had a question for me. I have one for you.”

“Ask your question?”

“Who do you work for?”

“Not for Anaconda.”

The man contemplated the wrench in his hand. “I hope it isn’t for IWW.”

“No, not them. I know how folks like you, and others in these parts, feel about Wobblies. I read the day’s headline after the fact. ‘Good work: Let them continue to hang every IWW in the state.’”

“People don’t like socialists, and they don’t like someone who questions our place in the world, and why we’re in the war in Europe.”

“So I heard,” Midas said.

“Heard in the wind,” the man said, “a bunch of drunks killed the man, but it’s hard to prosecute a rumor when there are no witnesses. I’ve also heard told that you’re fond of scripture. I don’t suppose you have any wisdom on this matter?”

“He that justifieth the wicked and he that condemneth the just, both alike are an abomination.”

The man smiled. His fingers gripped the wrench. “You had a question for me?”

Sheriff Dempsey interrupted. “I think we ought to leave.”

“What did you want to ask me, Mr. Utter?”

“What time is it?”

The question perplexed the man and it showed in his face and his grip. He switched the wrench from one hand to the other and reached into his pocket. His hand surfaced with a pocket watch, the back of it visible. Midas saw the engraving. The man turned the timepiece over and his finger sprung the cover. “I’m sorry but it seems my watch has stopped telling time.” He held it to his ear. “I ought to get it repaired.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Midas said and walked away.

Sheriff Dempsey joined him.

The next morning Sheriff Dempsey sought out Midas Utter. He planned to tell Midas that he’d overstayed his welcome in town. The car was gone, as was Midas Utter.

Dempsey returned to his office and, while he was hanging his hat, a postman walked in. Dempsey saw the small box in the man’s hand.

He told the mailman, “Just leave it on my desk.”

“I can’t.” He raised the box for the sheriff to see it. “It’s C.O.D.”

“What the hell is C.O.D?”

“A new postal service. C.O.D. Cash On Delivery. You have to pay for it.”

“Everything comes at a cost these days,” Dempsey said. “How much?”

The carrier named the price and Dempsey handed him change.

Dempsey worked loose the envelope taped to the box. His name and address, not handwritten but typed. No address for the sender. Dempsey pierced the side with a letter opener and extracted the piece of paper. He unfolded it and read the typewritten message.

Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness.

He opened the box and found, on top of a square of cotton, a pocket watch. He opened the cover and saw time arrested. He closed the cover and turned it over, and read the initials WL.

A deputy rushed in said it was an emergency. There had been an accident, on the road into town. Three men dead, all with Anaconda.

The sheriff’s first thought was 3-7-77.