

# LYNCH

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"That's Lynch up there," volunteered Duke. Tom peered through the darkness up the tracks towards a jeweled spot at the end of the long narrow valley. The lights looked like children being dismissed from school, marching up the sides of the two mountains at first in neat rows outlining the terraces, then the few ahead, forgetting discipline in the sheer joy of freedom, scattering over the mountains in disarray. That one highest up is like I am, Tim thought, gladdest to get away from school.

Duke groaned. "I couldn't have gone much farther with these dam feet of mine!"

"What's the matter? Mine don't hurt."

"Froze 'em last winter in Wisconsin."

The two boys had met in a way car in Louisville and had ridden a freight to Corbin. Duke looked about sixteen — a knight of the rods and jungles. The other, younger by two years but as large, was a novice escaping from a too strict father and too much chalk dust during the day. Duke had agreed to take Tim to Lynch — to show him the ropes. The U. S. Steel Company was building a mining town there in the valley north and east of bloody Harlan. They could find work there, make a stake, and blow south for the rest of the winter. Tim felt his empty pocket. He had had ten dollars at Louisville but when Duke woke him at Corbin it was gone. When he mentioned it Duke snapped his fingers and said, "I'll bet that dirty bum that got off at Crab Orchard took it. Say kid, if you got any more dough you better let me take care of it for you." Tim hadn't seen anyone get on or off but he had slept most of the way. He looked at Duke and wondered.

They came to the end of the spur track and sank ankle deep in wet, slippery clay. Plodding on, they heard someone coming toward them, and a voice unmistakably Kentuckian called, "Howdy," then a miner's light flashed in their faces.

"Howdy, sir," Tim took the lead, "We're looking for work; can you tell us where to apply?"

Duke nudged him and said, "We sure are hungry, mister; can you tell us where we can get somethin' to eat?"

"The boarding house is closed now and I'm due at the mine in five minutes, but if you'll go up to the third cabin on your right and tell my wife that I sent you, she'll fix you something to eat and show you where to go."

The third cabin was like all the other two room houses perched on their clay shelves. They went up the open wooden steps onto the long but narrow porch; they scuffed their shoes over the gunny sack before the door. A tall, dark woman answered their knock.

"Sure, come in; I'll fix you somethin'." She motioned them to the wooden benches pulled up to the plank table in the kitchen-living room. Everything had a scrubbed look; the newness of the wide floor boards had been bleached by lye. A clean newspaper was folded under the coal bucket that stood by the company-furnished stove, the white over-starched curtains shone in the light of the single, unshaded bulb that was suspended by a cord in the middle of the room. As she peeled potatoes Tim noticed that her hands though rough and red were beautifully shaped; they were a little like his mother's — long and slender. He swallowed painfully at the thought of his



mother. She looked kind of pretty, too, with her hair knotted low on her neck like a Madonna — and then she spit — an incredible distance to the coal bucket. Duke kicked his foot under the table and whispered out of the corner of his mouth, "Shut your trap, you dope; most mountain women chew tobacco." As she moved from stove to sink and back again, revulsion and youthful admiration for her proficiency warred in Tim. But before she brought the large bowl of golden potatoes, scalding black coffee, and cold corn bread to the table, the little boy in him had gained the ascendancy. She washed the supper dishes as they ate, and then came over to the table.

"So you're lookin' for work?"

"Yeh."

"Yes, we are."

"The big boss is lookin' for mule skinners but he doesn't hire anyone under sixteen. You both that old?" she asked looking at Tim.

"Yeh, I'm eighteen and he's sixteen," lied Duke.

The woman took a shawl off a peg by the door and threw it around her shoulders. "If you've finished I'll show you the way," Tim edged over to the stove and looked at the newspaper; it was spotless.

The woman seemed anxious to talk as she swung along in graceful strides. "You see Lynch is divided into seven camps. We live in No. 4. Our camp is finished and the mine is runnin'. They're workin' on five, six, and seven buildin' the houses and openin' the mines. Down yonder is the commissary and the movie house. That light furthest up Black Mountain is the U. S. Steel Company Hotel; the officials and their families live there. There is the church and the priest's house down in that little holler." She stopped. "I can tell you the way from here. Go up that street to the last house — its bigger than the rest — and ask for Big Mac."

Duke was moving ahead. "Thanks, thanks for everything," Tim said.

"Sure. Good luck, kid."

Big Mac looked at them quizzically as he shut and locked his desk. "Yes, I think I could use two young huskies like you if you aren't afraid to work. Meet me at the stables in the morning at 7 o'clock. You'll get \$150 a month. There's room for you at one of the bunk houses; we bought one way tickets for two softies today and you can have their places. Tell Kilcullen I sent you.

"Ulysses!"

"Yes, suh! Mistah MacDougal." The small colored boy reluctantly put down the Irish Setter pup and came over to him.

Take these two men over to the bunk house where Kilcullen's staying. And then you scoot for home. Mammy'll be looking for you with a gad."

Tim straightened his shoulders. Big Mac had said take these MEN and he was going to make 150 bucks a month! It surely was good to get away from home where people realized that you were grown up and weren't always nagging you. He'd show them! As they followed Ulysses, Tim sensed that Duke wasn't feeling the surge of pride and exultation that he was experiencing.

"Sounds like he's gonna expect an awful lot for 150 bucks."

"Well, that's a lot of money to be making. He has a right to expect us to work."

"I dunno, I don't think I'm gonna like it."

Ulysses trotted along ahead. Now that the pup was out of sight he remembered Mammy's admonitions to get home early. If he could just get home before she started out after him! With this in mind, he didn't slacken his speed but pointing to a two story double, he called out, "That there house is the one you is lookin' for." He pattered on to the next house and had just



made the porch when the door opened and an irate woman, arms akimbo, shouted, "U-lys-sees!" A soft voice answered her, "Yes, Mammy, I'se a settin' here on the poach." The two boys smiled as they knocked.

"Are you Mr. Kilcullen? Mr. Mac-Dougal sent us over to see him."

"No. Red!" called the man, "a couple of fellows from Mac are here to see you."

"Send them up," came from upstairs.

Three pairs of eyes from three occupied bunks followed them as they walked to the stairway. Through an open door, leading to the other downstairs room, they saw a surly looking man sitting on the side of his bunk cleaning a gun. The stairway led directly into one big room upstairs. Three iron, double deck beds occupied two sides of the room, lockers and a large metal sink with a pitcher pump, a third. In the center of the room stood a table from which two men had turned expectantly from a game of rummy towards the stairs. On the other end of the table, littered with scraps of tobacco, lay several detective magazines, two well thumbed copies of the Police Gazette, a week-old New York Times bearing the date February 4, 1917, and a new and extremely clean looking Gideon Bible.

"Hello, looking for a place to sleep?" the big Irishman asked. "Well, you can stay up here or downstairs in the back room with Tex and the Jethro brothers."

"This is ok. We'll stay up here," Duke agreed rather hurriedly.

"You can wash up over there at the sink if you want to; I'll show you where the bathhouse is tomorrow. Those two end lockers are empty. You'll find your bedding and towels for the week on the top shelves." Turning back to the table he said, "Your play, Kentuck."

They took down tin pans from the nails above the sink and filled them with water. Tim stripped to the waist and lathered over

with the large square cake of strong soap. "Boy! this sure feels good; I haven't had my clothes off for four days, not since I left home." He dried on his large turkish towel with U. S. Steel in letters of red, running down its center. He looked at Duke and thought, "Gosh, that guy's underwear is really dirty!" Duke was gingerly washing his hands and face, and as he dried, his towel became smudged. Tim sat down on the floor and took off his shoes and clay soaked socks. "This will surely make your feet feel better, Duke." He was ashamed when he saw Duke's feet. "Good Lord, a fellow's feet couldn't get that dirty, could they?" Tim emptied his pan again and washed his socks and hung them over the little line above the sink. Duke looked at his and stretched them out on the lower shelf of his locker.

Red watching these proceedings between plays said, "You, Tim, take the upper deck of my bed and Duke, you can bunk above Peg-leg." The rotund form under the hunched covers hearing his name mentioned, turned over and blinked at them. Duke winced. Peg-leg's round face was puffy and pale under the bristling short pompadour. His brows were wirey and untrimmed, and one eyelid drooped slightly, giving him a rakish and evil look. He sat up in bed and yawned luxuriously, not bothering to cover the gaping mouth with its yellow and uneven teeth. Then he threw his one leg over the edge of the bunk and grinned broadly at the two boys, evidently settling himself for a good visit.

"If you're going to be mule skinnners," Red continued, "you'd better get Peg to teach you his lingo. Don't know what he says to them, but they never balk for him. Kentuck, here, isn't so bad either; he just shows them the notches in his gun. Kentuck gradually unfolded like a jackknife to his full six feet, three inches, and said,

"Wal, think I'll turn in."



Red picked up the paper and looked at the headlines, then laid it down slowly. "We'd all better get to bed if we expect to get going at 5:30 in the morning."

Tim made his bed and reached for the package that had a clean shirt, socks, and pajamas in it. Then he suddenly pushed it back in the locker. These fellows were sleeping in their underwear and probably would think he was a sissy if he didn't. He climbed into bed in the current style.

The tinny jangle of an alarm awoke him before it was light and he slid down to the floor to join the bustle around the sink. The boarding house was next door and when they went in Ulysses was stepping lively with platters of ham and eggs and bowls of potatoes for the two long tables. Mammy didn't trust him with her light baking powder biscuits but proudly brought them in herself after the men had sat down. Tim sat by Red.

"You'll have to sink or swim here, Tim. We never pass anything," he coached as he saw Tim waiting.

"Are you a mule skinner, too?"

"No, I'm a powder monkey."

"What's that?"

"I go before the pit crew and dynamite the site, then the pit crew levels off; they are followed by the stone cutters and the carpenters."

As they left the boarding house Red hailed the pit foreman. "Hey, Ted, going to the stables? How about showing these two men where it is?"

"Sure, come along."

The sun suddenly flooded the valley as they started down. Night and day didn't fool around about coming and going down here as it did in the plains of northern Indiana. He had noticed it last night; one minute it was light and the next the sun had slipped behind the mountain without bothering much about dusk, and it had been dark. The town looked different in

daylight — rather raw. The houses of clapboard were new and unpainted. They stood on neat stone foundations. Only the commissary and church were all of stone. Few trees were left on the carved, bare terraces but many, stripped of their branches, had been driven by pile drivers along the sides of the terraces to prevent avalanches. They found MacDougal waiting for them when they reached the stables.

"There's only one team so one of you will have to work down in the pit."

Tim looked at Duke and Duke said, "Gee, Tim, with my feet the way they are it would kill me to work in a pit. How about you takin' the pit job? After all, I did bring you here and I should have the first pick."

"I'll take the pit job, sir," Tim offered. He thought he had seen Big Mac smile, but when he turned around again he was serious enough.

"Sure you can handle it?" he asked.

"Peg, you take Duke with you and get him started and you, Tim, go with Ted."

The pit turned out to be no less than a broad terrace on which a little steam shovel was working. Tim's job was to fire the small upright boiler and to watch the water in the water glass so that it would not drop below level. "When the shovel is filling hollows you'll have to fire like the devil, but when we fill the wagons you can loaf. Some days we can work a half a day without moving the floats under the engine, and on those days you'll have to adjust the water hose only once." The mule drawn wagons began to come into the pit, Peg leading. He turned and maneuvered the mules into position effortlessly. Duke followed him and seemed to be having trouble. Finally he jumped down and tried leading them, but they refused to budge. His face was red and he cursed tunelessly but without results. Then he saw Tim sitting on the deck of the engine.



Tim called, "Hi yuh! This pit job isn't half bad."

Peg stopped his wagon and hobbled over to Duke, his peg leg sinking in the sticky clay with each step. "Get on my wagon and drive it down the road. I'll get these mules going for you." The next trip and the rest of the day Duke managed adequately if awkwardly; but somehow, Tim thought, his heart wasn't in his work. He didn't take kindly to the ribbing that he got in the bunk house that night either. He left early to eat and sat at the other table. When he came back he stayed out on the porch. Tim went out to talk to him but he brushed him off with, "I brought you here and got you a job, now dammit, quit hanging on my neck. I don't like kids!" That last word rankled in Tim's soul.

The next day he watched for Duke's wagon; before it got to the pit he hurried up his fire and stretched out on the deck, feet propped up against the seat box, and hat pulled down over his eyes. He whistled softly "The Livery Stable Blues." And Ulysses, hired for the day on the promise of a reward payday, inquired, "Anything you want me to do, Boss?"

"Why yes, Ulysses, you might reach in my jacket pocket and get me a cigarette, put it in my mouth, and light it."

"Yes sir, Boss!"

When Tim got home that night the locker next to his was empty. Peg said, "Your friend quit today. Said he had a job down in No. 1 on the pile driver. Mules didn't like him anyway; they're smart that way."

Payday came to Lynch bi-monthly. It brought with it revelry and trouble, but to Tim it brought the final proof that he had left childhood behind him. The day before someone in the pit yelled, "Here they come!" and everyone stopped to watch the procession coming up the narrow road.

First came six mounted and heavily armed deputies followed by a two seated, befringed surry drawn by four trotting mules, bearing in the front seat the paymaster and the company sheriff, and in the back, two more deputies. Following the surry, reining in their impatient horses to the speed of the mules, were six more deputies.

"What's it all about?" asked Tim.

"They've been down to Poor Fork to the bank; they're taking the pay to the Sheriff's office till morning."

"Do we get paid in the morning?"

"Naw, the night shift miners get paid when they get off in the morning; we get ours tomorrow afternoon; we get off at three."

"Does it take sixteen men to bring the money from Poor Fork?"

"Yeh, they're dropped off on each side of the valley between here and there, and they pick them up on the way back. There's a lot of strange people can drift into a place like this, you know."

Tim woke the next morning with a feeling of expectancy. One of the Italian stone cutters on the other side of their double was singing "O Sole Mio." Peg reached down at the side of his bunk and groped around on the floor till he found his peg leg; he pounded violently with it on the wooden partition. "Oh, let him sing; this is payday! I don't blame him. It's time to get up anyway," Red called from his bunk. As they went to work the miners were pouring out of the mine entrances like pale, colorless ants. They all turned up the valley toward the paymaster's office.

Three o'clock finally did come, and at last he was in front of the paymaster's window. He stood and looked at the money—\$75.00—until the fellow behind him elbowed him aside. Then he wadded it up in a tight ball in his fist, jammed it down in his pocket, and hurried towards the commissary. There were things there he need-



ed; he had them all picked out. There was a shoulder holster with brass trimmings, and a fellow had promised to wait out in front with a gun for him. He was there when Tim arrived and for five dollars gave him a nickel-plated Owlhead Revolver. The holster was there, too. He bought two cartoons of cigarettes, and looking up, saw the miner whose wife had fixed them the lunch their first night in Lynch. He bought a large box of candy, on the lid of which was a curvaceous lady with her hair done in ear puffs. He gave it to the miner and asked him to take it to his wife. On his way out he saw a striped silk shirt and bought it. Then he remembered Mammy and started toward the boarding house, hat on one side, whistling off key, and treading on air. He jingled the loose change in his pocket experimentally — "Pretty nice! Seventy-five bucks! That surely beats working on Saturdays at the drug store and peddling papers," he reasoned. He felt sorry for all the kids at home going to school. He grinned thinking how their eyes would pop if he could walk in on the gang and flash a twenty — just one of those twenties. He pushed his hat a little farther to one side and swaggered up the steps of the boarding house where he paid Mammy two weeks in advance.

There were two lanky strangers in the room when he got home. They hurriedly put a cover over a large basket as he came in. "He's o.k.," Red told them. "Tim, these are a couple of Kentuck's kinfolks from the Gap. They have some pretty good mountain dew; want any?" They had the moonshine in glass fruit jars. Tim put his quart on the top shelf of his locker. "Leave it alone till tomorrow; we've a job for you tonight."

"What doing, Red?"

"We'll cut the poker pot for you, and you're to stay outside and watch for Sheriff Hawkins."

It wasn't so bad sitting out there on the porch. He could hear them laughing and cursing inside, and after a while Jed came out and sat with him. Tim looked up the side of Black Mountain; it was bathed in a silver sheen from the dark pines at the base up the steep sides where the beeches, oaks, and water maples grew. The blue haze that hung over the ridges in the day time, and gave the mountains their name, had turned into a purple shadowy scarf, or was the mist gone and the sky that color?

"I'll bet this used to be a pretty spot before they started this town."

"Wal, now I reckon it wuz," Jed drawled, "about the purtiest place they ever wuz. The Markum brothers used to hev ther cabin right up ther in the bend where the two mountains meet. Could set on ther porch and see clean over the hull valley. Yep, funny thing!"

"What's funny?"

"Wal, sir, the U. S. Steel tried fer years to buy this valley frum 'em, but they wouldn't sell — didn't want furriners clutterin' up the place and revenuers snoopin' round. They liked to set on ther porch and count the smoke spirals frum the stills a slippin' up through the trees. Old Jake would say to Henry, 'I see Tom Steele's cookin' today,' — er who ever 'twuz. Then one day they found 'em — old Jake, shot through the back while he wuz a stoopin' over by the fireplace a rakin' the ashes off the corn pone. Old Henry was a layin' on the bed shot through the heart. Wuzzn't long till the valley wuz full of surveyors and g'ologists."

"Who killed them?"

"Never did find out. Ever' one thought it wuz some of ther kinfolk, cause they never lost no time sellin' to the Company." Jed sat still for a long time, then he picked up his old accordin and after fingering the keyboard a little, began to play *Barbara Allen*.



Domenico Leopardi jumped over the railing that divided the two porches and tossed a book in Tim's lap. "There's that book by John Fox, Jr. — *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*. You may not like the girl stuff in it but the feuding is swell. You know the scene of the book is laid in this valley. After you've read it, we'll go up Black Mountain some Sunday and I'll show you where the Lone Pine used to stand."

"That'll be great. How about going to the show tomorrow night?"

"Sorry; my violin lessons cost a lot and I'm trying to save enough this summer so I won't have to come back next year. There's too much danger of injuring my hands here."

Kentuck went with him to the show; before they started the big mountaineer gulped a huge tumbler of moonshine. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and said, "That ought to do me till I git back. Want a drink?" He pushed the tall glass towards Tim.

"My can is right here in my locker." He brought it to the table and filled the glass.

Kentuck eyed the glass. "You used to drinkin' that much?" he asked.

"Surely am." He wished he hadn't said that, the minute the scalding stuff ran down his throat. Tears sprang to his eyes and he had a hard time to keep from choking. Kentuck was watching him with an amused look. Tim took a deep breath and drained the glass. It was a long walk to the show and he felt grand; everything Kentuck said was funny. They went down the dark aisle and felt around for seats. It was a western; Tim was glad of that but he wished it wouldn't flicker so. Kentuck laboriously read all of the explanatory flashes aloud although he seldom completed them before the next picture came on. Someone on the other side of Tim was reading them at a faster speed. It was some-

what confusing. He tried reading them himself but they blurred and ran into each other. He was awfully warm and fumbled with his coat to take it off. All at once the picture started going around and around instead of rushing at him and sneaking back. There was a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach and he knew that he was going to be sick — terribly sick. He reached over to take hold of Kentuck's arm and pitched forward. He felt Kentuck with both powerful hands under his armpits propelling him up the aisle. It was like floating; his toes bumped once or twice, and then Kentuck held him higher and they were outdoors. Kentuck took him around to the side of the building and set him up against a pile of hollow tiles. "Jest set here till the show's out and I'll git you home." With that he went back in.

The air made him feel better but not for long. When he came to, someone was carrying him upstairs. He heard Peg say, "The damned little fool!" He tapped over to him and looked at him then asked, "Is he dead yet?"

Terror seized Tim. That was it — he was poisoned and was going to die! He called Red over to the bed but was too sick to say anything for a few minutes. After a while he asked Red to write down what he was going to tell him. He gave him his father's name and address. "You can ship me home after its over," he whispered feebly. "Tell Dad that I forgive him for licking me, but that the teacher was wrong — I didn't do it. Tell Mother that I'm sorry that I didn't tell her where I was going. You can have my gun and holster."

Red's lips twitched. "Thanks, partner, but you're not going out. You'll be o.k. in the morning. Peg was kidding."

He finally fell asleep. The three men tiptoed over and looked at him. His hands were flung above his head; his face was pale and little beads of perspiration stood



out on his upper lip; damp tendrils of his hair clung to his forehead.

"How old do you suppose he really is?"

Red whispered.

"Kain't be much more'n fourteen,"

Kentuck hazarded.

"Big for his age — looks younger when he's asleep, doesn't he?" said Peg.

Red motioned them back to the table.

"He's too nice a kid for a place like this. Let's send him home."

"Air you crazy or didn't you see him last payday? That kid is sold on this place; he wouldn't go home."

Peg grinned. "There's ways; there's ways."

They whispered together for a while and then went to bed.

Several nights later Tim woke and to his surprise saw Kentuck, Peg, and Red huddled around the table. He'd seen them go to bed and to sleep soon after he had come in. He was just going to say, "What's up?" when Kentuck said, "What about that brat over there in the bunk?"

"We'll have to take him along, I suppose," complained Peg.

"What do you mean HAVE to? We'll let him hold the bag," Red snarled.

"Good idea," they both nodded.

"When do you think would be the best night?"

"About two days before payday ought to be about right. The money comes in on the train that day."

"Hold everything," Red warned, "I thought I saw the covers move over there." He walked softly over to the bunk and looked at the tense figure under the sheet. Tim's heart pounded until he was afraid that Red could hear it. He held his breath until he heard Red say, "No, he's dead to the world." Red winked significantly as he came back to the table.

"There's only one night watchman and we can make the kid bump him off, or if

he doesn't and they ketch any of us we can swear that he was the one thet did it," Kentuck whispered.

Peg reached over and shoved the Gideon Bible under a pile of papers before he said, "He'll make a perfect alibi; his folks don't know where he is, so there'll be no one to push the case."

Red stood up. "Well, we've got time to plan it tomorrow. We'll meet down in Eagle Gulch where there is no danger of being overheard. Let's turn in."

Tim lay motionless till his muscles ached with the effort. Finally he could tell by their breathing that they were asleep; he rolled over and buried his face in the pillow and sobbed softly. He wasn't so scared — it wasn't that — he could get out, but he had liked them, especially Red, and Red was the one that had said the most. "Gosh, couldn't a guy trust anyone?" He knew one place they could be trusted. He pressed his lips tight together and thought, "I won't squeal on them but they're not going to make a monkey out of me!"

Red followed him at a distance and watched him stop at the paymaster's window; he saw him board the afternoon train, then he sauntered into the station. "See you did a big business this afternoon; sold one ticket, didn't you?"

"Yes, one to northern Indiana. Funny kid, he was; looking kind of down at the mouth."

Red walked slowly down the road. As he neared the bunk house Mammy's big, red rooster was pompously crossing the road. Red picked up a cinder and hurled it at him. The rooster squawked and, with neck stretched low, sailed over the fence where he smoothed his ruffled feathers among the sympathetic clucking of his hens.

"Mammy," called Ulysses, "Mister Red is pickin' on our rooster again!"