

EVEN STEVEN

By Emma-Lindsay Squier

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WARMING California sunshine, tang of December in the air, a dusty mountain road leading away from Sacramento—an old man plodding steadily, with sturdy defiance for age and the tiredness he was feeling.

He had been walking thus since early morning. The stamp of the “Old Prospector” was on him; his abundant hair was grizzled, and a dilapidated black felt hat was pushed far back from his forehead. In his eyes, crinkly and blue, was that incurable look of the adventurer who always expects something just around the curve in the road. His clothes were frayed and shabby; his dusty boots were patched in so many places that it was hard to tell where the original leather had started. His steady, plodding tread was accompanied by the jingle of pans and the clatter of a dangling short-handled pick and a miner’s shovel hung above them.

He had long ago left the highway for a narrow, dusty road. Below the slope of the hill he could catch a glimpse now and then of a wide, brawling stream. He had panned for gold in it many times. But the country, though familiar, had a strangely alien feel. It was like meeting an old friend after a lapse of many years, to find that something intimate and glamorous has escaped.

The warmth of the day was gradually giving way to a wintry chill that presaged the coming of night. The old prospector stopped, shivering a little, and adjusted the knapsack on his back.

“Shanty,” he said aloud after the manner of one who has lived much alone, “it’s jest a plain fool ye are! With Christmas only a few days off, and goose an’ trimmin’s at the Poor Farm, ye had to break yer parole like, and become a fugitive! Shame be to ye, Shanty, as can’t be a pauper in the proper spirit, but must be takin’ to the road again!”

He sighed, and turned over a vagrant piece of quartz with the toe of his boot, scanning it with the look of one who sees in every wayside rock a potential gold mine. Then his eye caught the angle of a roof, down at the foot of the hill on the other side of the stream, almost hidden by the rusty yellowing of sycamores and cottonwood trees. The sight of it lifted his spirits suddenly.

“ ’Tis a shack, sure as ye’re born! ’Twill have plenty o’ rats infestin’ it, but belike they won’t mind sharin’ it with ye fer one night—or maybe two . . .”

He turned off the narrow road and pushed his way down through a mass of clustering bracken. The tumbling stream that barred his way for the moment was

riotous, swollen by the autumn rains. There were sharp-pointed boulders strewn across it, and he stepped warily, while the water churned close to his feet.

The cabin stood in a clearing once ample size, but now encroached on by a younger generation of cottonwood trees assuming squatters' rights. He went around to the front. The windows were dusty, and the holes in them had been stuffed with rags. The door sagged on its hinges.

But as a twig snapped under his foot, there came from within the sound of something moving. And then Shanty stood still, looking into the twin barrels of a gun poked through a broken pane of glass.

"Stand where you are." The voice was muffled, but shrill with a frightened defiance. "I'll shoot—"

The old man felt an instant of unpleasant tingling along his spine. Then he chuckled, and scratched his head under the battered brim of the hat.

"Seems as if manners ain't changed after all, even if times has! 'Scuse me, pard—I wasn't after jumpin' yer claim. It's jest a bit chilly that I was, and—"

"Aren't you from the Orphanage?" the unseen voice demanded, a little louder.

Shanty's jaw dropped.

"From the Orphanage! Do I look *that* young?"

There was a moment of silence. Then the gun was drawn inward. A face appeared behind the dusty window pane—a smudged young countenance, with eyes that were like great black holes, and hair that even in the waning light showed brick red.

Shanty drew in his breath sharply. "Saints above—it's only a lad! Come out, son. Are ye lost, or what?"

Again there was silence. Then a bar dropped, and the door opened cautiously, creaking on rusty hinges. Shanty was staring at a sturdy figure, at a boy who might have been a replica of himself at sixteen. The youth's square face was pinched and thin above his blue overalls. He clutched his gun with a grip that made knuckles show whitely. But as he stared into the kindly, twinkling-eyed face, some of the strain went out of his own, and a little quiver came into his lips.

"I—I guess you're all right, Mister. Sorry I pointed the gun at you." Then a grin suddenly illumined the face. "It's not really loaded," he admitted.

Shanty grinned back.

"'Twas not such a monster of a fright ye gave me.

I've looked into gun barrels before—as was loaded! But what are ye doin' here, lad, miles away from anywhere?"

The boy's shadowed brown eyes took on a defiant gleam. His mouth set firmly.

"I ran away—from the Orphanage!"

Shanty burst out laughing.

“Saints upon us! Two of us as has the same idee! I’m a truant meself, lad, and they’re callin’ me bad names this minute, I’ve no doubt! Well . . . could ye be givin’ me the loan o’ yer roof the night? Sure the climate’s changed since I was out this way last, and me bones are feelin’ the chill.”

The boy stepped aside from the doorway.

“Sure, Mister, come on in. You’re welcome to what I got—there’s a bag of beans left, and apples from the tree in the yard.”

The old prospector stepped inside the small, bare room and looked about. It was fairly clean, but stripped of all that goes to make a home. A pile of dried ferns with some gunny sacks over it served as a bed. A battered tin pail in the embers of the fireplace sent forth a familiar smell of cooking beans. A sluice box leaned dustily in one corner.

Shanty set down his pack, wonderingly.

“Lad, lad—it ain’t much of a place ye ran away to!”

The boy answered with a fierce defiance.

“It’s mine. My mother and dad and my sister Myra and me lived here, and everything was jake until Dad was killed blasting. Then Mom took sick and died in a hospital at Sacramento, and they put Myra and me in the Orphanage. I reckon they meant all right, but we just weren’t used to it. Myra cried somethin’ terrible—she’s just a little thing, not quite ten,” he explained with dignity. “I wanted ’em to let us go, but they wouldn’t. So Myra and me fixed it up so I could run away. I know the place where Dad found gold, and I’m going to work that tunnel and get out enough to take care o’ Myra!”

An answering light kindled in the crinkled blue eyes of the old wanderer. He looked down smiling into the earnest freckled face of the boy.

“What might yer name be, lad?” he asked gently.

“Bill Radfield.”

The old prospector shook his head.

“I’m thinkin’, lad, ye shouldn’t have run away....”

“*You* did!” Bill challenged him.

Shanty sighed.

“True for ye, lad, I did—and I’m worse off than you. For when they took me for a vagrant, the judge sent me to the Poor Farm, on a parole like; but after a time the walls got to chokin’ me. Well—I’ll grubstake ye to bacon and coffee and the like, and to-morrow we’ll have a look at yer feyther’s mine. But what if the officers come seekin’ ye?”

“They don’t know where we lived—and Myra won’t tell ‘em!” the boy answered stoutly.

The old prospector grinned and got to work. He opened the knapsack and spread its contents on the floor. Then, squatting before the embers, he built them into a brisk blaze; and soon the smell of frying bacon and bubbling coffee rose in a cheerful, appetizing haze in the small room.

The boy watched him approvingly.

“What’s your name, Mister?”

The other grinned.

“Chauncy Wiltonshire I was born, belave it or not! But somewhere along the line I got to be called ‘Shanty.’ Hey!” he broke off suddenly, “there’s a varmint makin’ off with a piece o’ bacon!”

He raised a stick of wood; but the boy sprang forward as a huge brown rat disappeared with a frightened squeak into the depths of a large hole in the broken flooring.

“Don’t hurt him—that’s Steven!”

“Oh!” Shanty put the chunk down, and looked quizzically at the boy. “So that’s Steven! A pack rat, ain’t he?”

“Sure!” Bill’s voice was eager. He might have been talking about a faithful dog. “At first he was awful scared of us. But we kept putting out things for him to eat—and he’d always bring something in exchange. Mom called him ‘Even-Steven.’ And when I came back here, he remembered me. He isn’t a bit scared—he’d have come right up to me if you hadn’t made a pass at him!”

Shanty chuckled, and took the coffee pot from the embers.

“Seems to me his name ought to be ‘Uneven-Steven.’ I’ve known pack rats all me life, and I never seen one yet that traded anything like even for what they took away. For a chunk o’ bacon, they’ll bring ye a dried rabbit skull; and for a piece o’ salt pork they’ll leave ye a bent nail that ye can in nowise use!”

They began to eat. In the shadows beyond the firelight, there was a furtive movement. Two bright eyes peered cautiously. “Come on, Steven,” Bill coaxed, “this here is my pard; he won’t hurt you!”

The big pack rat slid forward, his right cheek bulging with something he was carrying. Bill extended a piece of bacon. At the appetizing odor of the long-absent luxury, Steven forgot his fear. He released what he was carrying in his mouth, snatched the meat, and whisked away into the darkness of his hole. Shanty picked up the small rock, examining it carefully.

“Well, there’s plenty o’ traders like him in the world! A stone for meat . . . and away they go! I had a partner like that once—‘Banshee’ I called him. But we’ll give Steven the benefit o’ the doubt—mayhap to him that pebble is a vallyable piece o’ property!”

It was morning, golden and gracious, with a warmth that denied the coldness of the preceding night. Shanty and Bill were pushing their way through a thicket of tall ferns and underbrush up the hill that rose behind the cabin.

“Geel!” panted the boy, “this sure has grown up since I was up here last! Hi!” He stopped, breathing heavily as they came out on a narrow but plainly marked trail. “Someone’s been along here! See that footprint?”

Shanty nodded, sniffing. There was a perceptible odor of tobacco in the fresh mountain air.

“Did ye tell me that yer dad kep’ this mine o’ his a secret?”

Bill hesitated.

“Well—not a *dead* secret! You see, there was a man who owned it, and he sold his claim to Dad. Mom didn’t like him ’cause he used to drink somethin’ awful, and once he tried to kill Steven for carryin’ off his pipe. After he sold Dad the mine, we couldn’t find gold in it anywheres; although there was plenty when he was showin’ it to us. . . .”

The old prospector’s eyes narrowed.

“Salted!” he said briefly. “Sech tricks ha’ fooled the wisest of us!”

“But then, a few weeks later,” Bill went on eagerly, “*we* found gold! Chunks of it!”

Shanty started.

“Nuggets, ye mean, lad?” he asked eagerly.

“No, not exactly nuggets . . . little pieces of quartz like they had been broke off—and shot just full o’ gold! Look, it was right here!” They had reached a ledge, set back under the sheltering brow of the hill. A rudely tunneled entrance made a rectangle of black against the gray-brown walls. Bill stooped down, his face glowing with excitement.

“Right here, it was.”

Shanty, squatted down beside him, was examining the ground with attentive care. A pile of broken twigs and sticks was scattered about, a fragment or two of green glass, and a tiny piece of a mirror. He picked up a small white object and held it out to Bill.

“Was this chiny button and these pieces o’ glass here when ye found the gold-bearin’ quartz?” he asked.

The boy stared at him with wrinkled brows.

“Do you think we paid any attention to rubbish. like that?”

The old prospector’s blue eyes were squinting down at the cabin and the brawling stream below, at the foot of the hill.

“No, belike not,” he said slowly, “but I’m wonderin’; ye say that yer dad found chunks o’ quartz *after* he’d bought the mine?”

“Yes! This man came around again, and he wanted to buy it back, but Dad wouldn’t sell it. Then one night he got Dad drunk, and when I went t’ sleep they were playin’ cards and arguin’ about the mine.”

Suddenly, through the low doorway, came the stooping figure of a man. He straightened up, blinking at the two on the ledge, his dark, unpleasant face streaked with grime and sweat. The boy caught his breath abruptly, and touched the old prospector’s sleeve.

“That’s him! That’s the man I told you about!”

Shanty stood up, his eyes strange and hard.

“The top o’ the mornin’ to ye, Banshee Taylor! Is it saltin’ the mine again that ye are, to snare some unwary devil like poor Radfield—and like mesilf when I gave ye all I had for a worthless hole in the ground?”

The man’s small, heavy-lidded eyes glinted dangerously.

“You git off my property, and stay off! This here is my claim, and I got the paper to prove it!”

The boy’s voice was shrill—more in anger than in fear. “You’re lying! My dad never sold this mine! He knew there was gold in it—he was blastin’ here when he was killed!”

Banshee Taylor grunted in derision.

“Much you know about it! He lost it to me at poker, and signed it over t’ me, fair an’ square. He’s dead, ain’t he?” A sudden thought struck him. “Say! You and yer kid sister was put in an orphanage! And you, Chauncy—I heard you was took up for vagrancy in Sacramento! The two of you is runaways, livin’ in the old cabin! Now you keep yer mouths shut, or I’ll make trouble! I ain’t forgot, Shanty, that you took a shot at me once.”

“And I ain’t forgot that the bullet went through yer hat instead o’ yer skull! The next time I’ll aim better—kape that in mind!”

The man’s face was hard and ugly. “There’s another thing to remember while we’re talkin’ about it—Radfield was jest a squatter! He never actually registered his claim to that land down there. Even the shack don’t belong to his kids.”

Down at the cabin once more, the two faced each other, breathing hard. The boy’s face was white.

“Shanty, we gotta do something! I’m not goin’ to let that man have my dad’s mine—”

Shanty’s face was grave.

“Yon’s a bad un, lad, as would take the pennies off his dead mither’s eyes! He has no legal claim to yer feyther’s mine, for a gamblin’ debt is not recognized in the

Californy courts. Sure, I've had six gold mines give t' me—on paper, across the poker table—but divil a cent could I collect on 'em! He's bankin' on our position here—which ain't too good, me lad. But—I've a hunch inside o' me, churnin' around like a butter paddle. Come, lad—show me the place where yer mither used to throw out trash.”

Wondering, the boy did so. Still wondering, he got pick and shovel for Shanty. But a day's steady work, grubbing in the unsightly conglomeration of broken bottles, tin cans and rusted cooking utensils, revealed nothing in the way of pay dirt.

With pan and sluice box the old prospector worked the swollen stream. The next day and the next they kept at it from early dawn until darkness. Food supplies were dwindling. Only apples were left, and a little coffee.

Of Banshee Taylor they saw nothing. But one night they heard the snapping of a twig outside the shack, and caught the flitting shadow of a face against the window pane. Instantly it was gone.

“ ’Tis a pity,” said Shanty, trying to speak lightly, “that we can't teach Steven to growl and bark when unwelcome visitors is prowlin' about!”

As if he had heard his name spoken, the big brown rat slid out of his hole in the rotten flooring, and came forward cautiously, his bright eyes fixed hopefully upon Bill.

The boy stooped down, holding out a piece of apple. The pack rat dropped what he had been carrying in his mouth, snatched the proffered morsel, and scurried back to his hole.

Shanty picked up the small white object and looked at it curiously. It was a china button, nicked at the edge.

“Now I may be crazy as a loon,” he said half to himself. “but this looks like the same chiny button as I seen away up there on the ledge! Bill lad, if only that rat could talk, I'm thinkin' he could tell us somethin' we'd like to know! Was it true, lad, what Banshee said about yer feyther not registerin' his claim?”

The boy shook his head.

“Gee—I don't know! He staked it out, but mebbe he didn't get into town—”

The old prospector sighed.

“And neyther one of us dares go in—unless we want to stay put!”

It was the day before Christmas, a dark, dreary day with heavy rain clouds swirling overhead and threatening momentarily to dissolve into a torrential storm. The old prospector's heart was heavy.

“Ye're not gettin' anywheres, Shanty,” he muttered, “an' ye're draggin' this lad nowheres with yel!”

He went to the door of the little cabin and looked up at the ominous gray sky. The sound of distant voices caught his ear. And then a tingling shock went through him.

For from the highway at the top of the hill three men were descending—and Banshee Taylor was in the lead!

For an instant he stood helpless. The end to the brief interlude of freedom had come. Banshee had brought the authorities. It would mean jail this time!

With the thought came fierce, swift revulsion of feeling.

He slammed the door shut, and flung the heavy bar across it. He was panting as he turned around.

“Lad, lad, they’re upon us!”

Bill leaped from his packing-box seat.

“I ain’t going back!” he cried. “Shanty, you aren’t either! You and me are pards—we’re workin’ for a livin’! We can get along if they just let us alone until we find that gold”

The old prospector’s face was white.

“I’m thinkin’ they won’t listen to any sech talk, lad. “They were at the window, crouching down together, peering out.

“Kape as quiet as a mouse, an’ belike they’ll go away—especially if the rain will but come!”

The sound of thrashing footsteps came nearer ... the men had paused on the other side of the swiftly racing stream to find the best place for crossing.

Suddenly, from behind the two in the cabin, came a little click. Shanty started nervously.

“It’s only Steven ... he’s brought something,” whispered Bill.

But Shanty made a queer, strained sound in his throat. For the flicker of firelight had caught the object that the big brown pack rat had dropped on the floor—and it threw off a molten yellow gleam!

“Saints love us,” he whispered, trembling, “it looks like— but it can’t be. . . .”

Bill turned, staring at his friend with startled eyes. For the old prospector was crawling along the floor as if his limbs would not support him. Then he squatted in front of the fireplace, the quartz lump in his hand, and there was sweat running down his seamed face.

“Bill, Billy lad—” his voice was hoarse and shaken—“it’s—it’s *gold!* As rich and free as ever I saw it in me whole life! Bill—when first I saw that pack rat’s nest up on the ledge and heard ye say that yer feyther found gold there, it came into me mind that it was carried there by a trade rat who liked shiny things! And when I glimpsed them pieces o’ green glass and the chiny button—I figgered that Steven must o’ packed ‘em from underneath the trash pile.” He paused an instant.

“But, lad—I’m thinkin’ the vein’s nearer. He’s been breakin’ off pieces along his runway, belike! Git that pick and dig—right down that hole there, under the floorin’ where Steven comes up!”

There were voices outside—the men had crossed the stream. Shanty got to his feet. His eyes were blazing.

“I’ll hold ’em off, lad! If we can prove we ain’t paupers—”

There was a peremptory knock on the barred door. Then a crisp, authoritative voice.

“Open up! We know you’re in there, Shanty—”

For a terrified second, Bill hesitated. Then he leaped for the short-handled pick. He swung it above his head, and it came crashing down into the rotten flooring.

“That’s it, lad—dig! Straight along Steven’s burrow—” He had the double-barreled shotgun in his hands, and was poking it through the broken pane.

“Stand where ye are,” he called out sharply. “Banshee, kape yer hands well above yer head; and you, Mister Sheriff, and you, Mister Deputy, take the same positions! I’m in no argyfyin’ mood, and Banshee will tell ye whether I can shoot straight.”

The three men outside, startled at the unexpected menace of the steady gun, lifted their arms involuntarily. Banshee Taylor’s face had turned a mottled bluish white.

“D-d-on’t shoot—” he stammered. “We—we don’t mean you no harm, Shanty—”

The voice from within was pricked with sarcasm.

“Ye don’t need to be tellin’ me, Banshee! Sure, I’ve had plenty of experience in the past with yer dove-like kindness . . . (Go on, lad, *dig!*)”

The sheriff frowned. He was a short, gray-eyed man with a deeply tanned face.

“Shanty, you’re just making things harder for yourself and the boy. You deliberately became a fugitive. Defying the law with a weapon is another serious offense. And you’re crazy if you think you can dig out of the shack. It’s hopeless, Shanty. Put that gun down, and let us in!”

The deputy spoke softly, out of the corner of his mouth.

“Mebbe I can sneak around the corner and stick a gun through one o’ the side windows !”

The gathering storm was nearer. The clouds were heavy and black. A white swish of lightning was followed by a crackling rattle of thunder.

“I’ll not let ye in unless ye agree to give us a chance! (*Dig, lad! Tear up that board yonder!*)”

The sheriff’s voice was stern.

“You’re spoiling every chance for yourself and the boy.

Open that door and surrender peaceably!”

Again came the white gnashing of the lightning's teeth, and the snarling roar of the thunder. The air was murky black....

"Beat it!" rasped out the sheriff to his deputy, and the man slipped like a phantom around the corner of the shack.

"Open the door, Shanty. You're covered from the other side!"

Suddenly, from within, there came an inarticulate cry. Then the gun barrel wavered, and the sheriff sprang forward and seized it, and dragged it through the broken window pane. Banshee, like a coyote, had turned tail and fled to the edge of the clearing. He came slowly back when he saw the gun safely in the hands of the sheriff.

"Be careful o' that old cuss," he said fearfully. "He shoots awful straight!"

The sheriff flung him a look of disgust.

The rain came down suddenly, in a vicious, breath-taking deluge. The three men hunched themselves against it.

"Let's get back to the car until this is over!" shouted Banshee Taylor above the smashing fury of the storm.

"Shut up, you!" the sheriff roared at him.

Then the cabin door opened abruptly, with the sound of falling bar and creaking hinges. The old prospector stood there, a strange, wild look in his eyes. His gray hair was disheveled by the driving wind.

"Come in!" he cried out to them, "come in and take shelter! Mister Sheriff, it's trustin' to yer honor that I am "

They stumbled inside, gasping for breath. Shanty shut the door behind them. The sheriff shook from his hat a shower of rain drops. "I've told you, Shanty, I can't promise anything except the law."

The bent figure straightened. There was an electric quality to his voice that seemed a part of the unleashed storm outside.

"It's justice of the law that I'm askin'! Justice fer an orphaned lad and his wee sister—fer them as has no feyther, and is hounded by a black devil in human form! *You*, Banshee Taylor—" he pointed a shaking hand at the dark, belligerent face—"you tricked William Radfield once by saltin' a worthless mine—and then, when ye thought gold was truly there, ye tricked him into gettin' it back again! But there's a justice above all yer dirty schemin's—and the instrument of it was a humble one! Jest a pack rat it was that fooled ye, Banshee Taylor, with his cache o' shinin' rocks! The vein is not up on the hill—it's here, under our very feet!"

The three men followed his pointing finger with hypnotized eyes. They saw a boy's bowed form, bent over something on the floor beside him—and there was tragedy in his figure.

“What the ...”muttered the sheriff, and lit a match. Then he drew his breath in a sharp, gasping sound. In the hollow space uncovered was a pack rat’s cache; a litter of rusted nails, bits of glass, a bottle stopper—and a handful of quartz chunks, each one sparkling up into the flickering light.

But that was not all. Along the burrowed passage, ran a broad rusty yellow band—an outcropping vein of purest gold!

The boy looked up with dimmed eyes.

“I—I killed Steven!” he choked out. “He gave us all this—and I killed him! The pick went into him as he was runnin’ out—”

The limp, inert body of a pack rat lay in his lap. Steven had made his greatest trade.

Suddenly there was a furtive movement in the room. Banshee Taylor was at the open door and in his hands was the double-barreled shotgun covering them.

“Hey! What are you doing?” The sheriff wheeled about and spoke sharply.

In the man’s face there was triumph.

“You all stay right where you are! I’ll blow the head off of anyone that moves! This claim ain’t never been registered . . . but it’s going to be—to-day! I’m goin’ to take the car!”

The sheriff’s voice was hoarse with rage.

“You—you scoundrel! You’d try to take a strike like this away from a kid an’ an old man. . . .”

He moved forward, but the gun halted him. “Stand back—or I’ll shoot—”

Then Shanty’s voice came, clear as a ringing bell. “Fooled again, Banshee—the gun ain’t loaded!”

The man hesitated, his jaw sagging. In that instant, the sheriff and his deputy whipped out their revolvers.

With an oath Banshee Taylor flung his useless weapon from him and stumbled through the driving fury of the rain toward the stream. A bullet cracked past him. He swerved, and plunged into the water. The turbulent, muddy current caught at him. He leaped for a boulder, missed his foothold—and crashed face downward on the sharp point. The three men and the boy upon the bank saw him throw out his arms, thrashing wildly. Then the rushing eddy and whirl of the maddened torrent dragged him down, rolling him over and over like a log. .

The sheriff and his deputy plunged in and battled with the fierce current. The rain beat at them with frenzied, stinging fury. The inert body avoided them, was swirled away, pushed under, battered against jutting logs and boulders—but at last they dragged it up on the bank. The sheriff straightened up, shivering in the downpour.

“He’s done for,” he said briefly. “Skull’s smashed in. Well, he had it coming to him. Shanty, I’ll stand by you and the kid—we’ll register that claim in his name to-day!”

“It’s half Shanty’s!” cried out the sober-faced boy. “He’s goin’ to be my adopted father!”

In Sacramento the next day, freshly clothed, and entertained by the sheriff at the most bountiful dinner either of them had known for many days, the question arose as to a name for the claim that was to prove one of the greatest finds since the old days of the Gold Rush.

On one side of Shanty sat Bill; on the other side, a demure, red-headed little girl whose adoring brown eyes never left the kindly, weather-beaten face.

“I think, lad,” Shanty said solemnly across the remnants of turkey and cranberry sauce, “that in honor o’ the day it oughta be called ‘Christmas Mine,’ for—”

But Bill shook his head.

“Nope—it’s goin’ to be called ‘The Even-Steven’! You wouldn’t find many pals who would give their lives for you!”

The sheriff and the old prospector looked at each other.

Shanty nodded gravely.

“I reckon that’s so; ‘The Even-Steven’ it shall be! An’ don’t ye be takin’ yer pal’s death too much to heart, lad. For if Steven is the b’y I think he was, he’d be glad that he could trade his life fer the happiness o’ two sech as yerself and the wee lass !”

“And you too, Shanty,” Bill said quickly.

The old man smiled. Tears of complete happiness were smarting behind his own eyelids. Then the sheriff lifted his big white coffee cup.

“Here’s to you all!” he said heartily. “A merry Christmas, and many of ’em!”