

SATIN & SUTHERLAND

THE GOLDEN CURSE



Free
Preview

RICHARD
HOOVER

Prologue

Somewhere in the Dominion of Canada Midwest

1870

The crackling fire glowed orange against the moonless black of night. It sparkled off the pile of gold before Frank Lemon.

There was so much gold.

The fire cast a circle of light, keeping the darkness at bay. Lemon had stoked it higher than a man.

No, no. Don't think about a man. Don't think about...that thing.

It lay there. Waiting for him.

Look at the gold. So much. So pure. They were going to be rich. *He* was going to be rich.

Lemon circled the small campsite. He didn't—couldn't—step from the light of the fire. He just knew the darkness held the devil himself. Lemon only needed to survive until morning. They could escape with dawn's light.

No, *he* could escape. He. Him. Alone.

He and his gold.

The misshapen lump at the other end of the camp caught his eye. He averted his gaze to stare into the darkness.

It wasn't his fault. Had Blackjack not been so stubborn, they'd never have been in this state.

Poor Blackjack. It was his fault. Yes, it was. The fever had taken him. Him, not Lemon.

Gold. Gilt. Guilt.

“Ha-woooooo!”

Lemon half jumped from his skin. The chill, inhuman cry echoed off the rocky slopes surrounding the camp.

It came again. “Ha-woooooo!”

Not a wolf. Lemon had heard wolves. This was bigger. More cunning. More calculating.

Lemon backed towards the fire. He heard a rustling in the darkness, just out of sight. Then another, off to the side. A high-pitched laugh came to him. More cries.

The light from the crackling fire showed movement. Indistinct shadows writhed among the

trees. Unnatural eyes glowed like the gold.

The cries and laughter came more quickly. They were in front of him. Behind him. Above him. Below him. Everywhere!

His foot slipped on a rough branch, part of the wood he'd collected to fuel the great bonfire.

Lemon crashed to the ground. The horrid sounds surrounded him. He curled into a ball.

His heart nearly stopped. He was face-to-face with Blackjack. Lemon's bush axe was still wedged in Blackjack's skull. The dampness of Blackjack's blood touched Lemon's cheek.

Amid the howls of the devil, Lemon screamed.

Road to Riches

In which our Heroes meet – a Steamer Explodes – Her Majesty's Secret Service – a Map of Sorts – Stories and Travels – The Curse

Seattle, Washington Territory

May 1879 (9 years later)

William “Deuces” Sutherland spoke around the unlit cigarillo in his mouth, “I’ll see your fifty and raise you, oh, one hundred.”

A murmur went through the audience in the Rusty Sprocket saloon. There was more money on the table than most people earned in a month of Sundays.

The man seated across the table from Sutherland was sweating—Sutherland could smell it. Not that that meant anything. In the warm spring night, the other man, one Dan Thompson, had been sweating the whole time. Stubble showed on his cheeks and crow’s-feet sprouted from the corners of his eyes.

“Now I know you’re bluffing,” Thompson said. He finished his drink and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

Sutherland shrugged. “It’ll cost you a hundred to find out.”

Thompson hesitated before shoving most of his dwindling chips forward. “All right. How many cards you want?”

Sutherland’s cards rested face down on the table, a poker chip on top of them. He made no move towards them. “Oh, I’m good.”

Thompson snorted. “One for me.”

Thompson pressed a button set into the table. Next to him, the wind-up auto-dealer chugged to life. Gears and pulleys turned and a brass armature swung out and dropped a card before Thompson.

Sutherland threw an arm over the back of his chair, giving the impression of being entirely bored with the game. “I guess the bet’s to me then. One hundred.”

The murmur through the crowd was louder this time.

“I...I don’t have that much.” Thompson stared at his pile.

“No? Pity.” Sutherland reached for the mound of chips in the center of the table.

“Wait.” Thompson pinned Sutherland’s hand to the table with his own. “Just...wait.”

Sutherland raised his eyebrows. He saw a struggle on Thompson's face.

"I haven't got all night," Sutherland prompted. "There're plenty of other poker games in this little town."

Thompson glared at Sutherland and the audience around them. He reached into his greasy waistcoat and pulled out a crumpled, folded piece of parchment. He held it above the pile of chips and, with a visible effort, let it drop. "I call."

Sutherland laughed. "With what? Some moldy parchment?"

"It's a map."

"A map? A map to what? Your bank so I can get the rest of my money?"

Thompson chewed at his cheek. "A map to the Lemon diggings."

The name meant nothing to Sutherland but it caused a stir among the saloon patrons.

"The Lemon diggings?" Sutherland echoed. "And those would be...?"

"One of the richest gold strikes ever discovered," an old gentleman from the crowd spoke up.

"That a fact?" Sutherland looked at Thompson.

"It is," Thompson replied.

"If it's so great, why do you need a map to it?"

"It was lost."

"Lost?"

"Yeah, lost. Old Frank Lemon lost it after murdering his partner, Blackjack."

"I thought his name was Mark Lemon," the gentleman in the crowd said.

"I'd heard it was Jack," another spectator said.

Thompson shook his head. "I got this map from *Frank* himself."

Sutherland had been involved in more than a few cons in his time. "If this map's so valuable, then why are you gambling it? Why aren't you raking in the gold right now?"

"I'll show you."

Thompson leaned forward and unfolded the map. Everyone around the room pressed closer to see.

"What am I looking at?" Sutherland asked.

The "map" was a mess of lines with odd little notations. It looked more like the gearing for a steam locomotive than any sort of cartographic aid.

“It’s a schematic.” Thompson smirked. “You know? Plans for building contraptions like this auto-dealer.”

“And the map part would be...?”

“You build this device and it shows you the map,” Thompson explained. “Only problem is, you need a good gearhead—I mean, a *really* good one—to build this thing. Trust me, I’ve asked around. And good gearheads don’t come cheap. That’s why I’m here. For the money.”

Sutherland saw why the man wasn’t afraid to show the schematic in public. The design was complex. It was very, very complex. Sutherland shuffled two stacks of chips into one while he considered.

“All right. If you say the map’s good, I’ll take your word. You’re an honest man. I could tell that as soon as I saw you.”

Thompson folded the map. “Well, now. The way I figure it, this map is worth more than your one hundred dollar bet.”

“That’s the way you figure it?”

Thompson nodded.

“How much more?”

“Oh, I’d say everything you’ve got would about do it.”

Sutherland lifted his cigarillo from his mouth. “That’s another twelve hundred thirty-six.”

“Sounds about right for the map.”

“That’s quite a raise.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Thompson smirked.

“And if I call it,” Sutherland said, “and if I lose, I lose everything.”

“Are you in or not?”

Sutherland replaced the cigarillo in his mouth. He made a show of drawing his cards from beneath the poker chip under which they lay and studied them closely.

“Are you in or not?” Thompson asked again. The man could barely stay in his seat.

“Wal,” Sutherland said. “I rather think I’d like to call.”

Thompson tossed his cards forward almost before Sutherland had finished speaking. “That’s too bad. You should’ve folded and kept a stake. But four kings. What can I say?”

Thompson started raking in chips. Now it was Sutherland’s turn to pin the other man’s hand.

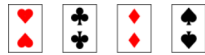
“Don’t you want to see my cards? You paid enough for them.”

“Eh? Paid?”

“Mm-hm.” Sutherland started flipping cards. “Eight through queen of clubs. That’d be a straight and a flush.”

Thompson stared at Sutherland’s cards. His fingers curled in and out above the pot.

Sutherland grinned, “What can *I* say?”



After Sutherland won the hand with Thompson, the game had ended. Nobody was inclined to play against the young gambler at that point. Sutherland cashed in his winnings, tucked the map safely into the pocket inside his waistcoat, and headed for the bar.

A large mirror adorned the wall behind the bar and Sutherland positioned himself so he could keep an eye on things. He noticed Thompson hadn’t left the Rusty Sprocket. Instead the prospector took a seat at a table in a dim corner. A couple of people visited the table and bought sympathy drinks for Thompson. Thompson’s gaze was burning into the back of Sutherland’s skull.

“Be careful with ol’ Thompson there,” the bartender interrupted Sutherland’s reverie. “He’s a poor—”

“Poor loser,” Sutherland said. “I could tell that as soon as I saw him. Your place wouldn’t happen to have a backdoor would it?”

“You expecting trouble?”

“Exactly how poor of a loser is he?”

The bartender eyed Thompson. When he turned to Sutherland he found a five dollar note on the bar. “No door, but I’ve got a window.”

“Good enough.”

Sutherland swirled the contents of his glass. He hadn’t touched a drop all night. With as much as he was carrying—and the map, don’t forget the map—it wasn’t a good idea to cloud his head. Especially not with a man sitting behind him who’d lost everything.

Sutherland was so focused on spying that he didn’t notice another man take the seat next to him at the bar. At least, not until the man pulled a knife and pressed it to Sutherland’s side.

“Just keep on smiling,” the man whispered. “Now pass me that map, nice and—”

“Did you just cut my jacket?” Sutherland demanded loudly. He twisted to see the man’s knife. “You did, didn’t you? Do you know how hard it is to find a jacket like this? It needs to be the right length, the right cut. I’m rather svelte, you know. And of course it needs to be waterproof.”

The man reeled away from the verbal barrage. He reeled away more when Sutherland tossed his drink in the man's face.

The attacker tripped on a bar stool and clattered to the ground. A shout went up. Sutherland checked the mirror. Thompson was roaring and charging across the room.

“Gimme my map back!”

Sutherland grabbed the edge of the bar and rolled across it. He fell to the floor on the other side. A series of valves and pipes ran beneath the bar. They played some function in filling and re-filling patron's drinks. Sutherland wasn't sure of the details—he was better at people than machines—but he'd learned the value of “messaging about” as a friend had once called it.

Sutherland flipped a couple of levers and was rewarded with a splooshing sound and a choked cry. In the mirror he saw a foaming gout of beer shoot from a hose on the back wall, spraying both Thompson and the knife man.

Thompson staggered into a table where a young man and his sweetheart sat. Drinks went everywhere. The young man leapt to his feet. He swung a fist at Thompson.

“There you are!” Knife's head appeared over the bar followed by the knife itself.

Sutherland grabbed a rubber hose dangling under the bar. His gaze tracked to the mess of pipes and levers the hose attached to. The lever he wanted was just in kicking range. He kicked.

The hose expanded beneath his grip. A jet of water gushed forth. He pointed the hose at Knife. The man gargled as he took the cleaning water full in the mouth.

Sutherland pulled himself to his feet. With drinks and water scattered everywhere, and people flailing about, the bar was in a tumult. People he hadn't even seen enter the fight were swinging away with great enthusiasm.

“That's enough!” the bartender shouted. The room was filled with a high-pitched whistle.

Everyone stopped and looked to the bartender. He held what appeared to be an old fashioned, front-loader blunderbuss. Pipes and tubing surrounded the stock. A thin outlet valve—the source of the whistling sound—spouted small puffs of steam.

“Ol' Betsy here hasn't had much use since the war, but she still packs a punch.” He cranked a wheel on the side of the weapon and the whistling grew shriller. A few people clapped their hands to their ears.

“Out the window?” Sutherland asked the bartender.

“Out the window.” The bartender nodded to a door set behind the bar. He followed Sutherland through the door to the bar's sleeping quarters. A thin framed window was set into the rear wall.

“Sorry about all that,” Sutherland said as he produced his billfold. “Here's something for the damages.”

The bartender's eyes widened as Sutherland dropped a couple of hundred dollars into his hands.

"One question," Sutherland said. "Would you really have fired that thing?"

"What?" The bartender drew his gaze away from the unexpected windfall. "Oh. No. Betsy here's just for show. I had a gearhead rig it all up to seem intimidating. He said it'd likely explode if I ever tried shooting it."

Sutherland laughed. "I like that. You're a sharp one. I could tell that as soon as I saw you."

The young gambler stepped to the window and opened it. He had one leg outside when he felt the bartender's hand on his arm.

"You really think that map's real?" the bartender asked.

"I live in eternal hope."

"But what about getting that device it describes built?"

Sutherland smiled lopsidedly. "Oh, that's easy. I just need to see a girl about a gear."



Chilliwack, British Columbia

The Next Day

"The deck ran red with the blood of the British. Anne Bonny, pirate of the seas, stood in victory, smoke curling from the emptied flintlocks in her upraised hands. She surveyed the pile of plundered booty brought on deck and thought it good.

"Her lover and captain, the fearsome Calico Jack, resplendent in his bright long coat, strode onto the deck from the dank depths of the captured ship's hold. He took Anne in his strong arms and kissed her with the passion of eternity. Breaking their embrace, he turned to his crew and proclaimed, 'We brave few, we who rule the seas, men and women alike, know the sweet taste of true freedom.'

"Anne pulled her lover to her embrace once more. 'Taste of me again,' she declared and the crew of Calico Jack huzzahed their approval."

Satin New Brunswick sighed as she flipped the page of the penny dreadful. She stood on the gently rocking deck of the paddle steamer that had been brought into Boswell's Steamship Repairs, the place she worked.

Satin spoke over her shoulder to her boss, "Isn't it romantic, Charlie? Pirates and treasure and freedom?"

"Romantic, sure," Charlie Boswell replied faintly. The upper half of his body was hidden inside

a large cabinet on the deck of the steamer. Metallic clanks mixed with Charlie's mumbled grumblings as he tinkered with the inner workings of the boat. "How's that flywheel holding up?"

"The flywheel's fine, Charlie. Have you checked the boiler?"

"It's not the boiler."

Satin pushed her long brown hair back from her eyes. She deftly tied it behind her head. "Please let me mess about with it. These hands can fix anything." She raised her hands to illustrate her point. They were scarred and calloused from long hours of work on machines and contraptions of all sorts.

Charlie pulled himself from the cabinet. He pointed a heavy metal wrench at her. "Don't. Touch. The boiler. The steamer's captain just wants the engine tuned."

"There are new boilers coming out of the east. I've seen the designs for them. If you'll just let me—"

"No."

"But I could—"

"No."

"Well, what if I—"

Charlie sighed and stowed the wrench in a pouch on the thick leather belt he wore. The balding man took Satin's hands. "You're the most gifted mechanic I've ever met, Satin. And I have no doubt you could have this old creaker racing up and down the Fraser faster than anything."

Satin smiled widely. She felt the tips of her ears burning at the faith her employer placed in her.

"But," Charlie held up a finger, "We're not getting paid for that. The captain only wants us to get rid of the annoying clanking so he can be on his way. You've got to think like a businessman, Satin. Only do what you're paid to do."

"But I can make it better and it will only take—"

"Satin. Please, only the engine tuning."

Satin rolled her eyes. "Fine. We'll *tune* the engine."

"Thank you." Charlie tugged the penny dreadful from a pocket of Satin's tool belt. "And would you please stop reading these on the job? I need you focused."

"It's the newest edition, Charlie. Oh, the way they dressed back then. The way they talked."

"How do these writers know how they talked, huh? Were they there? No. It's all made up."

"You've got no imagination, no music in your soul, Charlie."

“Whatever it is that means.”

Charlie squirmed his girth inside the cabinet again. The clanking from within resumed. After a couple of minutes, he pulled himself free. “Right. I think we’re ready to try this now. Would you ignite the engine? I’ll keep an eye on things here.”

Satin nodded and headed for the stern of the ship. A large steam engine was bolted to the deck. The fat, metal tube was longer than Satin was tall. The mechanic stepped to a fine wood control panel mounted to the side of the engine.

Satin flicked a metal switch on the panel. The boiler of the engine sported a thick glass pane showing the heating chamber within. Satin watched through the glass as sparks from the flint igniter she’d triggered played across the chromosphorite pile. The green-gray compound glowed lime. Satin heard the water of the boiler start to percolate.

“Everything seems fine here, Charlie,” Satin called.

“Here too,” Charlie replied.

The engine chugged to life. The two paddle wheels of the steamer had been disengaged from the drive train while Satin and Charlie worked on the repairs. The engine spun, but the ship stayed nice and stable at the side of the dock.

“All right, Satin. Shut it down.”

Satin pulled a lever on the engine control panel to cut the flow of air into the heating chamber. Except the flow of air didn’t end. Satin shoved the lever to the top of the panel, then pulled it again. Still nothing.

Satin peered into the heating chamber, squinting her eyes against the glowing chromosphorite pile. She worked the dowsing lever a third time. Inside the chamber, the sealing plate the lever connected to didn’t budge. Satin banged on the control panel.

“Satin, what are you doing?” Charlie peered around the edge of the cabinet he’d been working in.

“The dowsing plate’s stuck, Charlie.”

The boiler started whistling. Satin stared at the control panel before her. A brass needle swept across a marked, metal gauge.

“Oh, that’s not good,” Satin said.

“Satin, what—”

“Run, Charlie. Run!” Satin pelted away from the control panel. Her skirt swirled about her legs.

The shrill whistle of the boiler grew and grew. The ship rattled.

Charlie caught Satin and pulled her into the lee of the cabinet.

BANG!

The steamer lurched in the river. Its aft end was submerged for a moment. Hot water rained across the deck, pelting Satin and Charlie.

Then it was over. The steamer leveled and swayed only a little in the current of the Fraser River.

Satin and Charlie raised their heads to peek over the cabinet they'd hid behind.

Charlie's mouth dropped open.

"Well," Satin sniffed. "At least I can replace the boiler now."

The boiler had blown free of its bolts. It had flown some twenty yards before splashing into the river.

"What happened?" Charlie asked.

"I don't know," Satin shook her head. "The dowsing plate wouldn't engage. The engine just kept heating."

"The pressure relief valve should have opened."

"It obviously didn't. Maybe—"

Satin was interrupted by a commotion from the nearby dock. The dock was a wooden structure with rough logs supporting it where it jutted over the waters of the Fraser River. A man in a faded leather coat bustled towards the steamer.

"Boswell? Boswell!" the man on the dock shouted at Charlie. "What have you done to my boat?"

"Oh, perfect," Charlie grunted. "Satin, start clearing up this mess. See what we'll need to fix the boiler and if we've got it in stock."

"Fix it? Charlie, we're going to have to completely replace it."

"Just...see to it. I'll deal with the captain."

Charlie unfastened his tool belt and passed it to Satin. She slung it over her shoulder and watched her boss head up the ramp to the dock. She pursed her lips and turned towards the stern of the boat.

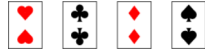
The damage wasn't as bad as it could have been. Aside from the boiler being blown clear, part of the decking had been ripped up. The drive chain Charlie had worked on had been pulled from its track beneath the deck. Its chain links lay coiled on the deck and one dangled over the side of the steamer into the water. The engine control panel had been blown into splinters. A few of its metal components were strewn across the deck.

Satin started cataloging what she'd need to replace the boiler and repair the rest of the damage.

In her head, she cross-referenced the list against what was in the store shed of the repair yard. The cost of the parts was mounting quickly. Charlie wasn't going to like that. He'd either have to pass the cost onto the steamer's captain or deduct it from the profits. Deducting it from the profits probably meant deducting at least some of it from Satin's pay. And he was still deducting costs from her pay from when she'd installed a redundant drive system on that riverboat two months ago on her own initiative. Never mind that the captain of that boat was now doing twice the business because he could ship goods faster than any of the competition.

Satin knelt by the metal plates set into the deck that the boiler had been mounted to. She fished a wrench from her tool belt and started unscrewing one of the plates. One day, she promised herself, she'd find a way to be free of having to be a businessman—*businesswoman*—and would be able to work on her own devices all day long. That was the dream.

That dream was interrupted by a voice from the dockside, "Satin New Brunswick. I've been looking for you for a long time."



Satin & Sutherland: The Golden Curse

Coming to E-tailers December 2014

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