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Reincarnation

by Verena Cronberg

I said, "Well, on thing's certain, we can't get her started. the house over there probably has a 'phone. You go ask the folks if you can use it.

Call the garage in Harding and have 'em send out a man to work on this thing we call a car."

Ned said, "Sure," and started to get out, when he saw a big grey cat was sitting on the front steps of the house. He slammed the car door shut. "Oh, no!" he says. "You go."

Well, I suppose things had of been different if I'd insisted that he go in. He wouldn't of paid no attention to the telephone conversation and we never would of heard about the gold. But I knew Ned hates cats. We had a teacher once who said he had a cat allergy, and there's something about them, their fur or something, that makes him sick. So I figured it'd be less work for me to go do it myself.

The lady was in the kitchen. She said, sure I could use the 'phone, it was in the dining room, and the garage ring was three shorts and a long.

The 'phone was on a party wire. Everybody this side of Grasshopper's on the same line. It's mighty convenient, the only trouble being that most ranch women don't have time to hang on a receiver and hear everybody else's business. Well, anyway, I took down the receiver and found somebody was talking. I started to hang up, when one word caught my attention. That word was "gold."

I listened for quite a few minutes, then put the receiver back very carefully. Pretty soon I tried again and this time I got the garage.

We had to wait about an hour for the garage to send out a man. Most of that time we sat on the running board of the car, or walked around the yard. The woman wanted us to come in the house and wait, but Ned didn't like the idea of sitting

along side of a cat, and I didn't want to have to talk to anyone. I was pretty busy thinking.

I was thinking that old man Wilkinson down at Bancroft sure had the luck. Finding three bags of gold dust under his barn floor! No work about it, just tripped on a loose plank in the corner of his barn, pried it up with his toe and there was the gold. It had him so excited that when he called his son in Harding to tell him about it, he gibbered. Funny old guy—Syd Wilkinson. Just this morning I'd been telling Ned about him and his wife and how they kept the old hotel in Bancroft. Bancroft's just at the edge of Grasshopper, at the foot of the divide. It's the oldest town in the state, and once it was the biggest. But hardly anything's left any more—just a hotel and a post-office for the ranchers. But once—well, that was the real wild west. Cowboys and miners an bandits, and later on vigilantes and lynchings. You've heard of Harry Carter? Well, he ran Bancroft for ten years, 'till finally the vigilantes was strong enough to run him out of town. They was afraid to lynch him, y'see, and he swore he'd come back some day and get even. But nobody ever saw him again.

But folks hadn't forgot about him. Here was old Syd, brought up on stories of the early days in Bancroft, and believing that this gold he'd found had probably been cashed by Carter himself. And kind of afraid that Harry Carter—dead or alive—wasn't going to stand around and let his gold dust get taken. Of course, when Wilkinson told his son that, his son just laughed, and said not to worry, he'd get out Bancroft the next day and take care of everything.

It was kind of funny—sort of like a story—thinking, suppose Carter did turn up. That was impossible, of course. He must of been dead at least twenty-five years. But suppose somebody that looked like old Harry turned up? I bet Wilkinson'd turn over his bags fast enough then.

Well, I don't know what made me think of it, but I did. I thought, "Ned looks something like

Harry Carter does in that old picture of him they used to have in the saloon.” He was pretty tall and then, with dark hair and very black, heavy eye brows. Ned was tall and thin and had dark hair. If his eye-brows were darker and he had a bandanna tied around the lower part of his face, I suppose he’d look as much like Harry Carter to the old Wilkinson as Harry would himself, especially if the old man was kind of expecting him.

At first it was just an idea to fool with. then the garage man came and I showed him all that was wrong with the car, and talked to him about the people in Harding and in Grasshopper, which was where I used to live, and asked him how he thought chances were for Ned and me getting a job down on one of the ranches during haying. I stopped thing about Wilkinson and his gold. But it was in the back of my mind all the time, and when we started driving for Harding, in back of the garage man, I started in where I’d left off.

Of course we wouldn’t do it, ‘cause it was dishonest. But it looked so darned easy. Another thing it wasn’t the same as though Wilkinson had worked for the money. he’d just been lucky. We had as much right to it as he had. Besides, what could he do with it? He didn’t need anything. Why, it’d probably make him and his wife unhappy—be a lot of trouble for them.

Well, I wasn’t really thinking about it, but we sure could use the money. Our dough was just about gone and maybe we couldn’t even get jobs during haying. And it’d all be so simple. We could take the gold dust, cut back to the other side of Harding for Butte and Helena, and sell it in small quantities as gold we’d panned up in the hills. Then we could buy us a new car and spend the summer just travelling around.

When we got into Harding we stopped at the hotel for supper, and I said to Ned, “Say, Ned . . .”

As soon as I had told him my plan, he started objecting. “That’d be a lousy thing to do—stealing from a poor old man.”

“Listen,” I said, and started to give him all the arguments I had been giving myself.

When I was finished, Ned said, “Aw, Charlie, you know we couldn’t get away with it.”

I just looked at him. “O.K.” I said. “Forget it.”

We were through eating by then, and went out to the car. I told Ned to wait a minute. I wanted to get something, and went into the dry goods store. I bought a bandanna handkerchief and a toy revolver, and stuffed them into my pocket.

We drove out to Harding toward Grasshopper, and pretty soon we came to the cross roads. It looked like those cartoons you see in the newspapers, showing one road, kind of rocky and narrow, leading to whatever that paper is against, and the other all smooth and broad, leading toward what the paper is for. And there as the two signs, one pointing down the narrow road to Bancroft, and the other toward East Grasshopper, which was where we were planning on getting jobs. Feeling as though I was maybe taking the first downward step, I turned the car into the narrow road.

It was about eight o’clock, but since it was early in the summer, still light. It took us about an hour to get over the top of the divide, and then there was Grasshopper valley spread out below us. It was just getting dark, and way out across the valley you could see the scattered lights of the cattle ranches, and at the foot of the divide was a couple of lights that I knew must be Bancroft.

We went on down the hill and a little past Bancroft, around a curve in the road before I stopped the car. People’s ear get mighty sensitive to the sound of an auto when they don’t hear one more than two or three times a week, so I hoped that by going around the curve they wouldn’t notice the engine had stopped.

Ned said kind of uneasily, “You were just trying to be funny with all that talk about stealing gold, weren’t you.”

I opened the door carefully and got out. Then I drew the few dollars we had left from my pocket and threw them on the seat. “We’re about broke, Ned,” I said. “If we can’t get work during haying, we’ll be out of luck. I wouldn’t ask you to do it,” I went on, “if I could do it myself. But I’m too fat. Nobody who wasn’t pie-eyed would mistake me for Harry Carter.”

Ned picked up the money slowly and got out of the car on my side. I closed the door without slamming it.

“O.K., Charlie,” he said. “I’ll do it.”

I took the bandana from my pocket and tied it around the lower part of his face. “Better leave

your hat off," I said. "Doesn't look authentic." I put the toy gun in his hand. Then I thought of something else. I struck a match and let it burn down to a little stick of charcoal, then ground it on my palm, mixed it with a little saliva, and smeared it on his eye brows.

"O.K., kid," I said then. "Let's go."

It took us about five minutes to walk to the Wilkinson's hotel. I went to the window of the room where the light was and looked in. The old man was sitting by the stove reading a newspaper. The old lady was in a rocking chair, just rocking, with her eyes closed. I could see the door was unlatched. I went back to Ned. "Kick open the door with your foot, walk in, and point the gun at them," I whispered. "Scare 'em."

"Aw, Charlie, I . . . I can't."

"Where's your guts," I said, and gave him a little shove.

I stood at the window and watched the door as it was flung back with his kick. Both Wilkinson and his wife looked up, scared.

Ned walked in deliberately and slowly like gangsters do in the movies. He even kind of frightened me. He looked so much like what I thought Harry Carter must look, that I felt a weird feeling wandering up and down my spine.

He said in a shaky voice, "Hand over that gold."

Wilkinson gasped, "Harry Carter!"

Ned's voice was steadier by this time. He said, "I've come for my gold. Where is it?"

The old man said, "It's under my chair," and Ned said, "get it."

Wilkinson reached under the chair and brought something out. Ned was in my way, and I couldn't see what it was. The old man threw it on the floor in front of Ned, and I knew it wasn't the gold, because it didn't make a sound when it fell.

Ned stared at it, made some kind of a gurgling noise in his throat, dropped the gun, and stumbled out the door. I could see then what Wilkinson had thrown on the floor. It was a large, yellow, cat.

I ran around to the door and grabbed hold of Ned's arm. "Go on back in," I whispered. "Go on! Don't be yellow!"

He shook his head. "I can't do it, Charlie," he mumbled, and started walking down the road toward the car. I looked after him helplessly.

The door of the hotel was still open, and I could see the two of them in there. The old lady picked up the cat and was petting it.

"Why, Syd," she was saying, "how did you know to do that?"

Wilkinson laughed as though he felt pretty important. "I jest used my head, that's all. All of a sudden I remembered how pa used to tell how scared Harry Carter was of cats."

"My land," the old lady said, "he sure was, wasn't he."