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for a hundred dollars!" says Matt, jest as easy but so accusin'. "And it was you that done the shootin' the night o' the raid; and the knot on yore head, Lige," he goes on, as soft as a panther kitten a purrin', "was a' accident that you put to good use."

None o' the four didn't say a word.

"And now I've got to arrest you and take you to town," Matt tells 'em, as sad as death itself, "and break yore pore old mother's heart. Either that, or I've got to break my oath as a' officer, and let myself down in the eyes of God and man."

The Carter boys' fingers commenced to tremble, and they all looked at the ground.

"Boys," Matt says, a seein' that they wasn't a goin' to do no talkin' right then, "if it was you, which would you do? Would you break the heart, or the oath?"

Not a word from the Carters. But their heads was a hangin', and their faces was shore as long as a mule's.

"The blessed old woman that made me all o' them thar fine pies, and who loved me like I was her own boy, and called me 'Honey' jest as if I was her own son,—one o' the sons that she is so proud of, that she tried all her life to raise up by the commands o' the Good Book; the sons that has forgot and each put his hand to the stab that will give her a mortal wound, and maybe even fever her soul beyont recovery! The wound will never, never heal: she will die with it still a bleedin' and as red as the fire of torment.

"I believe it will kill her to know that all her faith and hope and prayers has been for less than nothin'. It is terrible, Men, to take to yore bosoms the same pizen enemy that caused yore father's death. He was a good man. He died with his head in yore mother's lap, with the blood a soakin' through her dress to her knees."

At this Buck Carter, a man in hell, crumpled same as if Matt had shot him, a kneelin' on the ground, his big brown hands a grippin' and a twistin'. "Hush, Matt, for God's sake!" he says, mighty nigh chokin'.

But Matt Brading didn't hush at all. He seemed to be a talkin' to hisself, because his eyes was a lookin' away and a past the Carter boys, it seemed, a thousand miles. Maybe he was a lookin' back to Boston, and maybe to some little cottage all covered up with vines and roses, and maybe to a spot in some churchyard on some lonesome hill. I'll swear, I jest cain't hardly keep from a breakin' all to pieces when I think about that! I could jest cry about it, durn my old hide of me!

"The old woman," says Matt, "who made me all o' them thar fine pies and called me by the same pet name she called her own flesh and blood—I've got to break her heart or my oath."

Then he throwed his rifle down and busted it at the breech on a rock, and raised both his hands high—so almighty high that they reached to Heaven, with his eyes a twinklin' like wet stars and his everlastin' smile as gray as a day in the wintertime.

"I won't!" he says. "I may be damned for it, but I'll never strike the hand that fed and loved me! Boys, remember this, and be men!"

He shook his fine head and dragged one hand acrost his eyes, and started out o' the thicket, a stumblin' like a blind man.

BUCK CARTER grabbed a' ax with a cry like somebody a dyin' in awful misery, and in one minute that thar still looked like it had been around the world a thousand times in a cyclone. Then the Carter boys caught Matt, and, ag'inst his will, took him to their cabin.

"We know our own mother," they told him.

Well, Sir, they got down on their knees afore that old woman, and told her the truth, all of it, and made promises that hain't never been broke. And the old woman, bless yore soul, hugged every durned one of 'em and loved 'em—all five of 'em—more'n ever!

So the hand of the law has got the four Carters for fingers and Matt Brading for a thumb. And it's the strongest hand the law ever stuck into the mountains, by gyar! You see, the boys paid their fines—with Matt's help—and got to be revenuers theirselves.

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