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Sophia Starling Tells How John Sprockett Saved Charley Diderot from Hanging

by Robert Cooperman

One minute he's Satan, the next St. George.
We arrived in Fairplay—a village desolate
as any in the wind-ripped Andes.
A scaffold completed, the crowd cheered.
The condemned man—his wife sobbing for mercy—
was dragged to the gallows.
“By God,” Mr. Sprockett thundered,
“that's Charley Diderot, as honest
as I'm a scoundrel and butcher!”

Only a thin shirt and the hangman's cravat
separated the trembling man from eternity.
The mob shouted; an Ethan Wagner—
Mr. Diderot's rival in the saloon trade—
was especially vociferous in shouting,
“Justice for Harry Rivers!”
Mr. Sprockett leapt onto the gallows,
shoved aside the executioner, untied the noose.
The assembly, enraged, hurled rotten fruit,
Mr. Wagner shouted, “String him up too!”

Mr. Sprockett bellowed fierce as the wind:
“I'll prove this man shot in self-defense!”
The saloon shutters cracked like gunshots.
The noose flung itself like a snared bird.
“Who saw it?” Mr. Sprockett demanded. Silence.
“How many rounds did Rivers get off?”
“Five!” someone yelled. A revolver glimmered
in Wagner's beefy fist, but John fired
a warning at the blackguard's boots.
Never have I seen anything so fast and true.

We dined at Mrs. Diderot's grateful table.
Later, Mr. Sprockett crept into my bed.
“Will you soil the best deed of your life?”
I hissed; flames, nonetheless, kindled my belly,
despite my oath not to succumb a second time
to the splendour his bravery filled me with.

“Sophie,” he groaned in mortal agony.
I could deny him, and myself, nothing.

