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Sam Todd The Lyrical Judge

Among the legends and tales of frontier justice is the story of Juan Garcia. His tale is one of lyric and hope, of Springtime and flowers, and of crime and punishment. Now whether or where or when or if this story actually happened is beside the point. It has been attributed to every cow town, boom town, and gold camp west of the Mississippi River.

The Mariposa County diggings of Coulterville was no exception. George Coulter had erected his blue canvas tent store on the bank of Maxwell Creek, and it had only been open a short time when Sam Todd was elected the Justice of the Peace for Coulterville.

Sam was possessed of a deceptively benign outward appearance and demeanor, and he possessed considerable rhetorical and oratorical skills. He also had a dedicated belief in the sanctity of the law, and he was unafraid to enforce it as he saw fit. Offenders were fined, flogged, run out of camp, or hanged. As such, there were not many repeat offenders to be found in Coulterville.

Enter one Juan Garcia. In his case, there was not one question of his guilt. The evidence was clear. Trav Jordan, a well-liked miner in the Coulterville area had been killed. His gold and his mule had gone missing, obviously stolen by his despicable murderer. When Trav's possessions were ultimately found, they were in the possession of Juan Garcia. The connection was obvious to everyone. It was all so obvious that his trial lasted only a short time.

Upon entering the sentencing phase of the trial, Judge Todd was in no great hurry. This fact gave Juan Garcia hope that he would be spared. After all, the evidence, in Juan's mind, was purely coincidental.

In a very friendly and warm tone the Judge began. "Juan Garcia, you have been found guilty of killing a man. You stole his money and his mule. You have received a fair trial by an impartial judge. That judge has found you guilty. It is now the duty of that judge to sentence you in a manner befitting your crime." At this point the judge smiled at Juan and the obviously guilty man's cold criminal heart grew warm with hope.

"In another two weeks," the judge declared, "the coldness of a jarringly bitter winter will be only a memory. The breath of verdant spring in all its sweetness will caress mankind. The sun will shine in the blue heavens with all its glory. The sweet green grass will spring into the lushness of life along Maxwell Creek. Through its gold flecked banks will pour the fresh and pure waters of the Sierra's melted snow, a faint reminder of the winter past."

"Silver rivulets will course down the hillsides to bring the growth and color of the wild poppies, and of the bluebells, lupines, and buttercups, which are the fine handiwork of nature. Together they will form an opulent and vibrant quilt that will blanket the neighboring hillsides in splendid color. The fertile soil, freed of the cold crust of winter will give life to seeds. Golden corn will soon sway in the gardens, and green beans and other delicious vegetables will mature for man's sustenance. Tiny buds will be kissed by the warm spring air, and blades of grass and boughs of trees will rustle and sway in rhythm as Mother Nature smiles."

"The birds will return from the southlands and build their nests, rear their young, and fill this camp with the loveliness of their songs. The chipmunks will come out to chatter joyously

as they scamper about, and the bees will buzz from flower to flower, busy in their life sustaining work for us.”

“It will be a time of rebirth and regeneration. All of Nature will be in grand and glorious symphony with world, and all will be happy and gay.”

At this moment, the Judge looked at Juan Garcia and smiled warmly again.

“But you, Juan Garcia, will not be here to enjoy these blessings.’ His tone became much more ominous now, “In just ten minutes, you low down scum of the Earth, you black hearted, conniving, thieving villain, you murdering scoundrel, you will be hanging by the neck from that oak tree over yonder!”

“Court is adjourned!”