

Bargain

A.B. Guthrie, Jr.

In the late nineteenth century, Moon Dance, Montana, was still fifty miles from the nearest railroad. That meant that even in good weather it took freight carriers at least two days to bring supplies over the mountains to the town's two general stores. One of those stores Mr. Baumer owned, and it was Mr. Baumer who finally spotted a bargain he couldn't pass up.

Mr. Baumer and I had closed the Moon Dance Mercantile Company and were walking to the post office, and he had a bunch of bills in his hand ready to mail. There wasn't anyone or anything much on the street because it was suppertime. A buckboard¹ and a saddle horse were tied at Hirsches' rack, and a rancher in a wagon rattled for home ahead of us, the sound of his going fading out as he prodded his team. Freighter Slade stood alone in front of the Moon Dance Saloon, maybe wondering whether to have one more before going to supper. People said he could hold a lot without showing it except in being ornerier even than usual.

Mr. Baumer didn't see him until he was almost on him, and then he stopped and fingered through the bills until he found the right one. He stepped up to Slade and held it out.

Slade said, "What's this, Dutchie?"

Mr. Baumer had to tilt his head up to talk to him.

"You know vat it is."

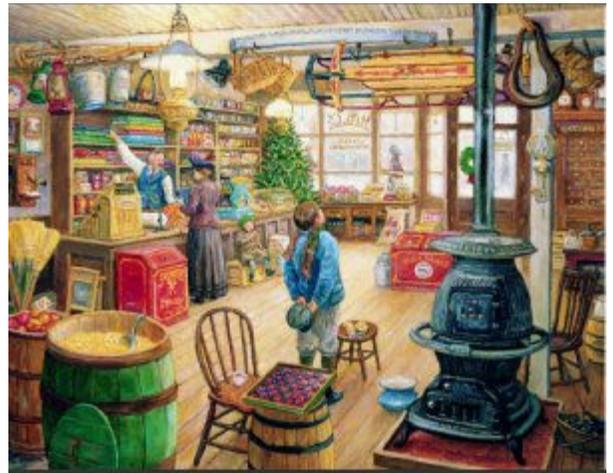
Slade just said, "Yeah?" You never could tell from his face what went on inside his skull. He had dark skin and shallow cheeks and a thick-growing moustache that fell over the corners of his mouth.

"It is a bill," Mr. Baumer said. "I tell you before it is a bill. For twenty-vun dollars and fifty cents."

"You know what I do with bills, don't you, Dutchie?" Slade asked.

Mr. Baumer didn't answer the question. He said, "For merchandise."

Slade took the envelope from Mr. Baumer's hand and squeezed it up in his fist and let it drop on the plank sidewalk. Not saying anything, he reached down and took Mr. Baumer's nose between the knuckles



¹ **buckboard:** light carriage

of his fingers and twisted it up into his eyes. That was all. That was all at the time. Slade half turned and slouched to the door of the bar and let himself in. Some men were laughing in there.

Mr. Baumer stooped and picked up the bill and put it on top of the rest and smoothed it out for mailing. When he straightened up, I could see tears in his eyes from having his nose screwed around. He didn't say anything to me, and I didn't say anything to him, being so much younger and feeling embarrassed for him. He went into the post office and slipped the bills in the slot, and we walked on home together. At the last, at the crossing where I had to leave him, he remembered to say, "Better study, Al. Is good to know to read and write and figure." I guess he felt he had to push me a little, my father being dead.

I said, "Sure. See you after school tomorrow" — which he knew I would anyway. I had been working in the store for him during the summer and after classes ever since pneumonia took my dad off. Three of us worked there regularly — Mr. Baumer, of course, and me and Colly Coleman, who knew enough to drive the delivery wagon but wasn't much help around the store except for carrying orders out to the rigs at the hitchpost and handling heavy things like the whiskey barrel at the back of the store, which Mr. Baumer sold quarts and gallons out of.

The store carried quite a bit of stuff— sugar and flour and dried fruits and canned goods and such on one side, and yard goods and coats and caps and aprons and the like of that on the other, besides kerosene and bran and buckets and linoleum and pitchforks in the storehouse at the rear — but it wasn't a big store like Hirsch Brothers up the street. Ever would be, people guessed, going on to say, with a sort of slow respect, that it would have gone under long ago if Mr. Baumer hadn't been half mule and half beaver.

He had started the store just two years before and, the way things were, worked himself close to death.

He was at the high desk at the end of the grocery counter when I came in the next afternoon. He had an eyeshade on and black sateen protectors on his forearms, and his pencil was in his hand instead of behind his ear, and his glasses were roosted on the nose that Slade had twisted. He didn't hear me open and close the door or hear my feet as I walked back



to him, and I saw he wasn't doing anything with the pencil but holding it over paper. I stood and studied him for a minute, seeing a small, stooped man with a little paunch bulging through his unbuttoned vest. He was a man you wouldn't remember from meeting once.

There was nothing in his looks to set itself in your mind unless maybe it was his chin, which was a small, pink hill in the gentle plain of his face.

While I watched him, he lifted his hand and felt carefully of his nose. Then he saw me. His eyes had that kind of mistiness that seems to go with age or illness, though he wasn't really old or sick, either. He brought his hand down quickly and picked up the pencil, but he saw I still was looking at the nose, and finally he sighed and said, "That Slade."

Just the sound of the name brought Slade to my eye. I saw him slouched in front of the bar, and I saw him and his string² coming down the grade from the buttes³, the wheelhorses⁴ held snug and ' the rest lined out pretty, and then the string leveling off and Slade's whip lifting hair from a horse that wasn't up in the collar. I had heard it said that Slade could make a horse scream with that whip. Slade's name wasn't Freighter, of course. Our town had nicknamed him that because that was what he was.

"I don't think it's any good to send him a bill, Mr. Baumer," I said. "He can't even read."

"He could pay yet."

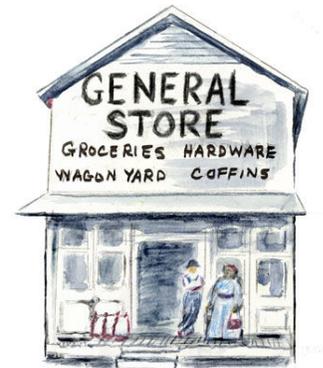
"He don't pay anybody," I said.

"I think he hate me,"

Mr. Baumer went on. "That is the thing. He hate me for coming not from this country. I come here, sixteen years old, and learn to read and write, and I make a business, and so I think he hate me."

"He hates everybody." Mr. Baumer shook his head. "But not to pinch the nose. Not to call Dutchie."

The side door squeaked open, but it was only Colly Coleman coming in from a trip, so I said, "Excuse me, Mr. Baumer, but you shouldn't have trusted him in the first place."



² **string**: a team of horses

³ **buttes** (by uts): group of steep hills

⁴ **wheelhorses**: horses closet to the wheels

“I know,” he answered, looking at me with his misty eyes. “A man make mistakes. I think some do not trust him, so he will pay me because I do. And I do not know him well then. He only came back to town three-four months ago, from being away since before I go into business.”

“People who knew him before could have told you,” I said.

“A man make mistakes,” he explained again.

“It’s not my business, Mr. Baumer, but I would forget the bill.”

His eyes rested on my face for a long minute, as if they didn’t see me, but the problem itself. He said, “It is not twenty-vun dollars and fifty cents now, Al. It is not that anymore.”

“What is it?”

He took a little time to answer. Then he brought his two hands up as if to help him shape the words. “It is the thing. You see, it is the thing.”

I wasn’t quite sure what he meant.

He took his pencil from behind the ear where he had put it and studied the point of it. “That Slade. He steal whiskey and call it evaporation. He sneak things from his load. A thief, he is. And too big for me.”

I said, “I got no time for him, Mr. Baumer, but I guess there never was a freighter didn’t steal whiskey. That’s what I hear.”

It was true, too. From the railroad to Moon Dance was fifty miles and a little better — a two-day haul in good weather, heck knew how long in bad. Any freight string bound home with a load had to lie out at least one night. When a freighter had his stock tended to and maybe a little fire going against the dark, he’d tackle a barrel of whiskey, or of grain alcohol if he had one aboard, consigned⁵ to Hirsch Brothers or Mr. Baumer’s or the Moon Dance Saloon or the Gold Leaf Bar. He’d drive a hoop out of place, bore a little hole with a nail or bit, and draw off what he wanted. Then he’d plug the hole with a whittled peg and pound the hoop back. That was evaporation. Nobody complained much. With freighters you generally took what they gave you, within reason.

“Moore steals it, too,” I told Mr. Baumer. Moore was Mr. Baumer’s freighter.

“Yah,” he said, and that was all, but I stood there for a minute, thinking there might be something more. I could see thought swimming in his



⁵ **consigned to:** addressed to, for the purpose of being sold

eyes, above that little hill of chin. Then a customer came in, and I had to go wait on him.

Nothing happened for a month — nothing between Mr. Baumer and Slade, that is — but fall drew on toward winter and the first flight of ducks headed south and Mr. Baumer hired Miss Lizzie Webb to help with the just-beginning Christmas trade, and here it was, the first week in October, and he and I walked up the street again with the monthly bills. He always sent them out. I guess he had to. A bigger store, like Hirsches', would wait on the ranchers until their beef or wool went to market.

Up to a point, things looked and happened almost the same as they had before, so much the same that I had the crazy feeling I was going through that time again. There was a wagon and a rig tied up at Hirsches' rack and a saddlehorse standing hipshot⁶ in front of the harness shop. A few more people were on the street now, not many, and lamps had been lit against the shortened day.

It was dark enough that I didn't make out Slade right away. He was just a figure that came out of the yellow wash of light from the Moon Dance Saloon and stood on the boardwalk and with his head made the little motion of spitting. Then I recognized the lean, raw shape of him and the muscles flowing down into the sloped shoulders, and in the settling darkness I filled the picture in — the dark skin and the flat cheeks and the peevish eyes and the moustache growing rank.



There was Slade and here was Mr. Baumer with his bills and here I was, just as before, just like in

the second go- round of a bad dream. I felt like turning back, being embarrassed and half scared by trouble even when it wasn't mine. Please, I said to myself, don't stop, Mr. Baumer! Don't bite off anything! Please, shortsighted the way you are, don't catch sight of him at all! I held up and stepped around behind Mr. Baumer and came up on the outside so as to be between him and Slade, where maybe I'd cut off his view.

But it wasn't any use. All along I think I knew it was no use, not the praying or the walking between or anything. The act had to play itself out.

Mr. Baumer looked across the front of me and saw Slade and hesitated in his step and came to a stop. Then in his slow, business way, his chin held firm against his mouth, he began fingering through the bills, squinting to make out the names. Slade had turned and was watching him, munching on a cud of tobacco like a bull waiting.

"You look, Al," Mr. Baumer said without lifting his face from the bills. "I cannot see so good."

⁶ **hipshot:** with one hip higher than the other

So I looked, and while I was looking, Slade must have moved. The next I knew Mr. Baumer was staggering ahead, the envelopes spilling out of his hands. There had been a thump, the clap of a heavy hand swung hard on his back.

Slade said, “Haryu, Dutchie?”

Mr. Baumer caught his balance and turned around, the bills he had trampled shining white between them and, at Slade’s feet, the hat that Mr. Baumer had stumbled out from under. Slade picked up the hat and scuffed through the bills and held it out. “Cold to be goin’ without a sky-piece,” he said.

Mr. Baumer hadn’t spoken a word. The lampshine from inside the bar caught his eyes, and in them it seemed to me a light came and went as anger and the uselessness of it took turns in his head.

Two men had come up on us and stood watching. One of them was Angus McDonald, who owned the Ranchers’ Bank, and the other was Dr. King. He had his bag in his hand.

Two others were drifting up, but I didn’t have time to tell who. The light came in Mr. Baumer’s eyes, and he took a step ahead and swung. I could have hit harder myself. The first landed on Slade’s cheek without hardly so much as jogging his head, but it let hell loose in the man. I didn’t know he could move so

fast. He slid in like a practiced fighter and let Mr. Baumer have it full in the face.

Mr. Baumer slammed over on his back, but he wasn’t out. He started lifting himself. Slade leaped ahead and brought a boot heel down on the hand he was lifting himself by. I heard meat and bone under that heel and saw Mr. Baumer fall back and try to roll away. Things had happened

so fast that not until then did anyone have a chance to get between them. Now Mr. McDonald pushed at Slade’s chest, saying, “That’s enough, Freighter. That’s enough now,” and Dr. King lined up, too, and another man I didn’t know, and I took a place, and we formed a kind of screen between them. Dr. King turned and bent to look at Mr. Baumer.

“Fool hit me first,” Slade said.

“That’s enough,” Mr. McDonald told him again while Slade looked at all of us as if he’d spit on us for a nickel. Mr. McDonald went on, using a half- friendly tone, and I knew it was because he didn’t want



to take Slade on anymore than the rest of us did. “You go on home and sleep it off, Freighter. That’s the ticket.”

Slade just snorted.

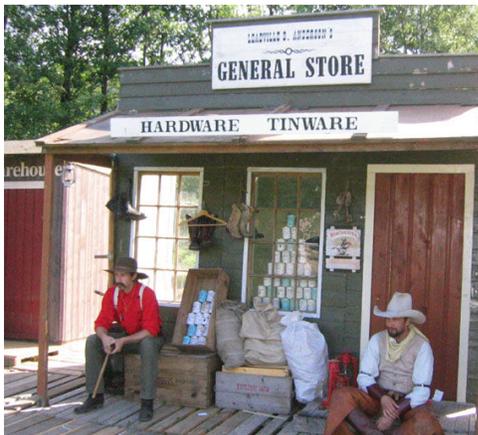
From behind us Dr. King said, “I think you’ve broken this man’s hand.”

“Lucky for him I didn’t kill him,” Slade answered. “Dutch penny- pincher!” He fingered the chew out of his mouth. “Maybe he’ll know enough to leave me alone now.”

Dr. King had Mr. Baumer on his feet. “I’ll take him to the office,” he said.

Blood was draining from Mr. Baumer’s nose and rounding the curve of his lip and dripping from the sides of his chin. He held his hurt right hand in the other. But a thing was that he didn’t look beaten even then, not the way a man who has given up looks beaten. Maybe that was why Slade said, with a show of that fierce anger, “You stay away from me! Hear? Stay clear away, or you’ll get more of the same!”

Dr. King led Mr. Baumer away, Slade went back into the bar, and the other men walked off, talking about the fight. I got down and picked up the bills, because I knew Mr. Baumer would want me to, and mailed them at the post office, dirty as they were. It made me sorer, someway, that Slade’s bill was one of the few that wasn’t marked up. The cleanness of it seemed to say that there was no getting the best of him.



Mr. Baumer had his hand in a sling the next day and wasn’t much good at waiting on the trade. I had to hustle all afternoon and so didn’t have a chance to talk to him even if he had wanted to talk. Mostly he stood at his desk, and once, passing it, I saw he was practicing writing with his left hand. His nose and the edges of the cheeks around it were swollen some.

At closing time I said, “Look, Mr. Baumer, I can lay out of school a few days until you kind of get straightened out here.”

“No,” he answered as if to wave the subject away. “I get somebody else. You go to school. Is good to learn.”

I had a half notion to say that learning hadn’t helped him with Slade. Instead, I blurted out that I would have the law on Slade.

“The law?” he asked.

“The sheriff or somebody.”

“No, Al,” he said. “You would not.”

I asked why.

“The law, it is not for plain fights,” he said. “Shooting? Robbing? Yes, the law come quick. The plain fights, they are too many. They not count enough.”

He was right. I said, “I’d do something anyhow.”

“Yes,” he answered with a slow nod of his head. “Something you would do, Al.” He didn’t tell me what.

Within a couple of days he got another man to clerk for him — it was Ed Hempel, who was always finding and losing jobs — and we made out. Mr. Baumer took his hand from the sling in a couple or three weeks, but with the tape on it, it still wasn’t any use to him. From what you could see of the fingers below the tape, it looked as if it never would be.

He spent most of his time at the high desk, sending me or Ed out on the errands he used to run, like posting and getting the mail. Sometimes I wondered if that was because he was afraid of meeting Slade. He could just as well have gone himself. He wasted a lot of hours just looking at nothing, though I will have to say he worked hard at learning to write left-handed.

Then, a month and a half before Christmas, he hired Slade to haul his freight for him.

Ed Hempel told me about the deal when I showed up for work. “Yessir,” he said, resting his foot on a crate in the storeroom where we were supposed to be working. “I tell you he’s throwed in with Slade. Told me this morning to go out and locate him if I could and bring him in. Slade was at the saloon, o’ course. I told him this was business, like Baumer had told me to, and there was a quart of whiskey right there in the store for him if he’d come and get it. He was out of money, I reckon, because the quart fetched him.”

“What’d they say?” I asked him.

“Search me. There was two or three people in the store and Baumer told me to wait on ‘em, and he and Slade palavered⁷ back by the desk.”

“How do you know they made a deal?”

Ed spread his hands out. “ ‘Bout noon ‘ Moore came in with his string, and I heard Baumer say he



⁷ **palavered:** held a conference

was makin' a change. Moore didn't like it too good, either."

It was a hard thing to believe, but there one day was Slade with a pile of stuff for the Moon Dance Mercantile Company, and that was proof enough, with something left for boot.

Mr. Baumer never opened the subject up with me, though I gave him plenty of chances. And I didn't feel like asking. He didn't talk much these days but went around absent-minded, feeling now and then of the fingers that curled yellow and stiff out of the bandage like the toes on the leg of a dead chicken. Even on our walks home he kept his thoughts to himself. I felt different about him now, and was sore inside. Not that I blamed him exactly. A hundred and thirty-five pounds wasn't much to throw against two hundred. And who could tell what Slade would do on a bellyful of whiskey? He had promised Mr. Baumer more of the same, hadn't he? But I didn't feel good. I couldn't look up to Mr. Baumer like I used to and still wanted to. I didn't have the beginning of an answer when men cracked jokes or shook their heads in sympathy with Mr. Baumer, saying Slade had made him come to time.

Slade hauled in a load for the store, and another, and Christmastime was drawing on and trade heavy, and winter that had started early and then pulled back came on again. There was a blizzard and afterwards a sunshine that was ice-shine on the drifted snow. I was glad to be busy, selling overshoes and sheep lined coats and mitts and socks as thick as saddle blankets and Christmas candy out of buckets and hickory nuts and the fresh oranges that the people in our town never saw except when Santa Claus was coming.

One afternoon when I lit out from class, the thermometer on the school porch read 42° below. But you didn't have to look at it to know how cold the weather

was. Your nose and fingers and toes and ears and the bones inside you told you. The snow cried when you stepped on it.

I got to the store and took my things off and scuffed my hands at the stove for a minute so's to get life enough in them to tie a parcel. Mr. Baumer — he was always polite to me — said, "Hello, Al. Not so much to do today. Too cold for customers." He shuddered a little, as if he hadn't got the chill off even yet, and rubbed his broken hand with the good one. "Ve need Christmas goods," he said, looking out the window to the furrows that wheels had made in the snow-banked street, and I knew he was thinking of Slade's string, inbound from the railroad, and the time it might take even Slade to travel those hard miles. Slade never made it at all.



Less than an hour later our old freighter, Moore, came in, his beard white and stiff with frost. He didn't speak at first but looked around and clumped to the stove and took off his heavy mitts, holding his news inside him.

Then he said, not pleasantly, "Your new man's dead, Baumer."

"My new man?" Mr. Baumer said.

"Who do you think? Slade. He's dead."

All Mr. Baumer could say was, "Dead!"

"Froze to death, I figger," Moore told him while Colly Coleman and Ed Hempel and Miss Lizzie and I and a couple of customers stepped closer.

"Not Slade," Mr. Baumer said. "He know too much to freeze."

"Maybe so, but he sure's froze now. I got him in the wagon."

We stood looking at one another and at Moore. Moore was enjoying his news, enjoying feeding it out bit by bit so's to hold the stage. "Heart might've give out for all I know."

The side door swung open, letting in a cloud of cold and three men who stood, like us, waiting on Moore. I moved a little and looked through the window and saw Slade's freight outfit tied outside with more men around it. Two of them were on a wheel of one of the wagons, looking inside.

"Had a extra man, so I brought your stuff in," Moore went on. "Figgered you'd be glad to pay for it."

"Not Slade," Mr. Baumer said again.

"You can take a look at him."

Mr. Baumer answered no.

"Someone's takin' word to Connor to bring his hearse. Anyhow I told 'em to. I carted old Slade this far. Connor can have him now."



Moore pulled on his mitts. "Found him there by the Deep Creek crossin', doubled up in the snow an' his fire out." He moved toward the door. "I'll see to the horses, but your stuff'll have to set there. I got more'n enough work to do at Hirsches'."

Mr. Baumer just nodded.

I put on my coat and went out and waited my turn and climbed on a wagon wheel and looked inside, and there was Slade piled on some bags of bran. May be because of being frozen, his face was whiter than I ever saw it, whiter and deader, too, though it never had been lively. Only the moustache

seemed still alive, sprouting thick like greasewood from alkali. Slade was doubled up, all right, as if he had died and stiffened leaning forward in a chair.

I got down from the wheel, and Colly and then Ed climbed up. Moore was un hitching, tossing off his pieces of information while he did so. Pretty soon Mr. Connor came up with his old hearse, and he and Moore tumbled Slade into it, and the team that was as old as the hearse made off, the tires squeaking in the snow. The people trailed on away with it, their breaths leaving little ribbons of mist in the air. It was beginning to get dark.

Mr. Baumer came out of the side door of the store, bundled up, and called to Colly and Ed and me. “We unload,” he said. “Already is late. Al, better you get a couple lanterns now.”

We did a fast job, setting the stuff out of the wagons onto the platform and then carrying it or rolling it on the one truck that the store owned and stowing it inside according to where Mr. Baumer’s good hand pointed.

A barrel was one of the last things to go in. I edged it up and Colly nosed the truck under it, and then I let it fall back. “Mr. Baumer,” I said, “we’ll never sell all this, will we?”

“Yah,” he answered. “Sure we sell it. I get it cheap. A bargain, Al, so I buy it.”

I looked at the barrelhead again.

There in big letters I saw “Wood Alcohol — Deadly Poison.”

“Hurry now,” Mr. Baumer said. “Is late.”

For a flash, and no longer, I saw through the mist in his, eyes — saw, you might say, that hilly chin repeated there. “Then ye go home, Al. Is good to know to read.”

