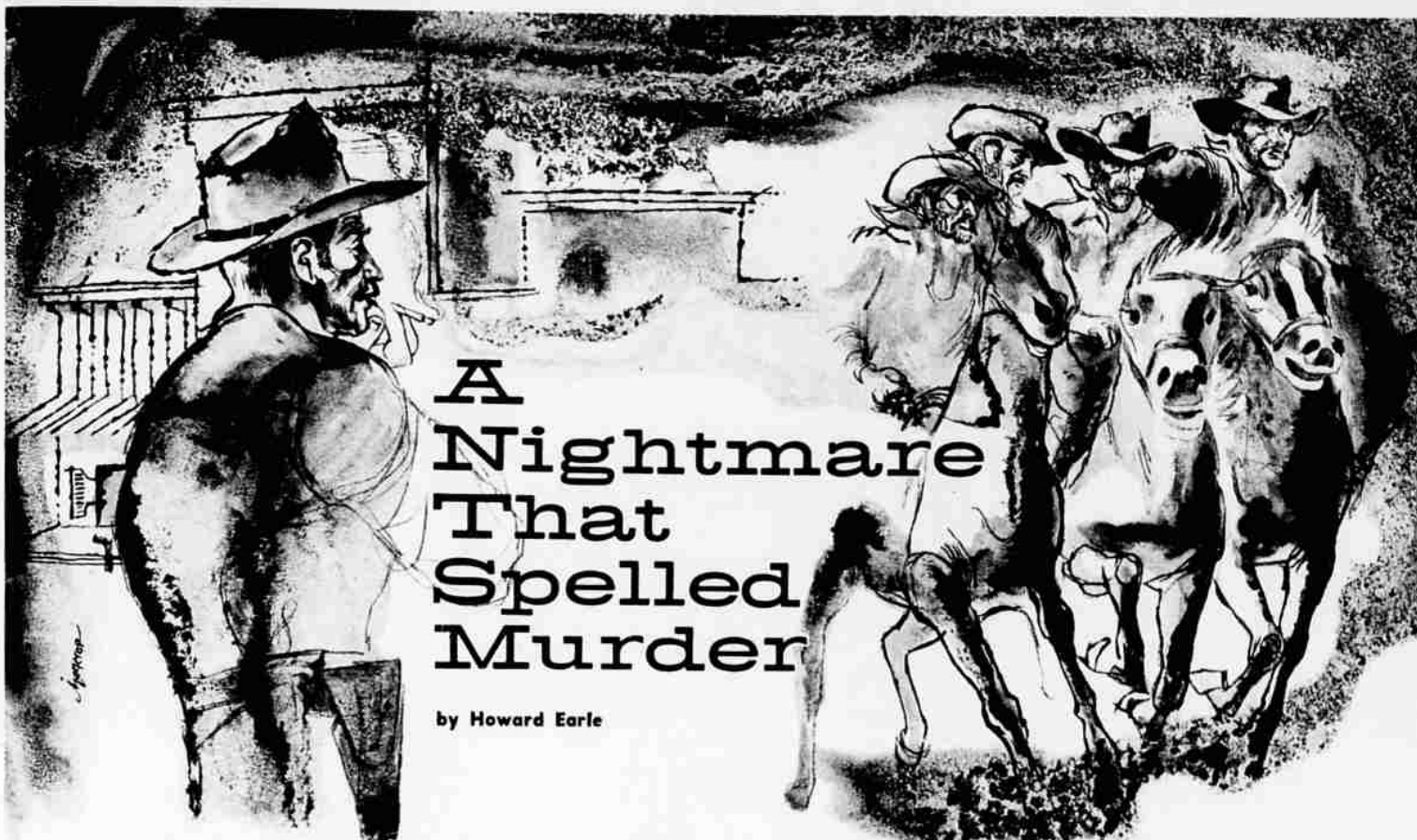




A Nightmare That Spelled Murder

by Howard Earle

Hill Beachey dreamed that his best friend had been assassinated, but how could he prove the crime?

ONE OCTOBER NIGHT IN 1863, Hill Beachey awakened from a horrible nightmare. He had dreamed he was in Montana's Bitterroot Mountains and had seen a man split Lloyd Magruder's skull with an ax and toss his body into a deep ravine.

Beachey tried to brush the dream aside, but it tormented him until he told his wife about it. Maggie Beachey rebuked her husband and pleaded with him to forget it.

"Lloyd Magruder has been murdered," Beachey insisted angrily, "and I won't rest until I track down his killers."

Beachey was one of the first settlers of Lewiston, Idaho. He had come there from California with Magruder, who started a general store in Elk City.

Magruder was Beachey's closest friend. The Elk City merchant had come to him in July saying he was taking some merchandise 300 miles to miners on Grasshopper Creek in Montana and would return in a couple of months.

That was not unusual in 1863. Merchants often took wagon trains of merchandise hundreds of miles over trails to mining settlements. But ever since Magruder had hit the trail, Beachey had feared his friend was in terrible danger.

Beachey's fears increased a few days after Magruder left when he saw four of the town's worst ruffians set out on the trail. Beachey was sure they were out to get Magruder after he exchanged his merchandise for gold dust. Now, with Magruder due back, had come the disturbing nightmare which he couldn't forget.

A few nights after the dream, Beachey remained longer than usual at his stagecoach office. He saw a tall man, his coat collar pulled high and hat brim riding low to hide his face, purchase four tickets for Walla Walla, Wash.

Beachey rushed outside just as the stagecoach

was pulling away, but he caught a glimpse of the four men's faces and recognized them as the ruffians he had seen leaving Lewiston shortly after Magruder. Beachey shouted for the driver to stop, but the wind drowned out his voice.

Beachey was sure the men were running away with Magruder's gold, and told his dream to all who would listen. But they laughed at him and said Magruder wasn't dead. Someone from Elk City had reported that Magruder's wife had received a letter saying he wouldn't be home for another week or 10 days.

ONE MORNING a wagon train was sighted coming down the old Nez Perce trail. Everyone thought it was Lloyd Magruder and rushed to meet him, but it wasn't the storekeeper. The wagonmaster said Magruder had left Montana ahead of him and should have reached Lewiston a week before.

"That's it!" cried Beachey. "Magruder is dead! Murdered just as I saw it in my dream."

He went to the governor of Idaho Territory and persuaded him to issue requisitions on the Pacific states and territories calling for the return of the wanted men to Lewiston for trial.

Beachey himself set out to track down those he believed had murdered Magruder. He hurried to Walla Walla and found the quartet had left four days before for Portland. He pushed on toward Portland, traveling on foot, horseback, in stagecoaches, rowboats, and riverboats.

At each stop Beachey learned the men were just ahead of him. Everywhere they were losing heavily at cards, but they always seemed to have plenty of gold dust.

In Portland he learned the men had sailed for San Francisco two days before. They had told of plans to sail for New York or South America. An-

other steamer wouldn't leave Portland for 10 days. The nearest telegraph line to San Francisco was Yreka, 400 miles south over mountain roads.

Beachey traveled the 400 miles in less than four days, using every type of conveyance available. He telegraphed a description of the four men to San Francisco police with a request to hold them.

In San Francisco, Beachey found the quartet detained on an old robbery charge. He hired an attorney to represent Idaho Territory and the legal barriers finally were cleared. Then he hired special guards and returned to Lewiston with his prisoners.

Once home, Beachey realized he had no real evidence. Magruder was missing, but there was no proof that he had been murdered.

He made a final desperate attempt to wring a confession from the men, who were being held under heavy guard. Four nooses were erected, and one by one, at one-hour intervals, the men were led from their quarters.

The last of the prisoners, William Page, an old teamster, was near collapse when the guards called for him. He thought the others had been hanged.

Beachey told Page he believed him less guilty than the others and that he still could save himself by turning state's evidence. As they approached the nooses, Page poured out the grisly details of the murder of Lloyd Magruder.

Magruder's head had been split with an ax in the Bitterroot Mountains and his body tossed into a ravine where it was covered with swirling snow—just as Beachey had dreamed the crime.

After a fair trial, three of the quartet were hanged for the murder of Lloyd Magruder. Page was let off because he took no actual part in the slaying, but little more than a year later he was killed in a drunken brawl.

As for Hill Beachey, residents of Idaho Territory never doubted him again.