

# Keseberg Monologue, Reed Monologue

SHERIFF. Quiet! . . . Under oath, Mr. Keseberg has declared that these two individuals, on various occasions around this Fort, have called him "corpse-hunter" and "carrion vulture." Also they have accused him of being a thief, a robber of the dead, and of being directly responsible for the deaths of two little ones, George Foster and James Eddy, the children of the accused.

SUTTER. You have heard the charges, Mr. Reed. How do the defendants plead?

REED. With regard to calling Mr. Keseberg "corpse-hunter" and "carrion vulture," we make no response at all. That does not constitute slander.

SUTTER. And the basis for your thinking?

REED. Those words refer to the act of feeding off the dead. Mr. Keseberg does not deny committing such acts. And these defendants in no way condemn him for doing so. How could they, when they themselves were forced to the same extremity? Indeed, Alcalde, most of the survivors had to sustain themselves in that way in order to come out alive.

SUTTER. Then all the adversaries agree—the use of the dead is not at issue here.

ALL. Agreed.

SUTTER. You must still respond to the other charges, Mr. Reed. Those accusing Mr. Keseberg of robbery and murder.

REED. They do admit having made such accusations.

SUTTER. Then they confess to being guilty?

EDDY. *Not guilty.*

REED. You see, Alcalde, these statements are not slander but the truth.

SUTTER. These are serious charges, sir. Are these men ready to advance convincing proof?

REED. We seek that opportunity, sir.

SUTTER. Mr. Keseberg, you must be aware of the gravity of these charges. And the consequences to you, should they be proven true.

KESEBERG. I would be tried for murder.

SHERIFF. In these parts, sir, the punishment for that is hanging.

KESEBERG. (*A cryptic reference to the past.*) The hangman's rope can be a terrifying threat—as we both know, Sheriff—but I put my trust in the justice of this court.

SUTTER. Then, sir, you are prepared to go ahead and prosecute this matter to its natural end.

KESEBERG. I am. My honor leaves me no choice. I must.

SUTTER. Then let the trial begin. Gentlemen, I expect you to remember, we are not called here today to judge other members of the Donner Party—not the living or the dead. The issue we are concerned with, plain and simple, is the charge of slander. Mr. Keseberg, please make the first statement. (*Keseberg rises and moves freely about during his speech.*)

KESEBERG. Herr Bürgermeister, ten days ago I was the last one to come out. I rescued no one, only myself. My single achievement, if we can call it such, is that *I survived*. I am no hero. (*Pause.*) Whereas, here we have three splendid heroes. Earlier on, James Reed went out on his own. And, as everyone knows, he was the first to bring word of our trouble to you, Herr Bürgermeister, at this Fort. (*Pause.*) Some weeks later, William Eddy and Bill Foster, as members of the Snowshoe Party, succeeded in making their own escape. Because I was not able to follow in their "heroic" footsteps, because I could not come out until months later, it pleases them to make Lewis Keseberg into an outcast. With malice and spite, these heroes left me back there to die.

~~REED. That is not true.~~

KESEBERG. They were convinced that without their heroic help I would have to perish. Regrettably, I dared to disappoint them. They hate me for that. And now, by their slander, they mean to ruin me. (*Pause.*) I am no longer under any obligation to prove my charge. Just moments ago, in your presence, Herr Sutter, they freely confessed to slander by calling me "grave-robber" and "murderer." Very well, let them prove it. If I am innocent, then they are guilty—and must pay the penalty. If I am guilty, then you may order a new trial and take my life—and welcome to it! It is for you to decide. (*He returns to his seat.*)

SUTTER. Mr. Reed . . . (*Reed rises and moves to similar action.*)

REED. Alcalde, ultimately we will prove, beyond all doubt, that this man Lewis Keseberg is guilty of those crimes already described—and crimes of greater magnitude. Back there in the snow, with no proper law by which to govern ourselves, this man transgressed against his own kind. To begin with: He deliberately stayed behind at the settler's camp on Lake Truckee rather than risk his life in coming out, so that he might rob from the dead. Then, finding himself without food and fearing starvation, he plotted and carried out the murder of two helpless children—the only sons of these two men here. Finally, for reasons that can only