

The Dead Man's Inn
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It was towards night on a dull, cloudy day of the latter part of November that I found myself in front of a dingy looking inn in the southwestern part of Mississippi. I dismounted and threw my horse's bridle rein over a post, and then made my way into the house. The building was of hewn timber, halved together at the corners, and I found that the only finish within consisted of coarse brown paper pasted upon the walls. The landlord's name was Job Blackthorn. He was a short, stout, square-built, bulldog looking fellow, somewhere about five-and-forty years of age, and possessed a face the complexion and expression of which was halfway between that of a Crow Indian and a very poor white man. I asked him how far it was to the next town, and he told me 'twas too far for me to reach it that night. And when I pressed him for a more definite answer he told me 'twas something over ten miles.

When I first dismounted I had intended to remain there overnight, but I began to waver now that I had seen the host and his house. To tell the plain truth, I did not like the looks of things. I saw a negro, whom Blackthorn called Joe, that looked worse, if anything, than his master, and I soon made up my mind that I would ride the next ten miles that night rather than remain there. So I simply asked the host for a glass of spirit, at the same time informing him that my business would force me to push on. He remonstrated—assured me that a severe storm was close at hand—road bad—dark night, and so on. But I pretended that my business was imperative, and that I should make the trial, at all events. He gave up with a bad grace, though I detected something in his eye which had a hopeful meaning. He went out after the spirit, and when he returned he placed a common junk bottle upon the rough counter, and informed me that it contained the best of whiskey. I poured out a glass, but the moment I placed it to my lips I detected the presence of some drug, and in a moment when his eye was turned I poured the stuff into the water pitcher, and then clapped the glass to my lips as though in the act of draining the last drop. I paid for the liquor, and then turned from the place.

In a few moments more I was in my saddle and on my way. At the distance of half a mile I came to a piece of wood, and just as I entered it the sun sank from sight. I had hardily entered the wood when I heard the tramp of horse's feet behind me, and on turning I could just distinguish the negro Joe upon horseback galloping after me. In a moment it flashed upon my mind that Blackthorn supposed I had taken his accursed drug, and that the negro had been sent to overhaul and rob me. So I just gave my horse a touch of the rowels, and he started into a gallop. I had no fear of being overtaken, for my horse was a noble one.

Night settled down dark and drear, but my horse kept the road; and ever and anon, as I turned my head I could hear the tramp behind me. At length I cleared the wood, and soon afterwards I lost the sound of the negro's horse. And, furthermore, I was very agreeably surprised upon finding the village only a short distance ahead, as I could tell by the numerous lights that twinkled through the gloom. The village was really only about six miles distant from the old inn, and ere long I was ensconced in a tavern that gave me some promise of comfort. I found quite a company assembled there, and upon inquiry I learned that the circuit court was in session.

On the following morning I took an early walk, and found the village quite a thriving one, it being located within a few miles of the Mississippi, and upon a navigable stream which emptied into that parent river. After breakfast I was informed that a young man was to be tried for murder, and as I had nothing else in particular to do I concluded to attend.

The circumstances of the case were as follows:—The prisoner, whose name was Henry Rosveldt, had been in company on the road with a peddler named Austin Stanton, the latter being a man near fifty years of age, and who had been known in the vicinity for several years. He had been in the habit of carrying two tin trunks suspended by a strap over his shoulders, and selling such articles as he could thus carry,—sometimes watches, knives, combs, razors, pistols, &c. About a week before, Stanton had arrived, one evening, at Job Blackthorn's inn, in company with Rosveldt. The latter only remained at the inn long enough to get a glass of whiskey, and then he started on, while the peddler said he

should remain behind, as he was not well. On the following morning the peddler was found in the woods brutally murdered, his head having been nearly severed from his body. His trunks were by his side, but rifled of everything of any value. He was found by means of his dog, the faithful animal having remained, howling by the side of his dead master. And the dog, too, gave signs of hard treatment, having evidently received a severe blow on the head.

Blackthorn was called upon, and he swore that the peddler did not remain in his house five minutes after his companion had left—that he drank a good stiff glass of whiskey, and felt so much better that he said he'd go on and overtake Rosveldt. The old inn was thoroughly searched, and so were all the outbuildings, but not a thing could be found of a suspicious character. The next move was to apprehend Rosveldt; and upon his person were found two gold watches which had belonged to Stanton, and also Stanton's pocketbook, containing over a thousand dollars! This was gloomy proof for the young man.

But Henry Rosveldt told his story in this wise:—He said that he had been acquainted with Stanton several years, and had done considerable business for him in the way of receiving money and purchasing goods and sending them on. On the evening before the murder, when they came near to Blackthorn's inn, Stanton told him that he was too faint and weak to keep on to the town, and should have to stop at the old inn. But he had little confidence in Blackthorn's honesty, and wished his companion to take his pocketbook, with the bulk of his money, and also his gold wares, and carry them on, as he had no doubt he should be able to follow the next morning. And since that time he had not seen the peddler until he saw him dead.

The trial came on, and Rosveldt was placed in the prisoner's box. He was a young man, not over thirty, and had a face too mild and frank for a robber. He was pale and wan, for the evidence was strong against him. Job Blackthorn was called upon the stand, and he testified to what we have already related. Then came the negro, Joe. His evidence was the same, and no amount of cross-questioning could shake him. He swore that within five minutes after the prisoner left the inn on the evening in question the peddler followed him upon the run, and must have caught

him before he reached the wood.

Rosveldt was allowed to tell his own story, but it seemed to have but little influence, for any murderer could have readily planned such a defense. About the only thing that worked in his favor was the dark suspicion that had long been held against Blackthorn. He was known to be a reckless, murderous fellow, and his inn was shunned by all who knew him. And furthermore, several men had mysteriously disappeared who were known to have been some-where in the vicinity of his place when last seen. But though his house had been repeatedly searched, yet no clue to anything out of the way could be found.

The case seemed about finished when the prisoner whispered to his counsel, and thereupon some of the witnesses were called back upon the stand.

“You were out in the wood and saw where the dead body lay?” the lawyer asked.

The witness answered in the affirmative.

“Now did you notice much blood upon the ground?”

“No, sir— not hardly any.”

And this same answer was returned by all who had taken any notice of the fact.

“Then,” returned the lawyer, “it seems evident enough that the man was not murdered upon the spot where his body was found; for we all know that the amount of blood which must have flowed from that man would have been very plainly seen had it flowed there, for you know every vein and artery of the neck was severed.”

This created some excitement among the crowd; but the next words of the counsel produced more.

“Your honor,” he said, addressing the court, “I am about to ask of you a curious favor. You are aware that the peddler had a dog—one which had accompanied him several years. That dog was with his master that night, and has since manifested the utmost uneasiness whenever he could get near the prisoner—not a vengeful manifestation, but an imploring one. You have had the dog sent out of the courtroom this morning. Now, sir,

nothing is too much to ask where the life of an innocent man is at stake. If the dog is as intelligent as some dogs are he may conduct his friend, the prisoner, to the very spot where his master was murdered. It is most plain that the murder was not done where the body was found. Now, sir, I ask you that the test may be tried. Let the Sheriff and his assistants take charge of the prisoner, and see if the dog will lead them away. I ask it, your honor, as the last chance for the life of an innocent, unoffending man.”

The counsel for the prosecution did not object, nor did the court object. In fact, there was a strange hope that other things might thus be brought to light! Blackthorn scouted the idea to those who stood near him, but he did not speak aloud. The dog was sent for, and as the animal came in Blackthorn caught him, and would have plunged a knife in his heart had not a stout boatman close by knocked the blow up. On the next moment the dark innkeeper was secured, and people now began to feel sure he was the villain and murderer!

The dog went immediately to where the prisoner sat, and having gazed into his face a moment he leaped up and began to whine most piteously. After this Rosveldt was released from his shackles and allowed to come out and as the dog saw that he was to be followed he fairly leaped with joy. Ere long all was ready, and the party set off, the prisoner and Sheriff following the dog, and the rest coming after to the number of over a hundred, Blackthorn being led in the rear, with his arms pinioned. And thus they pursued their way, I keeping close by the prisoner. The dog did not stop where the dead body was found. He simply looked that way and gave a fearful, melancholy howl, and then kept on; nor did he stop again until he reached the old inn; and as soon as the front door was opened for him he sprang in with a loud yell and ran upstairs. We followed him up, and when he stopped it was at the end of the narrow entry, or passage, which ran between the chambers. There were four of these chambers, with two beds in each, two upon each side of this passage, and the end or the passage where the dog had stopped, seemed to stop at the wall of the house—the back wall. There were the hewn timbers, all in sight, the seams stuffed with rags, as at the front end. Yet the dog leaped up against them, tried to bite them, and seemed crazy to

make his way through. Some of the men were sent around to see what was on the other side of the wall; and having noticed that this passage was in the centre of the house they went out.

Upon going to the backyard they found a barn, or stable, which set close up against the back of the house, and upon entering this they found that a square mow of hay was neatly piled away against that part of the barn which came against the centre of the house. One of them thought of trying this mow of hay. A long stick was procured, and one end sharpened with a knife, and with this they probed the hay. The stick entered some three feet, and then struck a solid body!

Away they went to report what they had discovered. They found the Sheriff in the passage, and they told him the story.

“There must be an apartment here somewhere,” said the spokesman, “for there’s room for it. Just against here there is a large mow of hay, very neatly piled away, and looking as innocent as can be; but at the depth of three feet we came to a solid partition.”

“Ho! Ho!” was the shout.

Axes were sent for, but before they came the secret was discovered. A brace overhead was found to be loose, and upon removing it the partition shook, and shortly afterwards one of the men gave it a shove and slid it part way off. Thus the whole section of hewn timber, which faced the end of the passage, was slid away into the next chamber, and beyond this was seen a regular door just like the other chamber doors. The two walls of the passage had concealed the cracks where this sliding door met the outer wall of the house.

The door thus revealed was easily opened, and beyond was found a small room with a bed in it. The floor was covered with a coarse carpet, and upon taking up that the rough boards beneath were found to be covered with blood! A closet in one corner was broken open by means of an axe which had arrived, and a cry of horror escaped the lips of those who were the first to look in. There—within the closet—were found a heap of bedclothes soaked in blood!—a bloody hatchet; a large knife; a pail half full of clotted blood; and upon some shelves were found not only the goods which had been stolen from the peddler, but many other articles, some of which were recognized as having belonged to men who

had disappeared on former occasions!

And all this while the dog was jumping about and howling most piteously, as though he expected we could bring his master back to him. This apartment was ingeniously contrived, and I doubt if human agency, unaided, would ever have discovered it. When in the house that section of the timber wall seemed only a part of all the rest; and when in the stable the mow of hay was too honest and simple in appearance to excite suspicion.

But it was out now. When Blackthorn had a lodger whom he thought it worthwhile to rob he could slide away the timber partition, and they would then enter the chamber without suspicion. There the work of death could be done, and the marks removed at leisure.

The party moved back to the town, and Henry Rosveldt was released at once. Blackthorn and his negro were tried and condemned, and when he knew that he must die the wretch made a confession. He said that he had murdered fourteen men in that house, the bodies of which had either buried in the woods, or, in the height of the tide, when the river was high and rapid, thrown in there. Austin Stanton was the fifteenth. Before he killed him he asked him where his money was, and the peddler told him he had given it to Rosveldt on purpose to have it carried safely. This maddened the villain, and when he found that Rosveldt had in his possession the most valuable of all the victim's property, he determined to be revenged upon him. So he put the peddler to death, and having taken all he wished, he and the negro carried the body and the trunks to the spot where they were found, feeling sure that he could fasten the guilt upon the man who had the murdered man's money and gold watches! The only sorrow he expressed was that he did not succeed in killing the dog. He said he knocked the animal in the head, and supposed he was dead, but some time in the night he made off, and found his master's body.

So Job Blackthorn and his black accomplice were hung, and Henry Rosveldt went on his way. No one would live in the house which bore such fearful memories with it, and it was torn down; but the place where it stood still bears the name of "The Dead Man's Inn!"

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