

*A Sick Robber;
And How Tim Cured Him*

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by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr
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Tim Benson was a brave, kind-hearted man, and had seen much of the world, and been mixed up some in adventurous affairs. I lost sight of him when I left our native village, and shortly after that he wandered off to the Far West. Not long since Tim called upon me. I did not know him at first, for he had grown stout and dark, and his coarse hair had many a silver touch upon it. But I found him to be the same warm, genial friend as of old, and I enjoyed the week through which his visit extended very much. One day we went out upon our old trout stream, with our poles upon our shoulders, and our dinners in our pockets; and when it came noon we sat down under some shady trees upon the bank, and eat our meal. After the last crumb had been disposed of, and Tim had lighted his pipe, I picked up the old newspaper in which the “grub” had been done up, and glanced my eyes over its columns. I saw an account of a murder in Missouri, and read it aloud to my companion.

“That’s a great place for murders and robberies,” I remarked, as I threw the paper down.

“Yes—’tis,” said Tim. “But I can tell you one thing: When they catch one of the villains, they make ’im suffer. I tell ye, a man stands on his own merits there.”

“But a great many villains escape,” I added.

“True,” he replied, “for they have more chance than they do here. But once in awhile a chap gets jerked up when he least expects it. I caught one once—about a year ago—and he was strung up without much ceremony. He was tried; but they wasn’t long in convicting him.”

“How did you catch him?” I asked.

“I’ll tell ye,” said Tim. He knocked the ashes from his pipe; then picked out an easier seat upon the bank; and then commenced:

“About two years ago I took a notion to go to Texas. I landed at Galveston, where I staid six months. I was just getting ready to go up the Trinity River when I was taken down with the small-pox. I had it hard, as ye can see by some of the marks on my face; but I come safely out of it, and when I was wholly well, I started off. At Brownville I fell in with a man I had known in Mississippi, and I stopped there, and went into a sort of a dickering business with him. His name was Smith; and I think he belonged in New York. One evening he and I went over to the tavern, where we used to sit sometimes to hear the news, and while we were there a peddler came along, and engaged lodgings for the night. He was a short, middle-aged man, and I should say a German by birth. He had two large japanned trunks; and after he’d eaten his supper he opened ‘em, and tried to trade with us. He had a good many watches; and some jewelry; and some silver spoons; and a host of other truck, such as knives, and pistols, and so on. He sold quite a lot of stuff, and then put his trunks away, and sat down and smoked.

“Just about this time a chap named Sutt Mangle, who lived a mile from the settlement, on a little by-way that branched off from the main road by the river, sank forward in his chair, and said he was taken very sick. The landlord got him a glass of whiskey, but that didn’t seem to do him any good. He said he hadn’t felt well all the afternoon. He was dizzy now, and almost blind, and had severe pains all up and down his back. He said he never could get home alone, and he wanted somebody to help him. One of the company, who had a horse in the shed, offered to help him, and Sutt got up to go out with him, but he staggered and trembled so that he had to help him out, and lift him onto the horse.

“This Sutt Mangle had lived in that section going on four years, but folks didn’t know much about him. He had a wife, but no children, and earned his living by hunting. He seemed to be a quiet sort of chap, but as he didn’t seek anybody’s company, of course there didn’t anybody seek his.

“About nine o’clock Smith and I went home and went to bed, and just as we were going to work the next morning we saw the German peddler posting off down the main road to the river. We went to the shop, and along towards the middle of the forenoon we saw a crowd gathering in front of the tavern. I ran over, and learned that the peddler had been murdered and robbed! We found the coroner, and off we went down the road, for about a mile, where we found the murdered man. His head was smashed to a pumice, and his clothes all covered with blood; and not far off was found the club with which it had been done. It was a piece of locust, and was daubed all over the heaviest end with blood and tangled hair. The two trunks were found in the woods, entirely empty, everything they had contained having been carried off.

“It didn’t take long to find a verdict in that case; and when they had decided that the peddler had been brutally murdered by some unknown person, the body was carried back to the tavern, and then the people turned out to hunt up the murderer. They hunted all that day, scouring the highways, and the by-ways, and the woods in every direction; but the object of their search was not to be found. One of the first places visited was Sutt Mangle’s. They found him sick abed, and his wife said she was afraid he had the smallpox. She had seen nothing, and heard nothing, of any stragglers about the premises, and as the settlers were anxious to get out of the way of a man who had that fatal disease, they left as quickly as possible.

“It was on the third day after the murder that all hopes of finding the villain in that section were given up. As many as twenty different individuals had been apprehended and examined, but not proof enough could be found to detain them. People wondered how it could have been done—and well they might—for the murder could not have been done an hour before it was discovered, and in less than another hour half the inhabitants of the town were on the search. Inquiries had been made upon every way by which a villain could have escaped, but no clue could be thus gained. I had made up my mind that the murderer had not left the town at all. I believed that it must have been done by some one who lived in that section; though I had no idea of where a suspicion could rest.

“The third day after the murder was Sunday, and in the forenoon Smith and I went out to take a walk. We stopped at the tavern, where I learned that Sutt Mangle had the small-pox of the worst kind, and that nobody dared to go near the house. I asked if he had the doctor.

“ ‘No,’ said the landlord; ‘his wife says she can fix him up, as she has been in a hospital at New Orleans. So the doctor thinks there is no need of his venturing there.’

“Of course I knew that I couldn’t take the small-pox again, so I made up my mind that I’d go down and see the poor fellow, and find out if he wanted any help. Smith said he would go part way with me, but he wouldn’t venture into the cot. We set out, and when we got to within half a dozen rods of the house, my companion said he guessed he’d stop, and let me go ahead. The dwelling was only a log-cabin, and when I reached the door, Mrs. Mangle came out. She was a hard looking woman, though not so homely as I had seen.

“ ‘Don’t come no nigher,’ she cried, when she saw me. ‘Sutt’s got the small-pox awful.’

“ ‘Never fear,’ says I. ‘I ain’t afraid of it. I’ve just dropped down to see if I couldn’t help him.’

“But she declared that I musn’t come in. She said it would be the death of me. He didn’t want any help. However, I insisted, and she finally gave way; but she warned me against going near the bed. I went in, and there, in one corner, on a low bed, I saw Sutt Mangle. His face was as speckled as an adder, and he seemed to be in much pain.

“ ‘How are ye?’ I asked.

“ ‘Awful,’ said he.

“ ‘Can’t I do something for ye?’ says I.

“ ‘Take care!’ he cried. ‘Don’t come no nigher! Ye’ll ketch yer death!’

“It struck me that the man could talk a good deal better than I could when I had the small-pox, and I thought his eyes looked rather bright and clear. And then his face wasn’t swollen a bit.

“ ‘Take care!’ says he, as I went nearer to him.

“ ‘Never fear,’ says I. ‘I’ve had it;’ and as I spoke I sat down on the side of the bed. He trembled so that I could feel the bed shake under me, and turned quickly over so as to hide his face; and as he did this I saw two things that rather startled me. In the first place, I saw that he had his clothes on; and in the second place, I saw that the spots on his face *weren’t anything but spots!* They weren’t pustules at all, but only daubs of some kind of red and purple paint, or berry-juice.

“It didn’t take more’n a minute for me to see quite an *animal*. I’d seen twenty men sick with the small-pox at the same time, and I knew that this chap wasn’t sick any more than I was. I’d come there to help him if I could; but the thought struck me that I might help him in a little different way from what I was expected.

“ ‘Well,’ says I, as honest as I could, ‘if I can’t help ye, I’ll be moving; but look out that ye don’t catch cold.’

“He said he would, and I left him. When I joined Smith, I told him what I’d found. I told him that Sutt Mangle hadn’t got the small-pox—that he’d pretended to have it so as to keep people away from him, in which he had succeeded pretty well. Says I,— ‘He planned to rob the peddler when he first pretended to be taken sick at the tavern. It was a shrewd thing, but if you go back with me we’ll show him that he hasn’t succeeded.’

“Smith was all afire now, and as anxious to examine into the matter as I was. Of course I wasn’t morally sure that Sutt was the murderer; but I *was* sure that he had no sickness; and that was ground enough to work upon. We got a couple of good clubs, and went back to the cot— crawling along under the bushes—and when we got to the open yard we rushed in. Sutt was just getting out of bed, and when he saw us he grabbed a pistol from under his pillow; but before he could cock it Smith gave him a rap on the head with his club which settled him back. The woman turned to flee, but I attended to her case, though I had to knock her down before I could secure her.

“As soon as Sutt was bound I took a wet rag, and gave his face a washing that cured all the small-pox in a very few moments. He came out as fresh as a rose-bush after a shower. The very first place we examined was under the bed, where we found two bundles done up in old quilts. We pulled ’em out and opened ’em, and found the peddler’s whole stock. Sutt Mangle had supposed that a case of small-pox would be a sufficient safeguard against any outsider’s poking in under that bed; and if it hadn’t happened that I’d had the critter, and so wasn’t afraid of it, the valuables might have laid there in safety till he got a chance to move ’em, which he probably meant to do as soon as it was proper for him to get well.

“I remained in the cot to keep guard, while Smith went after help. Sutt swore and begged, and offered me all he’d got if I’d let him go, but I made no words with him. I waited until Smith returned, which he did in company with a score of the villagers, and then we carried the prisoners and their plunder up to the tavern.

“Of course there was no lack of evidence to convict Sutt Mangle of the murder and robbery. It was as plain as day. The clothes he had worn that night at the tavern were found all spattered with blood, and we found the locust, too, close by his cot, from which the club was cut. But the small-pox and the articles under the bed were enough in themselves. However, he was convicted, and in two weeks he was hanged, and before he died he not only confessed that he murdered the peddler, but he said he had killed and robbed a good many men in different parts of the country. His wife was convicted at the same time, and sentenced to imprisonment for life.

“That’s the only case of small-pox I ever doctored, but I think, all things considered, I managed it pretty well. Don’t you?”

“Yes,” said I.

“Then let’s go at the trout again,” said Tim. And at them we went.

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