

## *Arresting A Murderer*

by Emerson Bennett

During the early settlement of Texas, it was my fortune, whether good or bad, to be made sheriff of the County of —. At that time, as all know who are conversant with the history of the “Lone Star,” the whole country was filled with outlaws and desperadoes of every description, from the common gambler and thief, down to the highway robber and cold-blooded assassin. In every settlement of note they could be found by scores, and sometimes by hundreds; and in many places they formed by far the largest portion of the population. Where this was the case they ruled in blood, might made right, and woe to him who dared to breathe of law and order. Texas at that time was to some extent composed of the refuse of creation, the scum of the earth, the dregs of society—scoundrels and villains of various nations and climes. Of course there were many honest, upright, pure-minded people in the country—or it might perhaps have remained a land of robbers and murderers to this day—but I think the majority had more sins than virtues, and I know that a large portion of the floating population was absolutely bad, wicked, and fiendish.

Now it happened that the county of which I had the honor to be sheriff, and which for reasons of my own I do not care to name, was one of the worst in the State—by which I mean that it contained more bad men and less good men than any other. In two or three of the principal settlements, there was a fearful representation of every kind of wickedness, beginning with drinking, and going down through fighting, gambling and stealing, to burglary, robbery, arson and murder.

In one of the largest and most populous of these settlements, the one in which I resided, and which contained the courthouse and jail, it had been the custom, previous to my introduction into office, to average at least one homicide per night, besides a goodly number of broken heads and other lively and interesting matters of a similar kind. The first thing I did, after taking the oath of office, was to issue a proclamation, setting forth the real state of affairs, and warning the people that, so long as I remained in power, such *amusements* must cease in that locality, or every red-handed villain might expect to be hunted down and made to feel the vengeance of outraged justice, and I called upon every good citizen to aid me in suppressing crime and establishing law and order.

This proclamation, as I had expected, created a buzz of excitement, but on the whole did not have an encouraging reception. The better class of citizens thought I had taken a bolder stand than I could maintain, and the villains laughed in derision at what they were pleased to term my bombast.

“We shall see!” I muttered to myself, as I armed myself with two brace of pistols and a heavy bowie-knife.

For several days I had the satisfaction of knowing the town to be unusually quiet, with no greater disturbance than two or three drunken brawls, and no more serious results than a

few swelled faces and blackened eyes—but then came something which put me on my mettle. A young man, a stranger in the place, was deliberately murdered and robbed in the public streets, in sight of half-a-dozen people, who were too cowardly to attempt the arrest of the assassin. The deceased had spent the evening in a gambling hell, where, by reckless betting and a strange run of luck, he had broken a monte-bank, and, after treating the crowd two or three times, had set off for his hotel, distant not more than a quarter of a mile. He had only gone about a dozen or twenty yards, when he was stopped by a big, black-haired, heavily-bearded ruffian, known as the Bully of Brock, who, with a frightful oath, ordered him to stand and deliver. Knowing there were a number of men within call, the stranger instantly turned to run, shouting:

“Help! Murder!”

The same instant the heavy left hand of the brawny ruffian fell heavily upon his shoulder, turning him partly around, and his right hand drove a knife up to the haft directly through his heart, killing him at once. The next moment, before allowing the body to sink to the ground, the villain rifled the pockets of his victim of his ill-starred gains; and then, with a fiendish, defiant laugh, as he drew forth and wiped the bloody knife on the garments of the murdered man and brandished it above his head, he shouted out:

“This here’s for whoever wants to come and get it. My compliments to the — sheriff, and hopes he won’t be backward in coming round to try his hand on old Pete Slinger, the Bully of Brock!”

With this he walked off with a swagger, and, I shame to say, not a man of those who dimly saw and clearly heard him, ventured to follow for the purpose of taking him into custody.

All this was told me within ten minutes of its transaction, and in less than five more I had reached the scene of the tragedy, where I found quite a crowd collected around the body of the murdered man.

Having seen matters in train for a proper inquest, I summoned a posse of ten men, selecting only such as I believed I could rely upon, and, retiring with them to my office, I had every man thoroughly armed. I then addressed to them a few emphatic words.

“Gentlemen,” said I, “a brutal, willful murder and robbery has just been committed, and defiance flung at the laws. The body of that murderer must now be had, either living or dead—the honor and safety of the community depends upon it! I trust you are all as determined as I am; and before high Heaven, I solemnly swear, I will never rest while I live till a just punishment will have been meted out to him! If there is anyone present who thinks he might falter in the moment of peril, let him stand forth and I will release him now!”

Not a person moved. I had made no mistake in selecting my men.

There was a quarter of the town, known as the “Den of Thieves,” which was considered worse than all the rest, and this was saying a good deal. Its buildings were low, wooden shanties, nearly every one of which was a groggery of the vilest description, and its denizens were criminals of both sexes, who might be said to have a common interest in keeping off the officers of justice. It was dangerous for any respectable persons to pass through that locality at any time, wither day or night, and very few arrests had ever been attempted there, and in no case with success.

In the worst part of this infernal quarter, Pete Slinger, the bully of Brock, kept one of the vile grogeries, surrounded by companions of his own stamp, of whom he was the chief; and it was to his own place that I had been so defiantly invited, and which now, contrary to his expectations, probably, I was about to visit.

We did not start at once, however—I did not think it advisable—feeling almost certain that the villain would not leave the place, and that before morning he would be pretty much overpowered with his own bad liquor. The first main thing to be done, according to my idea, was to get inside the hours, without having to expose ourselves by breaking into it; and I thought this might be effected by cautiously stealing round at a late hour, secreting ourselves in the back yard, waiting there till some one should open the door, and then by rushing in together, surprise the ruffians, and overcome them before they could make effectual resistance, or get their neighbors to assist them. I knew the premises well, and therefore did not need a guide to get to them in the most secret way.

It was between two or three o’clock in the morning, when we sallied forth on our dangerous mission. The night favored us. A fine, misty rain was falling, the clouds were low, black and humid, and the unlighted streets were so dark that we could not see each other at the distance of two paces. We started in single file, myself on the lead, and kept close together. It required all my previous knowledge of the town, and the locality of the “Den of Thieves,” to find the house I sought; and so cautiously did we have to move, that it was at least an hour before we reached it. There was a noisy revelry going on inside, but most of the other houses in the vicinity had become quiet.

Slowly and silently we climbed over the board fence into the yard; at once there together, we felt a very important part of our work had been accomplished. We could now hear the drunken orgies of the wretches inside, and, loudest among them, a voice which I recognized as that of the murderer himself, making merry over his wicked exploit; but the shutters were tightly closed, and we could see no light.

If we could get inside and surprise the ruffians! Could we? Perhaps the back door might not be fastened!

I went to it, and gently raised the latch. To my great surprise and delight, the door yielded to a slight pressure, and I cautiously pushed it open. There was a small back-room, which was dark; but the front one, in which the orgies were held, was only separated from it by a rough board partition, through several cracks in which faintly streamed the light of a rude lamp. Putting my eye to one of these crevices, I saw a roughly fashioned room, with

a sort of bar in one corner, in which stood the host himself, haranguing some half-a-dozen brother cutthroats, and boasting of the black deeds he had done and would do, in spite of all the sheriffs and constables outside of — I need not say where. There were at least ten other wretches in the room, three of them females, scattered about on benches and on the floor, but all apparently so stupefied with liquor as to be in no condition to make any serious resistance. All the chances of success that I could possibly have asked for now seemed to be mine, and I hastily stole back to my companions, to communicate the pleasing fact and arrange the mode of attack.

Five minutes later, just as the Bully of Brock and as many of his vile associates as were not too drunk already for the purpose, were in the act of drinking to the speedy death of my humble self, I flung open the door, and, with a pistol in each hand, stalked into the room, my men crowding close after me.

“You seem to have forgotten to ask me to join you in that toast!” I said, in a very distinct but quiet tone.

I never saw a set of villains more astonished than were they, as they looked around and perceived the formidable party opposed to them, with myself at the head. Every one of them turned pale and trembled.

“Pete Slinger, Bully of Brock, robber and murderer, I have come for you!” I pursued, hurrying forward, with both pistols extended and leveled at his head; “and what is more, I will take you living or dead! Hold out your hands!”

The coward trembled like a child as he obeyed my order, and in less than thirty seconds the click of the irons made him secure.

“Now, then,” I continued, addressing the others, “I arrest all here! And the first man that resists shall be shot down like a dog!”

In ten minutes more we had every villain secured, and the whole gang so bound together that we could easily guard them on their march to the jail,”

“Now mark me,” I said, as we were about leaving the house; “you are to go along the streets quietly, without making the least disturbance; and the first man that attempts to break from the chain, or call out for assistance, I will blow out his brains!”

I believe it was only the terrible surprise we gave the villains, by rushing in on them so suddenly that enabled us to make such a capture without a good deal of bloodshed and probable sacrifice of life. I will do them the justice to say that, had they received only half a minute’s warning, I believe they would have made a desperate defense; but the fact of their leader being surprised and captured, almost before he was aware of it himself, probably led the others to think “discretion the better part of valor.”

Such a haul of villainy had never before surprised the keeper of the jail, nor the citizens at large; and when the latter heard next morning of my night's work, they came to my office in crowds, and overwhelmed me with compliments. The good work thus begun was continued till the whole county became one of the most orderly, quiet, peaceable, law-abiding sections of the State.

Of those arrested at Pete Slinger's grog shop, nearly every one was a known criminal, and was subsequently convicted of some unexplained crime. Pete Slinger himself and four of the others were hung—three were sentenced to prison for life—four were publicly whipped and banished the State, and the remaining two were permitted to leave for a more salubrious clime. My life was often threatened; but I am living yet; and I flatter myself, I kept my promise to the people, did my duty, and rid my jurisdiction of boasting robbers and assassins.

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