

The Horse Detective

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IN THE WINTER OF 1836, I was stopping for a while with a planter friend, whose extensive cotton fields stretched along the west bank of the Boque Chitto, where that stream, after traversing Pike County, in the State of Mississippi, crosses the State line into the Parish of Washington, Louisiana. The plantation lay wholly in the former State, but its southern limit was formed by the highway that led westward from the Pearl River to the Mississippi. This road lay directly on the surveyed boundary of the two States, so that two neighbors, meeting in their morning ride, could shake hands from their saddles, and each in his own State—the Mississippian and the Louisianian standing each on his own soil.

One morning business made it necessary for me to ride to Franklinton, the county town of Washington parish, and the weather being unusually fine, my friend proposed to accompany me there.

We had reached the State line road, along which our road lay for a little way, when, on approaching a thicket on the northern side of the path, our horses suddenly shied to the right, and evidencing great alarm, refused to pass the spot.

Dismounting, and throwing the rein of my bridle over the pommel of my friend's saddle, I entered the thicket, to discover the cause of their unusual excitement.

I perceived in the dust of the road, the appearance of something heavy having been dragged through it in the direction of the bank of the bayou, and following this track into the dark shadow of the clump, I was horrified at the sight that met my eyes.

Before me lay the body of a large, well-dressed man, who had been most inhumanly murdered, for beside a pistol shot through the head, the throat was cut from ear to ear, and the embroidered vest and fine linen shirt bosom were slashed and dabbled with gouts of blood, from wide knife-wounds in the breast and side.

The man had but just been murdered, for on lifting one of the arms in my hasty examination, I observed that it was yet purple, and scarcely cold. Beside the body lay a pair of leathern saddlebags, which had been rifled, and portions of their contents were scattered about the ground.

My exclamation of horror at the bloody spectacle had attracted the notice of my friend, and hitching the animals, he was soon at my side. He immediately recognized the man as Esquire Hendricks, a lawyer of standing in one of the neighboring counties of Mississippi.

While occupied in the examination of the body and the surrounding locality, a violent snorting and tramping was heard close at hand, and my friend, leaving me for an instant, returned, leading by the broken bridle a noble and greatly excited animal, which he said was the horse of the murdered man.

He was a beautiful thoroughbred bay, known to everyone in that portion of the country, and noted for his remarkable intelligence.

The horse, on being led to the spot, exhibited the utmost excitement, and trembling in every limb, almost fell to the ground with terror. As he stood thus, with his fore feet braced forward, his long neck and head stretched toward the mangled remains of his master, his mane standing almost on end, and his eyes glaring wildly from their sockets, like balls of fire, I thought he presented the most perfect and sublime picture of terror I had ever looked upon. For a moment the faithful creature stood thus gazing upon the fearful sight, and then gradually approached the body, and after smelling it, as if to remove all lingering doubts of the identity, he reached forward to one of the outstretched hands, as it lay, palm up, on the grassy ground, and licking it like an affectionate spaniel, evinced attachment and grief in a language stronger than words could ever have done.

Of course, this painful discovery put an end to our journey to Franklinton for that day; and gathering up the scattered property of the murdered man, and leading the excited horse, we returned to my friend's plantation—calling on the way, upon the neighbors and imparting the startling intelligence to them.

A cold-blooded murder like this, was a circumstance that had not agitated the community of Boque Chitto for a long time; and Squire Hendricks being widely known, and deservedly popular, it created no small degree of excitement.

During the investigation that followed, it transpired that the lawyer was, at the time of his death, in possession of a sum of money, which he had collected for a client; and on the morning of the murder, was taking it to the bank at Franklinton, to deposit, for the benefit of his employer. This money was missing, together with his gold watch. No doubt, of course, remained that the deed was perpetrated by a highwayman. But notwithstanding several suspicious persons were arrested, nothing was established against them, and they were discharged.

At length several weeks had passed away, and although the community were continually on the *qui vive* for the detection of the villain, the excitement in a great degree had subsided.

The month of March arrived, and I began to turn my thoughts northward; and in anticipation of the homeward journey, I had disposed of my horse. In consequence of this, I was for some time indebted to the courtesy of my friend for the use of the animal which had belonged to the murdered lawyer, still in the keeping of my friend.

One day during the Spring session of the Circuit Court of the county, I happened to visit the town; and stopping outside the court house, to speak with my attorney, my horse, being well known as having been the property of Hendricks, naturally attracted considerable attention. All at once the horse sprang to one side with such force, as almost to throw me from the saddle and trampled upon the feet of some of his friends, and snorting loudly, seemed suddenly to be filled with terror.

As soon as I could recover my seat, I looked about the crowd for the cause of this extraordinary conduct. At this moment I perceived a person approaching, evidently to ascertain the cause of the gathering. I had frequently seen this man before, and knew he was the keeper of a dining saloon in the place. Though not a man much thought of, he was looked upon as an honest and harmless sort of fellow. This man came up; and as he drew near, the horse exhibited the utmost alarm; and snorting wildly, sprang, in spite of the rein, through the crowd, and trembling violently, endeavored to escape in an opposite direction. This strange behavior of the animal was remarked by all; and several voices exclaimed in the same breath:

“It’s Bill Nevins! The horse’s afraid of Bill Nevins!”

“By gracious!” cried another, “who knows but Bill, here, killed the lawyer? I say, old fellow, go up to the critter, and let him smell the blood on yer hands!”

From his first appearance, I had kept my eye upon this man; and no sooner had he caught sight of the horse, than I observed a peculiar expression on his face; and when the last words were uttered,— a deadly pallor spread over his features, and he almost staggered, as he replied:

“Who says I killed lawyer Hendricks? It’s a lie!”—and turning abruptly, he attempted to walk, with all the apparent nonchalance he could assume, in the direction of his saloon. As if an electric shock had struck me, the conviction of that man’s guilt rushed upon my mind; and forcing the frightened animal across the court-house square, till I overtook him, I bent forward in my saddle and shouted in his ear:

“*Bill Nevins! I SAY you murdered Squire Hendricks!*”

Had a thunderbolt struck the guilty wretch, he could not have fallen more suddenly to the ground. He was not hardened in crime; and this abrupt accusation of murder overcame him.

A warrant for his arrest was immediately obtained; and he was conveyed to prison to await his trial at the next session of the Circuit Court in June; while I was required to remain in the county as a witness in the case.

It was a matter of doubt whether the murder was done within the jurisdiction of the courts of Mississippi, or of those of the State of Louisiana; and the prisoner’s counsel, it was hinted, would plead this question of *venue* in favor of their client.

The body of the murdered man was found on the western side of the road, and some little distance from it, and consequently within the territory of the State of Mississippi. This would be testified to, by both my friend and myself; but, at the same time, it could be proven by the appearance of the dust of the road, that the body had evidently been dragged some distance, to the place where it was discovered, *after* the deed had been perpetrated. The vicinity had been thoroughly searched, as was supposed, and no evidence of the precise locality of the death scene had been detected, by which the venue could be established. In consequence of this it was feared that the guilty man would escape the clutches of the law.

Since the discovery of the murder, I had not had occasion to pass over the road where it had been perpetrated, having transacted my business at Franklinton, through the kindness of a friend. But a few days previous to that set for the trial of Nevins, I found it necessary to visit that town myself.

I started from my friend's plantation in company with several gentlemen of the neighborhood, so that we formed quite a company of horsemen. As usual, of late, I was mounted on the beautiful bay, which had been the property of the murdered lawyer; and it was on this occasion that the extraordinary intelligence of the animal led to the complete elucidation of the mystery of the murder.

When we reached the vicinity where the bloody act had been consummated, the animal began to exhibit the same symptoms of alarm he had shown on the former occasion, and at the court-house square, notwithstanding the horses of my companions evinced no signs whatever of fear. We had passed the spot where the body of Hendricks had been discovered, when the horse, in spite of my guidance, dashed into the tangled thickets with me, and forcing his way through the grape vines and overhanging limbs, reached the roots of a large sweet-gum, when he stopped, and pawing the ground violently, exhibited signs of excessive agitation.

The gentlemen, as well as myself, having all confidence in the remarkable intelligence of the beautiful creature, we busied ourselves in examining the locality, convinced that this was the very scene of the killing of his master.

And such it proved; for one of my companions soon picked up a large, peculiarly shaped bowie knife, which was immediately recognized by several as having been in the possession of Bill Nevins shortly previous to the murder; while on the roots of the tree were found tangled masses of hair, of a color comparing exactly with that of the deceased.

These facts were sufficient, not only to prove the guilt of the prisoner, but also established the *venue*, thus making all the initiatory proceedings in the case in strict accordance with the forms and requirements of the law.

On the morning of the trial, I visited the prisoner in his cell, and stated the recent facts that had been developed against him, and conjured him, if he was really guilty, to confess the fact at once, and no longer attempt to stand out against the strong array of testimony that would establish his guilt.

As I have said before, the man was not a hardened criminal, this, doubtless, being the first crime he had ever been tempted to commit, and with terrible agitation, most fearful to look upon, and which I can never forget, the poor wretch made a clean bosom of it, and confessed to the murder.

He had become aware of the fact that Hendricks was in possession of a large sum of money, and also that he intended to deposit it at Franklinton, and secretly leaving Holmesville, he proceeded to the State line road to intercept him. Meeting his victim, to whom he was well known, by the roadside, he formed some pretext by which he induced him to enter the thicket by the sweet-gum, where the bloody deed was consummated; and the robbery accomplished, he dragged the body to the spot where myself and my friend had found it.

Thus it was, that a noble and affectionate animal, with a wonderful intelligence, not only pointed out the murderer of his master, but the very spot where the terrible crime had been committed, thus being the instrument, in the hands of Providence, of retributive justice.

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