

The Sheriff's Story

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

In the autumn of '42, on my way home from the West, I found myself obliged to put up for the night at the inn of a small settlement on the Wabash. The day had been dark and lowery, and the evening set in with a driving storm. After supper a goodly company assembled in the bar-room; and story-telling became the order of the occasion. Among our number was a grey-headed man, whose name I learned was Warren Alton. He was past three score, but his gestures and movements betokened all the vigor of middle-age.

A number of stories had been told, and finally all eyes were directed toward Alton. Some one had called his name, and hinted that his turn had come.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “if you choose to listen, I can give you a short story touching a certain criminal that I once had the pleasure of arresting.”

Of course we would listen.

“Twenty years ago, or thereabouts,” commenced Mr. Alton, “I was sheriff of Jefferson county. Close by a bend of Bottom Branch Creek was located a settlement called Jackson; and nine miles distant, in a southerly direction, was the town of Huntsville. The creek, after bending around Jackson settlement, took a sweep to the west, and then turned back and crossed the track about midway between Jackson and Huntsville. Of the nine miles between these two places seven of them were through a low, dismal swamp, where the road, for the whole distance, was a corduroy of oak logs. On this dark, sunken road, travelers had been murdered and robbed. Two years before I came into office as many as six dead men had been found by the wayside in that swamp. After I became sheriff the trouble was renewed, and I went down to Huntsville to look into the matter. I found one of my deputies there—a fair, honorable man named Watson. He told me that every exertion had been made to apprehend the perpetrators of the murders, but without effect. In fact, the officers had not as yet been able to fix suspicion upon any person.

“I reached Huntsville in the evening, and on the following morning I rode down with Watson upon the corduroy road. The place was truly dismal and dark enough. The track had been cut through a thick, tangled, matted growth of Cyprus, cottonwood, and running vines; and in many places the logs had sunk so far that mud and water flowed over them. And this piece of swamp, by the road, was seven miles in extent. About half way through we came to the bridge which crossed the creek—not a bridge such as we usually see, but a sunken mass of heavy timber, pinned down by piles and ties, so that the stream could be forded. It was near this spot, I was told, that most of the murders had taken place.

On the following morning word was brought from Huntsville that another man had been found dead and robbed in the swamp. Watson and I posted off with many others, and found it to be as related. The dead man lay upon the roadside, about three rods from the bridge, with his skull

broken, and his pockets empty. A score of people from Jackson were already there, and I soon learned that the murdered man had stopped at the latter place on the evening before. I whispered to Watson that I must not be known, and that he should not recognize me in public. After this I mingled with the people from Jackson, and gathered what information I could; and at length the following facts appeared:— The murdered man was not known in that section. He had arrived at Jackson the evening before on horseback and had put up at the inn at that place. He had departed upon his way again very early in the morning, and he was next found dead by a boy who had come down to the creek to look at some traps which he had set on the previous day.

“The man who kept the inn at Jackson was present, and had been helping to identify the dead body. His name was Laman Stoker, and the moment I rested my eyes upon him I disliked him. He was a short, square-built man; with tremendous breadth of shoulders; a small, bullet-shaped head; with prominent cheekbones, and small, thin ears, buttoned back flat against his skull. I was close by him, studying his physiognomy, when an old gentleman who had come down on horseback, approached and spoke to him.

“I say, Stoker, what time did this man leave your inn this morning?” the gentleman asked.

“As soon as it was daylight,” replied Stoker. “I told him he’d better wait for company, but he was in a hurry.”

“I wonder if he had much money with him.”

“At this query, Stoker betrayed to me a suspicious sign, for I was watching him very closely. He tried to look surprised that such a question should be put to him. ‘How do you suppose I know?’ was his reply. ‘He may have had a thousand dollars, and he mayn’t have had a dollar. I can’t tell.’

“But where is his horse?” asked the old man.

“His horse was found in my yard by my hostler, just after breakfast.”

“Was there any blood on him?”

“I guess not.”

“At this point Stoker turned away, and I went to look at the dead man. The corpse had been moved up from the wayside upon the corduroy; and as I looked down where it had been first found, it struck me that very little blood had been left there.

“You may call it chance, or you may admit that my perception was keener than that of most men; but, at all events, my mind began to take a turn in a direction not yet explained by the officers who had preceded me in the search. At first I only suspected that the man, or men, who had committed the crimes, resided wither in Jackson or Huntsville. I had drawn enough out of the two old hunters to convince me of that. Next I suspected that Laman Stoker had some hand in the

bloody business. He looked fit for the work; and within the past few minutes, he had exhibited signs of guilt which to me were apparent enough.

“Loose straws indicate the way of the wind; and the man who seeks to ferret out great things must not pass carelessly over little things. Why was there no more blood spilled where the dead man had been found? Surely, not because the gates had not been opened, for his skull was broken to a pumice, and it was evident enough to one versed in such matters, that nearly all the blood in his body had run out. But where was it? From such a man as that, killed by such a ferocious wound, with all the arteries and veins of the head broken, there could not have flown much less than two gallons of blood. But where was it? There had not been a pint spilled where the body had lain. I looked to see if I could find blood anywhere else; and by and by I found a little clot nearer the creek. I continued to move on, and at the very edge of the stream I found more blood—not much—only a few drops—but I knew that it was blood. And I found more: I found the prints of feet there deeply sunken in the mud.

At this point the idea, which before had been dimly floating in my mind as a possibility, became very nearly a reality. These prints were at some little distance from the sunken bridge, and the man who had made them had crossed a point of turf in reaching the road. I selected a spot where the mud was quite hard, and here I stepped along by the edge of the other track. I was a heavy man; and yet the prints of my feet were not more than half as deep as those other prints. What did this signify? It signaled very plainly to me that the man who had made those deeper tracks had borne a heavy load upon his shoulders!

“And thus I arrived at a conclusion which explained why the search and investigations of the officers for two years, or more, had proved futile. They had searched in the wrong place. They had taken it for granted that the murders had been committed upon that dark road in the swamp. I was now convinced that the dead body I had just left had been borne to its present place of rest from the shore of the creek. And what was there beyond that? How came it upon the shore of the creek? We shall see.

“I left the proper officers to take charge of the corpse, and having told Mr. Watson to meet me in Jackson on the following morning, I started for the latter place and put up my horse at the stable of the inn—the inn kept by Laman Stoker. I found the hostler; and I shuddered when I looked at him—not because he was a very ugly looking man; but because he looked to me exactly fit to help his master do bloody work. He was a thin, pale, cold-blooded fellow, with a low, receding brow; sharp, cold eyes; a small, triangular nose; and a thick, heavy under lip. If he had been a larger man these characteristic features would have been more prominent, and people might have feared him; but, as it was, he had passed for a weakly, unhealthy man, and nobody had thought of his doing any harm.

“The landlord had not yet returned, and while the hostler—his name was John Boone—was removing the saddle from my beast, I spoke of the murder in the swamp. The fellow had heard all about it, but he had not been down to see the body. His master had gone, and he had to remain behind. He spoke freely and unconcernedly—in fact, too much so. It would have been natural for him to have exhibited some little feeling; and the fact that he did not do so led me to conclude that he had schooled himself to act his part.

“After I had seen my horse taken care of, I walked out behind the inn, upon the brow of a point of table land, and at a short distance below I saw the end in the creek. Towards the creek I made my way, and when within a few rods of the water I stopped. I saw something upon the grass—a dark, red clot, hanging upon a stout blade, and bending it down. I stooped and took it upon my fingers, and found it to be blood! I pushed on to the shore of the stream, but there were no fresh foot prints there. I went back a little way, and it led me to a point of the swamp, which made up behind the bluff upon which the little village stood. I made my way into the thicket of vines and cottonwood, and presently I found a boat drawn up upon the shore of the creek. It was of the kind called a ‘dug-out,’ and was wet, outside and in, as though it lately had been washed down.

“Perhaps you can imagine that I was beginning to be a little excited in my search. The boat had been washed down and rinsed; but the fatal marks had not been entirely obliterated. The water that had gathered in the bottom, standing in little pools, had a crimson tinge, and there were one or two dark spots which had not been washed off.

So far as my own mind was concerned, I had not a doubt left. Since I had first entertained the idea of the criminality of Laman Stoker, everything had turned out just as I had looked for it, and, when I left the boat, I had about come to the conclusion to make my next movement in my official capacity. When I reached the inn, Stoker had returned, and dinner was almost ready. The host eyed me sharply, but I kept my countenance. It did me good to have him eye me in that fashion; for I saw that he feared me. And why should he fear me? Did I not know very well? In short, every event, from that time forth, gave weight to the testimony I had already collected.

“After dinner Stoker asked me how long I intended to stop with him. I had intended to stop over night, and meet Watson there in the morning; but my plan was changed. The wretch showed more plainly than before that he mistrusted me, and I feared that something might turn up to injure my cause if I delayed too long. So I told him I was not going to stop at all—I had a long road to travel, and I was in a hurry. Whether he was pleased with this, or whether he was not, I could not determine. I paid for dinner, for self and horse, and rode post haste to Huntsville.

Walton opened his eyes with astonishment when I told him what I had discovered; but he did not oppose my belief. The whole thing, as I opened it to him in regular sequence, struck directly to his understanding; and he only wondered that he had not thought of something of the kind before. He was ready to act with me, and our plans were soon laid. He went out and engaged three stout men to accompany us, two of whom were his constables; and after tea we set forth on our way to Jackson.

“We reached the inn a little after dark. Watson and one of the constables went to the stable and secured John Boone, while I went into the house and arrested Laman Stoker. The latter, as I have already intimated, was a powerful fellow, and he came very near giving us trouble; but a blow fro the butt of one of my heavy pistols reduced his strength somewhat, and after that he was easily secured. Then we commenced to search the house. We hunted high and low, and we had plenty of interested people to help us. Partition walls were torn down, and floors were ripped up. We found the property of the murdered man in a secret locker; and in a tank of water, away in

one corner of the cellar, we found a lot of bloody bed-clothes. We had evidence enough; and the prisoners were carried to jail that very night.

“On the next day John Boone was dying. He had been sick with consumption for a long time, and during his struggle with Watson on the night before his strength had completely failed him. When he knew that he could not live he declared that he would make a clean breast of it. I am inclined to think, however, that he hoped that his confession might benefit him in case he should, by any possible means, recover.

“This confession was just what I expected. He and Laman Stoker had committed all those murders—had done the killing in the house, and then had conveyed the bodies, by way of the creek, to the road in the swamp; and where the murdered man had horses, the horses had been led out from the stable by a back way, saddled and bridled, and turned loose in the road. The whole plan had been adroitly contrived, and, for too long had been successfully executed.

“John Boone died within three hours after his confession had been made; Laman Stoker lived until his breath was stopped by the rope of the hangman.”

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