

## Adventure in a Stage-Coach

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

Hillbrook was about the smallest place to boast of a respectable hotel that I ever saw; but it happened in this way: Before any railroad had been thought of in that section a line of stage coaches furnished the means of public conveyance between the two beautiful valleys—the east of the mountains, and the still richer that lay to the westward. The passage across the mountain range was through Jackson's Notch; and here, at the eastern entrance, was Hillbrook. The stages from the east reached this place at night, meeting those from the west; so here passengers had to stop over until morning, when the coaches started on the return trip over their respective routes; and in the summer time there was much travel this way, and it required a good-sized hotel to accommodate the many passengers who were forced to spend the night at Hillbrook for the purpose of exchanging coaches in the morning.

It was late in the season when I arrived at Hillbrook. I had been sent up there to examine the timber, and also to determine whether it would pay to erect a mill upon the stream after which the hamlet took its name. I found hundreds of acres of as fine spruce timber as I had ever seen; and I furthermore found a spot where a mill could be safely put up. My company had not been the first to discover the value of the timber, nor to think of a mill. Three mills, at least, had been already erected there; but the heavy freshets of Spring and Autumn had swept them away. I had no thought of putting a mill upon the stream. No dam could have been raised that would withstand the power of those mountain freshets.

I looked for a good Fall, with a chance above it of running a canal inland to bring the water to a safe place. And such a Fall I found. I could not have asked for a better. I spent a week in my examination, and at the end of that time I had perfected my plans and designs, and I believed that before another twelve-month had passed we would be sending down from Hillbrook as fine spruce clap boards as were to be found in the market.

The times were dull enough at Hillbrook during that week. The Summer travel was over, and most of those who had occasion to pass to and fro through the Notch were farmers, who came and went in their own wagons. The stages were forced to make their daily trips, however, as they had a contract with Government for carrying the mails. Only one thing occurred to break the monotony of those seven or eight days, and that was, a robbing of the mail. The coach that left Hillbrook on Monday morning to go to the westward had three bags cut away from the driver's box, and they were afterwards found by the roadside, cut open, with the letters and papers scattered about in every direction. There was a bustling time at the hotel on the next day, while the officers were there making inquiries; but things became quiet after the officers had gone.

I had planned that I would leave on Friday morning; and so I told the landlord as I stood at his bar on the morning of Wednesday.

“I hate to have ye go, Captain,” he said. “At this season of the year we can’t afford to spare good customers.”

“Never mind,” I replied. “You’ll see enough of me by and by.”

I was about to turn away when the host stopped me with:

“By the way, Captain, I’ve got to send fifty dollars off by Dick Nolan, when he goes out, and I can’t quite make it up. Could you spare me a ten-spot as well as not?”

“Certainly,” said I. And I took out my wallet to give him the money; but I found that I had not that amount in it.

It is my custom to carry a pocket-book in a snug pouch upon the inside of my vest, in which I keep the bulk of my money, carrying only enough in my wallet to meet my passing wants; and thus I am not obliged to expose a large sum while traveling. On the present occasion, when I found that I had only three or four dollars in my port-monnaie, I took the larger book from my breast pocket, and opened it upon the bar. I was not afraid of the landlord,—I would have trusted him with my life,—and I did not think of the two men who sat by the fire. I had come to Hillbrook prepared to purchase a few hundred acres of land if I found it necessary; but I had obtained a refusal of the land, so I had the money with me—a pretty good pile of it,—and as I drew out the ten-spot for my host I was forced to expose it.

I had closed my pocket-book, and was about returning it to my bosom, when I observed that one of the men had come from the fire, and now stood at the bar by my side. He asked for a glass of whiskey; but not until I had detected the greedy, longing snap of the eye with which he regarded my pocket-book. I saw the snap of his eye; and I saw his lips close, and his fingers clutch nervously together; and then I heard him start to hum a tune; but he made wretched work of it. He was a villainous looking fellow, at best; though I had not particularly noticed this until I caught his eye at close quarters. He was of middle-age, and of medium height, and quite muscular; and his garb was such as an ordinary laboring man might wear while out of employment. That he had been a tough customer in his day was evident from his face, which gave token of having been a target in more than one game of fisticuffs. His nose had been battered down, and there was a bad scar on his right cheek. I noticed this scar particularly on account of its peculiar shape. It resembled the letter V, and looked as though a nail had been caught there and torn up the flesh.

“Who is that man?” I asked of the landlord, after the fellow had gone out.

“I don’t know,” replied my host. “He came last night on foot, and asked for supper and lodging and breakfast. His name is on the register.”

We looked on the register, and found that he had recorded his name—“JAMES MANN.”

Half an hour afterwards the man came in and got another glass of whiskey, and having taken up his staff and bundle—a goodly-sized bundle tied up in a large cotton, or gingham, handkerchief,—he took his leave.

That was on Wednesday morning.

On Thursday evening a man hobbled up to the door of the hotel upon a pair of crutches. He appeared to be an elderly man, his hair and beard being almost white, and his form much bent. His right foot was swathed in many bandages, the swathing extending to the knee, and the limb appeared to give him much pain. It was nearly dark when he came, and I was in the office; and as he sank upon a chair, and groaned in pain, I could not help feeling much sympathy for him. In a weak, cracking voice he asked me if I was the host. I told him I was not. I had hardly spoken the words when our landlord came in, and I pointed him out to the suffering wayfarer. The latter wished to know if the stage started from there in the morning for Weldonville; and upon being answered in the affirmative, he wished to know at what time it started; and when the host had told him that it started at 4 o'clock, he asked if he could be accommodated with lodgings for the night, to which, of course, the kind-hearted publican answered, yes.

The old man seemed to hesitate about taking the stage when he found how early it started; but when he was informed that he would find no other method of conveyance, he concluded to take it; and that he might obtain the rest which he sorely needed, he requested to be shown to his bed at once.

“Poor fellow!” I uttered, as the landlord’s little boy conducted the old man out from the barroom. “It must be hard work for him to travel on foot.”

“Yes,” responded my host. “And he looked as though he’d traveled some distance.”

“Did you ever see him before?” I asked.

“I was just trying to think,” replied Boniface, in a reflective mood. “There’s something familiar about his look, though I cannot call him to mind.”

“Perhaps,” I suggested, “he was not lame when you saw him before. His lameness may have resulted from a recent injury.”

“That must be it. I am not apt to forget faces, and if I’d thought to consider how he would have looked standing squarely on his pins, I should probably have called him to mind.”

And there our conversation ended.

There had recently been a change in the time of the steamer’s leaving Belchertown, and our stages from Hillbrook had to leave at four o’clock in the morning in order to hit it. As

I wanted a bit of steak and a cup of coffee before starting, I should be obliged to turn out by half past three, so I went off to bed pretty early.

I am generally a sound sleeper, and seldom dream; but on this occasion I had a dream, and a very curious dream it was, too. It was a cold, dark morning, and I had taken my seat in the coach, and the only other passenger was the old man with the crutches. I thought I tried to converse with him, but the only response I could get was a low growl, not at all like a human voice. By and by a dim, ghostly light broke in upon the darkness, and I noticed that a change had taken place in the appearance of my traveling companion. In place of the old gray coat which he had worn, I saw a shaggy mass like the covering of a bear, and something like a pair of huge claws were stretched out towards me. I looked up at his face, and beheld that it was a beast instead of a man who occupied the seat in front of me. And such a beast! A huge, ungainly monster, with a body and claws like a bear, but with a head and mouth like a hippopotamus.

Dear Reader, did you ever see a hippopotamus? If you have, you must have seen him open his mouth; and hence you can judge something of my feelings when that horrid monster opened his terrific, enormous mouth and sprang towards me! I gave one cry, and—

“Come, Singleton! Your steak is broiling, and you won’t have much more than time to eat it. Did I frighten you?”

“Why do you ask me that?” I said, starting up as I recognized my host.

“Because you gave such an unearthly howl when I touched you.”

I told him I had been dreaming.

“A kind of a bad one,” he suggested.

“Rather bad,” I said.

I was not long in performing my toilette, and when I reached the breakfast-room I found my steak steaming on my plate, and the driver already eating. Where was our lame friend?

He did not want any breakfast, the landlord said. He would reach Weldonville by eight o’clock, which would be in ample season for his morning’s meal.

The driver for that morning was Sam. Allard—one of the best and most accommodating that ever drew a rein. Those who have had occasion to ride by stage from Centre Harbor to Conway, on their way to the White Mountains, during the summers of the last six or eight years, may remember him. A light, sinewy man; quick and prompt; with a pleasant word always for those who have a right to demand his services; but a dangerous man to impose upon.

“What is the weather out?” I asked, as I took my seat at the table.

“Cold and damp,” was the reply.

“And I suppose we won’t have daylight for two hours?” I suggested.

“It’ll be very near two hours,” said Sam. “The sun doesn’t rise till almost six.

“How many passengers?”

“Only two—you and the old fellow with the crutches.”

“Is he up yet?”

“Yes. He’s been up half an hour; and he has made his breakfast on hot whiskey toddy. Egad! the old fellow seems to love it.”

As soon as I had done my breakfast I took a lamp, and went upstairs for my carpet-bag; and among other arrangements I took out my revolver, (one of Colt’s old-fashioned six-barrel shooters. The single-barrel with revolving chambers had not been made then,) and having examined to see that the caps were all on, I put it into my breast-pocket. The mail had been robbed on the same road not a week before; and it was not impossible that the coach might be attacked on such a dark morning as this.

A few words of farewell with our host, and an assurance that he would see me again ere long, and then we rattled away. It was truly a dark morning, and a cold one, a heavy fog having settled down around the base of the mountains, the temperature being pretty low into the bargain. I call it morning, because we generally so class those growing hours; but if ever there was night because of darkness, then it was night as we rode away from Hillbrook on that occasion.

When we had got well underway I made some commonplace remark to my companion, just to draw him out; but he was not in a talking mood. He intimated rather plainly that he would be gratified if I would let him sleep. It was the effect of his hot whiskey-toddy, I thought.

“My dear sir,” said I, “I didn’t have an opportunity to smoke before getting into the coach. Would it offend you if I should indulge now?”

“Nit a bit. Smoke as much as you like. I smoke myself sometimes.”

“Will you have a cigar now?”

“No. I haven’t had any breakfast; and, what’s more I don’t smoke cigars.”

I worked at a disadvantage in the Tartarian darkness, but I managed to find a cigar, and also to get out a match. It was a “patent” affair—that match—and warranted to withstand the highest kind of wind when once in flame. I drew it across the sanded corner of the box, and in an instant the interior of the coach was ablaze with a light like the noonday’s sun. And what, think you, was the first thing what attracted my attention?

*It was a cater-cornered scar!*

As the light of my match flashed out the man had been sitting up and leaning slightly forward, probably, listening to my movements; but when the flame glared out he quickly drew back into his corner, and pulled his hat down over his eyes. He was not quick enough, however, to hide his face from me. Never was a human face more quickly transferred to the plate of the ambrotypist, than were those lineaments daguerreotyped upon my mind. I saw the battered nose; the scarred brow; and the strange scar upon the right cheek. The gray beard was no longer a disguise. It was the same face that had glared upon me, so greedily, when I had my pocket-book open upon the bar at the hotel.

I lighted my cigar, and then I reflected. Touching the man’s identity, I had no need of reflection, for I simply KNEW that this was the traveler who had signed his name as James Mann, and who had seen my money. The only question beyond this was, what did it mean?

And here there was not room for doubt. It could only mean robbery! The man had heard me tell the host that I should leave on this Friday morning, and he had gone off and assumed this disguise and returned in season to bear me company. And the circumstance of the disguise being so near at hand seemed to signify that he was a professor in the business.

And how did he mean to do his work? It was not difficult to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion. In a very short time—if we had not done so already—we should enter a low, thick wood, through which the road continued for eight or nine miles, and in that solitary, gloomsome place he could do his work. A knife,—a gag upon my mouth! it was very easy. The driver would not hear. The rumbling of the heavy old coach would drown more noise than he would need to make. To kill me; to take my well-filled pocket-book; to slip quietly out and reclose the door; to make off and throw away his wig and beard and crutches, and all would be safe as could be.

I dared not take a long time to consider. I raised the sash at my elbow and looked out.

“Hallo! There goes my hat! Driver! Driver!”

Sam pulled up his team, and I got out; but I had no occasion to go back, for my head-gear was only a light travelling-cap, and that I had in my hand; however, I persuaded the driver to light his lantern, using one of my matches for the purpose, and the I asked him if his horses would stand. He said they would. “Then come back,” said I, “and help me find my hat?” And as soon as we were away from the coach I told him the story. Sam was

quick-witted, and we were not long in fixing upon a plan. We went back, and as we reached the coach-door he cried out:

“Good gracious! Singleton, look at that.”

“What is it?” said I.

“Look at that perch!” he said. “It’s a miracle that your cap blew off as it did. Another rod—and we should have been down, and our coach in ruins! That perch is broken short off. Get a rope out from my box. You’ll find one there. I guess we can lash it so ’twill hold to Weldonville;—hallo, old fellow! you’ll have to get out of that a few minutes. Come—bear a hand.”

“I can’t help you,” growled the man from the inside.

“You can help us by giving us less load to lift, at any rate. Come—move yourself. I’ll lend you a hand.”

Finally, the man came hobbling out; and no sooner had he touched the ground than Sam gave him a blow upon the head with the handle of his wheel-wrench, that settled him upon the ground in a heap. I was ready with the rope; and, just as we were taking the last turn around his legs, he came to and commenced to kick and struggle, very strangely for a cripple. In short, he displayed a strength which the pair of us could never have overcome if his limbs had been free. As soon as he was securely bound, we stripped off his wig and false beard; whereupon Sam cried out:

“The mail-robber! for a thousand dollars!”

Mercy! what a knife we found stowed away in his bosom! A long, broad-bladed bowie, and as sharp as a razor. And a pair of revolvers, too.

But we did not stop to investigate matters there. We lashed him to the hind-seat of the coach, so that he could not possibly break away; and in this condition we carried him to Weldonville, where we gave him into the hands of the proper officers, and where I was forced to stop over as a witness.

The rest of the story can be quickly told. On that very day, two of the officers who had been searching for the mail-robber came that way; and, on the day following, an officer from Philadelphia arrived. The wig, and the whiskers, and the crutches proved to be important bits of evidence. Our prisoner was found to be one who had gone, in Philadelphia and Baltimore, by the name of Connor McCann; and a more desperate villain did not remain unhung. But his game was up, for a term of years at least.

Since that Adventure in the Stage-coach, I have been very shy of old men upon criutches; and I never meet one without making a critical examination to see if he be not really a robber in disguise.

*The New York Ledger*, January 30, 1869