

The Robber's Roost;
-Or-
Hans' Last Victim

It was a sultry afternoon, that I crossed the Mississippi River, and negligently travelled on my way towards Greenville. The cool shade which covered the road, and the majestic woodland scenery, whiled away the time so pleasantly, that before I was aware of it, the sun was down, and darkness gently dropping its black veil.

I looked about me, and became alarmed at the density of the forest. The sighing of the wind, the rustling of a bush, the hooting of an owl, startled me. In the thick shades of almost every tree, I imagined a wild beast ready to spring upon me, and behind the tree's monstrous trunks, I expected some hideous animal to dash furiously at me. I carried my revolver ready, for any emergency, and loosened my heavy knife in its scabbard. But little did I imagine that, having passed the dangers of the woods, those of a more fearful and awful character awaited me.

The darkness had become intense, and it was with the greatest difficulty, I could pursue my course. At length, however, a light hove in view, and never in my life did I hail its gentle lustre with greater joy.

When I neared the spot, I found a dilapidated log house, two stories high, with a rickety old porch in front. A couple of gaunt ferocious hounds came rushing at me, and warned the inmates of my approach. I scrutinized the premises as closely as I could in the darkness, and was anything but satisfied with the result of my investigations. But when I looked about me, and saw the heavy gloom which hung upon everything, and the prospect of being devoured by wolves, I concluded to first inquire the distance to the next stopping place, and if it was too far, to remain where I was.

The door opened, and a husky voice said, "Who is there?"

"A stranger," I replied, and followed up by asking, "how far to the next stopping place?"

I could hear a low murmur of voices, and then a reply came, "ten miles or more."

I dismounted, and fastened my horse to a post, and as I ascended the old rickety stairs of the porch, they creaked a dismal dirge, and the gaunt, lean hounds nipped savagely at my heels.

The room which I entered presented such a repulsive appearance, that I started back with mingled surprise and disgust. The eyes of several rough, uncouth looking individuals were turned upon me, and I felt in their glance something more of the ferociousness of the wild beast, than the gentleness of human beings.

"Takes a seat, stranger?" said a burly, thick set man, as he handed me a chair, which groaned piteously with its infirmities. As I cast a glance upon the group before me, I seemed to hesitate,

which was instantly noticed, and the officiating man, who seemed to be the landlord, came towards me, and in a conciliatory tone and style as gentle as could be expected, said:

“Sorry we can’t accommodate you better, stranger; but make yourself at home, we’ll do the best by you we kin.”

A significant glance passed among the men, as the host concluded his hospitable invitation, which did not escape my notice.

At length, supper was served, consisting of corn bread and bacon; and for this meagre fare, abundant apologies were offered.

After listening a short time to their disgusting conversation, I informed my host I would like to retire.

“Will you leave your saddle-bags?” said he, with a bland smile, as he extended his monstrous hand to take them.

“No, sir,” I replied, while a heavy frown gathered on my brow.

“I have a very safe place to keep them,” he rejoined, while his blood-shot eyes stabbed me to the heart.

“No doubt,” said I, with a meaning nod, “but I would prefer taking them with me.”

This conclusion was received rather coolly, and as I prepared to leave the room, one of the men espied the handle of my revolver protruding from beneath my coat.

“Hello, stranger!” he exclaimed, in a quick tone, “let’s see that ‘ere pistol, will you?” So sudden had been the demand and in such seeming innocent curiosity, that I put my hand back to give it to him. But a second thought decided me, and I replied, that it was no great curiosity, and I would show it to him in the morning.

By this time, the men had gathered, around me, and seeing things looked rather peculiar, I backed myself through a door, followed by the host. When the door was closed, I could hear loud murmurings, and an oath or two uttered in vehement tones.

The landlord hurried me up a feeble pair of stairs, and a few yards from the landing, pushed open the door, and bade me enter. I glanced around the apartment, and showed, by my action, that I was dissatisfied with its appearance.

“It is the best that I can do for you, stranger,” said he; “and you needn’t be afraid of them fellows down stairs, they won’t hurt anybody.”

“I shall not be alarmed,” I replied, as he closed the door, and descended the step. I was somewhat annoyed at the appearance of things and determined to place myself in the best possible position

of defence. I examined my quarters closely, and found the door had no fastening whatever, nor was there anything convenient with which it could be secured.

Determined not to be baffled, I tore a strip of board from the wall, and with my knife, cut a piece sufficient long to make a brace from the lower cleft of the door to the floor. Then, with my pocket knife, I bored holes in the casing at the upper end, and drawing several nails from the wall, I drove them in with the handle of my large knife. Having examined the walls, and apprehending no treachery from them, I secured the window, and then turned my attention to the floor. Beneath the bed I discovered a trap door, and the discovery made my hair stand on end. I found it opened downward, and the probability of securing it strongly seemed hopeless.

Once I thought of removing the bed, and then watching, as a trapper does a hole in the ice for game. But that would not do, for should I successfully repulse the first intruder—for I had no longer a doubt of being in a Robber's Roost—it would leave a hole open which would expose me to their fire. At length a plan came to my relief. I moved the bed from over the door, and taking the clothes off, I threw the chaff bed upon the floor, and directly over the suspected trap. "But, oh, horror!" what a discovery I made. The bed was saturated with blood, and in many places, hard from the gore which had dried in it.

Having thus fortified myself, I took a seat on one end of the bed, with my saddle bags close to me, my knife in one hand, and my revolver in the other, and my ammunition convenient, in case I should need it. I blew out my light, and in the darkness awaited the denouement of the plot. How long I waited, I could not tell; but in spite of my perilous situation, my eyes grew heavy, and I was almost overcome with sleep. But an easy moving of the bed aroused all my perceptive faculties, and in an instant I was wide awake. It moved several times, quite easy, and then all became quiet. I listened a few moments, but could hear nothing. Presently, there came faint whispers from an adjoining room; my eyes followed the direction, and I saw a small stream of light pouring through an opening in the partition. I stole softly to the spot, and listened a moment. I then put my eye to the opening, and had a fair view of the operations inside.

So horrible was the sight I then beheld, that its recollection will never be erased from my memory. Hanging from the bed, and with his head nearly severed from his body, was an old gray headed man, while the purple current of life was steadily streaming from the gash. I reeled a moment with dizziness, and was about to withdraw from the scene, when the door softly opened, and a person entered. I looked again, and three of the men I had seen in the bar-room, were standing near the dead man.

"Why, Hans," said one, "I thought you had fixed him by this time."

"We'll have trouble with that customer," replied Hans, shaking his head: "he is up to some thing, he put his bed over the trap."

"The devil!" they both exclaimed, and looked at each other in surprise.

"We must manage him somehow," said Hans; "for he has money, I am certain of that."

“Hadn’t we better attend to that ‘ere gal, first?” suggested one.

“Yes, the old man is fixed, now, for the gal;” and picking up the light, they left the room.

“What girl?” thought I. “Is it possible some person as unfortunate as myself has been compelled to slop here!”

I listened eagerly, and presently a crash came, followed by a shrill scream. I sprang toward my door, but recollected that I had it well secured. I hesitated a moment, when another scream more terrific than the first, followed by the sharp report of a pistol. It was but the work of a moment to unfasten the door and dash out. As I sprang into the passage, I met two men, who fired simultaneously, but without effect. I leveled my revolver, and sent the contents of one barrel through the head of one, who tumbled heavily down stairs, dragging his companion with him. I rushed into the room, and found the girl sheltered behind the bed, keeping Hans at bay with a revolver. As I entered, Hans sprang at me with a fiendish expression, and in spite of my efforts, seized me in his Herculean clutches. My pistol now was of no use, so hurling it from me, I drew my knife, and soon put an end to the struggle. I gathered up my pistol, and hurried the girl into my own room, and soon had the door securely barricaded. I then explained to her our situation, and how I came to discover she was to be a victim. But when I told her of the old man, she faintly gasped, “It is my father!” and the next moment lay senseless on the floor. Now I was in a trying position. I expected every moment the attack of the robbers would be renewed, and in all probability they would overpower us, and then our dooms would be sealed. I involuntarily cast my eyes towards the window, as if it would afford some point of escape. But then the robbers would have a fair chance, could surround us, and murder us without a show of defence. I had all this time counted on my fair companion as an assistant, not reflecting that she was a woman, and I essayed to protect her. When this thought crossed my mind, all my combative powers were aroused, and I felt strong and competent to contend with a host.

I heard whisperings, and footsteps gently stealing up the stairs. A dim light shone beneath the door, and revealed several large holes and cracks. I kept my eyes intently fixed in that direction, while my heart palpitated so loud, that its vibrations could be distinctly heard.

A slight shuffling of the feet, and crash, crash, went several reports, while bullets whizzed sharply about my head. The girl gave a shrill scream; I groaned, and crept closer to the door, which was riddled with bullets, and through the holes I could plainly discern their actions. I still had five shots in my revolver, and determined to use them to the best advantage.

“He’s done for now,” said one, as he stood eyeing the door.

“But the gal,” replied a little, short, thick-set man, “she fights like thunder.”

“Ha! you coward, who would fear a woman?” returned the first speaker, with a sneer.

“Jim Bates, I’ll make you smell powder for that afore mornin,” said the little man, savagely.

“We must have this ‘ere door open;” and suiting the action to the word, assault was made up on it.

I leveled my pistol and fired, when, with an oath, the man fell back upon the floor. I gave them two more shots, when they retreated precipitately down stairs. I reloaded my pistol, and returned to my companion, who was trying to staunch the blood which was flowing from a wound in her neck.

“I fear, sir, my life is short, and I sincerely thank you for your kind protection,” she feebly murmured, and sank exhausted on the bed.

I was about to offer some assistance, when I again heard steps on the stairs, and earnest talking, as of persons remonstrating. Thinking the attack at the door would be renewed, I drew the bedstead against it, and threw the light bedding over the head-board, and thus formed a kind of breast-work.

“Say, Mister, don’t shoot, I want to speak a few words with yon,” said a voice at the head of the stairs.

“I’ll shoot the first man who comes near that door.” I replied, savagely.

“Oh! no, don’t; I’m your friend,” he replied, in a tone which carried treachery with it.— “Come to the door, will yon?”

“Yes; but don’t you come.”

“I won’t; are you there?”

“Yes.”

“Close?”

“Yes.”

I felt a slight moving of the bed over the trap, during which time the men outside kept up an incessant jabber.

One end of the bed was rising softly, and taking hold of it with my left hand, I gently raised it up, until I could discover a head above the opening.

“Are you at the door?”

“Yes”—and simultaneously with my answer went a leaden messenger through the head in the trap, and bang came a bullet through the door.

The sound of a heavy fall announced that my shot had taken effect.

I searched for the revolver the girl had used, and fortunately found it, and was happy to discover that but one load had been shot out of it, which I replaced; and being thus reinforced, I felt more confident of victory.

But to overcome this gang seemed almost hopeless, as their numbers might be very large, and I so far from assistance. But might not some providential circumstance transpire to deliver me from the hands of those desperadoes? I was determined to do my best, and leave the result in the hands of Him who directs the affairs of men.

A noise at the window drew my attention, and I caught the glimpse of a man's head slowly rising above the sill. Taking a deliberate aim, I gave him the contents of one barrel, and he descended much quicker than he came up.

What would be the next feature of the program— me, I could not imagine; but like a wild beast at bay, I watched every move, and had my ears open to every sound. But I felt that something decisive must be done, for day would soon make its appearance, and they would have the advantage of me.

Again they were ascending the stairs; I now determined to put an end to the contest, and if possible, overcome them, and make them come to terms, or die in the attempt.

I drew the bedstead around so as to protect the girl from their fire, and then stationed myself near the door, but beyond their reach.

Crash went an axe against the door, and the splinters flew in every direction. It was but the work of a moment to break the door in, and when it fell from its fastenings, I sallied forth with a revolver in each hand. One man dropped before me, another reeled and fled precipitately down stairs. A few shots were returned, one of which took effect in my shoulder, and as I felt the blood trickle down my side, it only increased my desperation. I rushed after them, firing whenever I was sure my shot would be effectual. When I reached the bar-room, I could see but one man, and as he fled through the door, I gave him my last shot. He fell, and begged me to spare him, as he was the only remaining one of the party. Thinking he could not escape, I returned to the house, and taking a light, searched it thoroughly, and could not find another live man about it. I then ascended the stairs, and found the girl somewhat recovered. We then set about dressing our wounds, and was so absorbed in the matter, that I did not notice a glaring light which was breaking through the door.

“The house is on fire!” exclaimed the girl, springing to her feet.

Taking her by the hand, we rushed, to the stairway, but it was one continuous sheet of fire. We then returned to the window, and finding the ladder still there by which the man had ascended, I took her in my arms and descended, thus effecting our escape from another imminent danger.

The man had set the house on fire, and either perished in the flames, or dragged himself to some place of concealment.

Finding two horses in a small stable close by, we took possession of them, and returned to a little town near the Mississippi River. The lovely girl and myself, who had met so strangely, never parted, but remained one and the same until death, nor have we ever forgotten The Robber's Roost, or Hans' Last Victim.

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