

Hunting Outlaws

For the first three years of my connection with a Western detective agency, I was known to the employees of the agency, when known at all, as “the outlaw man,” because I was assigned to the duty of hunting down outlaws and no one else.

For two years previous to my start, a man known as Bill Gibbs had been outlawed in Arkansas. He was a robber and murderer, had a price set upon his head, and had taken refuge in the Boston mountains, and from his lair defied all authority of law. He was a terror to a large district and the plan to get rid of him was discussed and arranged like an ordinary business transaction.

“What sum in cash will your agency take to hunt down and kill Bill Gibbs?” was the query.

“We will do it for — dollars.”

“All right; go ahead.”

When the preliminaries had been arranged with the committee I was called in for orders.

“You will proceed to Huntsville, Ark., and from thence locate Gibbs. Do not attempt to take the prisoner. The whole State wants him killed. Take your time and build your own plans, but do not return until you have disposed of him.”

Inside of five days I was in Huntsville, but I tramped over the country between that town and the base of the range for a week before I secured any definite information regarding Gibbs. Every farmer knew him, and almost every one paid him a tribute, but such was the fear of his vengeance that only an occasional person dared admit having seen him. He was described to me as a man of forty, very powerful and vindictive, and of a natural blood thirsty disposition. I found several negroes who had an ear slashed off by him, and half a dozen white men who had been shot at or otherwise intimidated. It was two weeks before I got any information of direct value, I then stumbled upon a negro squatter on a trail in the woods, and had him covered with my rifle before he knew of my presence. By threatening and coaxing and bribing I induced him to yield up the information I was after. He was then three miles from his cabin and on his way to Huntsville to procure supplies for Gibbs. He had a bundle of coon and fox skins, which he was to exchange for coffee, crackers, powder and lead. He had been a compulsory agent for a year, and such was his fear of the outlaw that when I brought the muzzle of my cocked rifle down to within a foot of his breast and threatened to fire he wailed out:

“You kin dun kill me, mar’s white man, but I’ze afraid of Mar’s Gibbs jist de same!”

Gibbs was to wait at the negro cabin until the owner’s return. I ordered him to go forward and say nothing to any living soul about meeting me, and when he had disappeared I started for the cabin. I had no idea that the outlaw would remain in the hut or close to it. While he probably trusted the negro as much as he trusted any human being, his outlaw life would render him suspicious of every body, and he would take no chances. I reasoned that he would quit the cabin

as soon as he had obtained a bite to eat, and that he would go into hiding at some point from which he could obtain a view. Therefore, when within a mile of the spot, I made a circuit to the right and came out a mile or more to the south of the little clearing. I found that a ravine led down from the mountain in the direction of the cabin, and after an hour's search up and down I discovered evidences that some one had traversed it but recently. The outlaw had come down from his lair by this gloomy trail, and he would doubtless return by it.

I met the negro about nine o'clock in the morning. He would have time to do his trading and return by four or five in the afternoon. Gibbs might go off on an expedition after receiving his supplies, but the chances were that he would at once return to his lair. I followed the ravine back to a point where it narrowed to a width of six or eight feet, and where the path was in semi-darkness even at high noon and there I prepared my trap. Had I met him face to face I could have shot him, but I could not lie in ambush and do it, outlaw though he was. It was too much like murder. Inside of an hour I had my rifle set as a spring gun, to be discharged as the man's legs pressed a small cord running across the path, and then I retired to a thick clump of pines about forty rods away, and went into camp to await results. If my action seems cold-blooded let the reader condone. I had in my pocket a list of five men whom Gibbs had killed in cold blood, and the names of a dozen whom he had slashed and maimed out of pure malignity.

While I was arranging the gun two land-lookers were approaching the cabin. They were strangers to the neighborhood and unarmed. Gibbs was just leaving the cabin to go into hiding, and although the men neither displayed weapons nor called upon him to halt, he fired upon them with a revolver, wounding one in the shoulder and the other in the side. He then started up the ravine, and I had not been ten minutes in hiding before I heard the "spring gun" discharged. I waited a few minutes and then carefully approached the spot, and it was to find Gibbs dead across the string. He had been instantly killed by the bullet. When we came to get the body out to have it identified we found the facial expression to be as savage as that of an enraged tiger. He had been living the life of a wild beast until he resembled one. His nails were like talons, his flesh covered with hair, and he had the odor of a caged panther.

My second adventure with an outlaw lasted much longer. A half-breed Choctaw named John Flint who was a resident of Doaksville. I. T., and who had killed several men in the year after the close of the war, was run out of the neighborhood by a vigilance committee, and he took up his lair in the mountain spur to the south, and swore that he would never be taken alive nor make friends with a human being. He was outlawed and a price set upon his head, but it was hoped he might be taken alive and hanged. Our agency was offered \$1,000 more to capture him alive than to furnish proofs of his death, but it was at the same time admitted that over a dozen men had spent weeks in vain in trying to either kill or capture him. Three of the number had been killed while pursuing the enterprise.

As is the case with every outlaw, Flint had his friends and admirers in the country about him. I reached Doaksville to learn that he was around with a Winchester and two revolvers, and that the people for twenty miles around were intimidated by him. He levied toll on the farmers with a high hand, obliging one to furnish meat, another flour, a third cartridges, and such was the terror his presence inspired that no one dared betray him, though all yearned to hear of his death or capture. He was put on his guard against me on my arrival, and he sent me word that if I did not

at once leave the country he would have my life. When I finally got ready to begin my hunt for him, he was hunting me as well. When I had secured such particulars as I desired. I bundled up what necessity demanded and cut loose from civilization. That is, I headed for the mountains, determined to pursue the man day and night until I had run him down. It was no use to plan to catch him about any of the farm houses, as he knew that I was after him, and he would, as a measure of prudence, forsake his old haunts for the time being, It seemed to me the best way to hunt for his lair and have it out with him on his own ground.

For the first three days I got neither track nor trace of Flint. It was like hunting for a needle in a haystack, as the mountain was thickly covered with verdure and split up with many ravines and gulches. Nobody ever found his hiding place, but from some remarks dropped once when he had liquor in him it was supposed to be a cave in the rocks, and to be approached only with the greatest difficulty. If I met him abroad it would be entirely by accident, so I carefully avoided crossing any bare place where he might espy me from his look-out. About mid-forenoon on the fourth day I came across a snare set for rabbits by some human hands. An investigation proved that it had been in use for some time, and had held several victims although empty at this time. This must be the work of the outlaw, since his presence on the mountain had driven all hunters away. Two hours later and a mile away I discovered a snare from which a partridge had lately been taken. I felt then that I was in the neighborhood of the outlaw's den, but I had to move slowly and exercise the greatest vigilance, I built my fires in ravines and with the least possible smoke, and whenever night came down I crept under the pines and rolled myself in a blanket. On the fifth and sixth days I did not cover over two miles of ground, and most of that distance was covered on hands and knees.

On the evening of the sixth day I had to descend the mountain to renew my provisions at a farmhouse, and what was my chagrin to learn from a negro that Flint had visited the place for the same purpose only the night before. He gave me the direction taken by outlaw. I hunted for him another week without finding further trace than a third snare he had set for game. On the thirteenth day my hunt came to an end in a singular manner. I was following up a dry ravine, so full of bushes and loose rocks that I had to creep most of the time, and I was resting under some very thick bushes when heard a movement on the bank of the ravine directly over my head, and after a minute or two I heard the squeal of a rabbit. It was Flint, then, and he was taking the game from a snare. We could not see each other, but he had the advantage in being above me. The bank was too steep to climb, and I was just turning to creep back to a spot where I could ascend, when there was a sort of crash above me, a suppressed shout of alarm, and next instant earth, rocks, and bushes were falling all about me. I sprang up and as I did so the spread-eagle form of a man struck the bushes at my right and broke through them with a great crash. I made a leap to get out of the way, but the body had scarcely come to a stop before I was at hand. It was the outlaw as I saw at a glance. The fall had stunned him. While he still clutched the rabbit in his right hand, his left hand was broken. I lost no time in securing and disarming him, and when he roused up five minutes later, he had no show. He took it out in cursing, however, and of all the blood-curdling oaths I ever heard a man use his capped the climax. I got him about noon, and before night I had him down the mountain and delivered up to legal authority. He resisted me vigorously for the first hour, declaring that he would die before he would accompany me, but after I had used a stout switch on him several times, and given him to understand that he would be dragged if he refused to walk, he was more tractable. He was turned over to the United States

authorities, arraigned on six or seven charges of murder, but convicted and hung on the first. I was not present when he was swung off, but in his speech from the scaffold he cursed me high and low and left it as his dying request that his friends would not rest until they had taken my life.

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