

A Real Romance

A Tale of Stage Robbers and Opened Mail Bags

The following is a true and romantic story of an old and worthy citizen of Missouri, and who was widely known throughout the State in former times:

Fifty years ago one Dr. Morris was Postmaster in the mountain town of Christiansburg, Southwestern Virginia, where the writer hereof was born. Webster Houston, a youth, was his deputy, and he was so intelligent and faithful that he was entrusted with almost the sole management of the office. This town was on the stage road from Richmond to North Carolina, and not far from the border. Newburn, thirteen miles south of it, was the next post-town on the route. As the mail had been frequently robbed somewhere between Richmond and Raleigh, the department at Washington sent out a detective to discover the thief. He went to Raleigh, got some bank bills, mostly of the Bank of North Carolina, marked them, put them in a letter directed to himself at Richmond, and started northward in the same stage coach with the letter. There were no envelopes or mucilage in those old days. Letters were always written on large double sheets, then folded and sealed with a wafer under the outer leaf. The wafer was about the size of a nickel. Each State had its own bank, and the paper money of each State was at a discount in every other State. After passing each postoffice on his way North, the detective stopped the coach, showed his authority, opened the mail bag and examined the letter to see if it had been opened. After leaving Newburn the detective took out the letter and found it, as he supposed, all right. As soon as the coach was fairly out of Christiansburg he again examined the letter and found it had been opened and all the money was gone. Young Houston alone opened the mail, and since leaving Newburn he alone had had access to the mail-bag and the letter. Could any case be clearer? Was it not a rule of law that circumstances do not lie? Young Houston was well known to the whole town and universally beloved. The detective returned and arrested him. The news soon spread, and the honest citizens spontaneously assembled at the postoffice. They insisted on his innocence, but the officers laughed at their credulity. But the people could not and would not believe him guilty. After a great deal of talk they finally engaged a "drover," that is, a dealer in cattle (which were driven in large numbers to Richmond and the North), to put on the clothes, saddle-bags, etc., which he usually traveled in, and to take the back track in the forlorn hope of finding out the real culprit, and save the unfortunate youth, whose doom was otherwise sealed beyond question.

Now it so happened that the postmaster at Newburn kept the only tavern in the little village. The "drover" got there about dark. After supper he went to the postmaster-landlord, and after stating that he was on his return trip and had sold his cattle in Richmond for Virginia money, and as he was going to North Carolina where it was at a discount he would like to exchange it at par for North Carolina money. The exchange was made, the marked bills being among the other bank notes, and Houston was saved. The detective had not examined the letter as closely as he should have done after leaving Newburn, and the jolting of the stage over the bad mountain roads had opened the moistened wafer before the next examination beyond Christiansburg. The shrewd

officer, and even the maxim of law that circumstances do not lie, were wrong, and the honest villagers were right.

Webster Houston, instead of going to the penitentiary, came to Missouri, settled in Troy, Lincoln County, was elected State Register of Lands, and, after leading a useful and honorable life died greatly esteemed by the people of this State. — [St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

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