

Zekiel's Head
by Mary Kyle Dallas

Old Aunt Hepsiba Potter was going down into the country to see her brother, Uncle Zekiel Potter, who kept the hotel at Katschka Station.

She did not often pay a visit, and she expected to enjoy herself. She had knitting work for a fortnight in her basket, and a great deal to talk about, for several people of her acquaintance had married, died, become parents, had property left them, joined church, or backslided, since she last saw "Zekiel's folks." Aunt Hepsy "rather calkerlated," also, "that 'twould be lively at Zekiel's now he kept hotel, and must allers hev company." And she wondered whether his wife, Samantha, found it hard work, and whether Ann Jane was "much help to her ma." "She was a kind o' flighty little gal," thought Aunt Hepsy, "but she must be rising eighteen now, and Sally goin' on for sixteen."

At the next station the door opened to admit two men, who sat down, with their backs to Aunt Hepsy, in the very next seat, and, in a moment, something tickled her ear. She turned her head suddenly and saw that the man behind her was just gathering in the flowing ripples of a long, blonde beard which the sudden breeze from the open door had blown over his shoulder.

"Beg pardon," he said, turning his head for an instant toward the old lady; but she only answered with an ungracious "Um!" and glanced at the other one. He also wore the hair upon his face in the same wild style, only his was black.

"A pair of 'em!" said Aunt Hepsy to herself, indignantly rubbing her ear. "I wonder if they aint ashamed of themselves." And she leant back further in the corner and tucked her green vail more closely about her face to insure herself against further tickling.

However, he of the blonde beard kept it well in hand, and the accident did not occur again. And Aunt Hepsy fell to thinking of Zekiel, and Samantha, and Ann Jane, and Sally, until she nodded. Indeed, she was quite asleep when a word spoken in her ear—the very ear the blonde beard had tickled—startled her awake.

"Katschka Station!"

It was one of the men behind her who had spoken. Yes, and now he spoke again:

"Katschka Station. Yes, that's my stopping-place. I'm going down to get a head."

"A head!" thought Aunt Hepsiba, growing interested. "What on airth does he mean?"

"Oh!" said the second man, with a yawn. "It's a horrid bother getting heads sometimes. What head are you after now?"

“Man’s head with a beard,” answered the first speaker.

“I knowed they was ruffians,” thought Aunt Hepsiba, smothering a shriek in her pocket-handkerchief, and shrinking closer to the window. But she listened with all her might.

The second ruffian spoke next.

“Why don’t you take your janitor?”

“I’ve used him up,” replied the first. “I can’t do anything more with him. That old fellow on the hanging committee told me the other day that I’d hashed over the same head for three exhibitions. I want a fresh one.”

“The stories we read in the papers about dead folks in barrels and boxes must be all true, and Providence has made me the instrument of discoverin’ them as does it,” said Aunt Hepsy to herself.

“Well, who are you after now?” asked the other.

“Well, there stands Judith in my room, you know,” said the ruffian of the blonde beard, “and not much time before me. I’ve treated the subject in a new way this time. She’s just going to pop the head into her meal-bag—good idea, think? I got an odd beggar out of the street, but his nose was too beastly red and he smelt of gin; couldn’t stand him; gave him a dollar and let him go; and just then Smudge came in.”

“‘Tell you what,’ said he, when I told him of my difficulty: ‘there’s a man down at Katschka with just the head you want—an old fellow named Zekiel Potter—keeps the hotel there.’”

“Good gracious! Brother Zekiel!” moaned Aunt Hepsy to herself.

“‘I boarded there last summer,’ says Smudge. ‘He’s your man. He’s an obstinate old hunks, but his wife will do anything for money. You go to her and tell her what you’ll pay for his head, and she’ll manage him. Nice place to stop awhile, too; good sunsets, and very nice mountain views.’”

“‘Well,’ said Smudge, ‘you just get him up into the north garret and there’s a good chance for Rembrandt effect.’ So here I am.”

“I’m bound for anywhere almost,” said the black-haired ruffian, “I’ll go over with you.”

“Good,” assented he of the blonde beard. “Let’s go into the smoking-car and have a cigar.”

With these words the two ruffians sauntered away, leaving Aunt Hepsy shaking and quaking with horror.

What should she do?—alarm the passengers, call on the conductor for aid? No: perhaps the passengers would think her mad; the conductor might have her locked up for safety. Her best plan would be to keep perfectly quiet until the train stopped at Katschka, to go at once with what speed she might to Uncle Zekiel's hotel—in the stage, if there were others in it, to insure her safety—seek audience with her brother at once and have the villains arrested, and, if possible, hung.

A sense of importance and power almost drove away Aunt Hepsy's terror. When at last the conductor assured her that Katschka Station was close at hand, and when the brakeman yelled that euphonious name from the platform of the car, Aunt Hepsy gathered up her parcels and her courage, stepped briskly to the platform, saw her trunk hauled to the stage-top, watched the two ruffians step in with their portmanteaux, and finding that two other strangers were going to the hotel, followed them. The journey was not long.

Uncle Zekiel came out to greet his guests. Samantha duly kissed Aunt Hepsy. Ann Jane and Sally appeared, and Aunt Hepsy fancied, nay, felt sure, that the ruffians looked particularly at Sally's head. However, they conducted themselves as any ordinary travellers might, took tea in quantities, and did justice to the ham and eggs, apple-sauce and ginger bread set before them.

Meanwhile Hepsy waited in speechless anxiety until the bearded ruffians and the two builders had been convoyed to bed, and the family drew together about the fire. Then her countenance changed, she started to her feet, rushed to the entry door and locked it, pulled the shades down lower, and seizing her brother's arm, uttered, in a low and awful whisper, these words:

“Thank Heaven, I'm the instrument of savin' you. Don't you see what a state I'm in? Don't you see how white I be? Samantha, hold on to him. Zekiel, your life is in danger. Them men with beards is come here a purpose to take it.”

“Are you crazy, sister Hepsy?” ejaculated Zekiel Potter.

“No, I *aint!*” said Hepsy. “Don't you think that. I'm a instrument, that's all. I've rid with my back to them men from York. They thought I was asleep or deaf, and they jest let out their plots and plans. They're the New York murderers that haven't been ketched yet. They make a practice of killin' folks. The yaller one told how't he'd killed a poor old janitor, and was goin' to kill a old beggar, but didn't because he heard of you. Sure as I live and breathe he said some one that put up here told him about you, and he'd come down on purpose, and that Samantha would do anything for money, and if he could get you into the north garret it would be all right, for it was a lonesome place, and he had a new way of murderin'. And he told all he'd done with the bloody heads, and if you'll get a Bible I'll swear I'm telling the truth. Don't go out of the room, Zekiel. Send the hired man for a constable and have 'em took up.”

“Oh, Zekiel,” cried Samantha, “I knew it would come to this. Somebody has found out about your keeping your money in a box up garret instead of banking it. It's Heaven's own mercy sister

Hepsy sot where she did. Ann Jane, call Peter. No, Zekiel—you stay here. My gracious me! don't you remember how old Ben Broker was killed for seventy-five dollars by that German hand of his?"

Ann Jane, trembling, flew toward the kitchen. Sally clung to her mother's arm and wept. Zekiel, with rather a long face, took down from over the mantel-piece an old rifle and examined it carefully. It was evident that he was determined to sell his life dearly. At every movement above the women started and suppressed a scream. And so an hour passed by, until at last steps were heard without, and Peter entered, followed not only by the constable but by Hiram Griff, Esq., justice of the peace, and six neighbors and friends, all armed and all highly excited.

"I'm glad to see you all alive. Where's the murderers?" asked the constable, in looking about him.

"Up stairs, abed," said Zekiel. "You see they don't know they are found out. Sister Hepsy overheard 'em in the cars."

"Plotting to kill Zekiel and rob him of all he's got," put in Samantha. "Some one had told 'em he kept it up garret."

"Ah, ah!" said Squire Griff. "Madam, your conduct has been most prudent. Constable, perhaps you and these friends had better bring the rascals down. Don't be alarmed, ladies. I'll protect you all."

The constable and his self-appointed staff filed out of the room. Some noise was heard above, and in a few minutes the tramp of feet upon the stairs, and the heroes of the night, very hastily attired, and with disheveled hair, were marched into the room, closely guarded.

"Here they be, Squire," said the constable. "They made some resistance, but we outnumbered 'em."

"I should rather think you did," responded he of the blonde tresses. "And pray, may I ask what all this means?"

"You'll learn soon enough," replied Squire Griff, solemnly—"you and your confederate. I wonder you can look on this happy family that you wair about to plunge into sorrer—on them lovin' children, and this affectionate wife, and remember that you come down here to rob 'em of their nat'ral protector, as well as to take the life of an innocent and confidin' man and landlord, and yet wear them unmoved countenances! I should think the most hardened of ruffians would jest break down and boo-hoo right out."

"Is this a joke, a trick upon travellers, or what?" asked the black-bearded ruffian.

“Do you really mean to accuse us of something?” added the light captive.

“We do!” screamed Aunt Hepsy. “Look at me! Don’t you remember me? I sat back to back with you in the keers. I heerd your talk. Thought I was deaf, didn’t you? Ah! for once you was mistook. What did you do with your janitor’s head, eh? Why didn’t you kill the old beggar? And where’s the ‘meal-bag?’ Didn’t you say you’d come down for Zekiel Potter’s head, and that Samantha would do anything for money, and you’d get him up into the north garret and take it off? Answer, wretch!”

The blonde-bearded murderer looked at the black-bearded one and smiled. The black-bearded ruffian laughed. “We might as well confess,” he said.

“Yes, we will. We did come down here to get Mr. Zekiel Potter’s head,” said the blonde man. “Heads are my specialty. Before you take me to prison I should like to show you one I have with me, if any one will bring down the square box beside my bed up stairs.”

A committee of four rushed up stairs at once and the box was brought down.

“Open it,” said the blonde murderer— “the key is tied to the handle.”

The box was opened. The spectators gathered around shuddering, but no gory head rolled out; on the contrary, they saw only a piece of mill board with something painted on it.

“A picture of a woman,” said one, lifting it carefully.

“Yes,” said the blonde ruffian, “that is one of my heads. I take them with the paints and brushes you see in the box. I am an artist, and am at work on a picture of Judith with the head of Holofernes. I heard of Mr. Zekiel Potter from an artist friend—Smudge, who boarded here last summer, and fancied that through his wife’s influence he might let me paint his portrait for the head of Holofernes. The conversation which this lady overheard she will readily perceive had no other meaning.”

“Why, I want to know?” cried Samantha. “Mr. Smudge, that painted our barn in a picture, so’s you felt like you could open the door and go in?”

“And you said he wanted to murder Mr. Potter, and spoke of the money he had hid away,” cried Squire Griff.

“I *didn’t*,” said Aunt Hepsy. “But when he talked about taking folk’s heads, how was *I* to know?”

“I don’t know; but you might be arrested for defamation of character, Miss Hepsy Potter,” said the Squire, severely.

Mrs. Hepsy burst into tears and was conveyed upstairs by her sympathizing sister-in-law and nieces; and Uncle Zekiel headed a procession to the cider barrel, and over a mug of its contents promised freely to permit his injured guest to take his head whenever he desired to do so.

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