

A Backwoodsman's Story

"I tell you it's an awful thing to go through," said Tom Mopson—"a man's last night on earth when he knows he's got to be hung in the mornin'."

"Why, were you ever in that fix?" inquired one of the listeners.

"If you'd like to hear it," answered Tom, "I'll tell you the story."

By general invitation he proceeded, first replacing his quid with a fresh one.

"It's now more'n thirty year," said Tom, "since I took a notion to go and settle in the backwoods."

"There wasn't another cabin within five mile o' mine, which made it a little lonesome whiles; but it's a good thing to be out o' reach o' bad company, and I always liked an independent life—so, on the whole, I got along quite comfortable.

"One night, as I was about puttin' out the light after sayin' my prayers afore goin' to bed, there came a quick knock at the door.

"I hurried to open it, when a man staggered in. His looks was wild and his face pale.

"'Help! Help!' he gasped; 'I'm afraid I've got my death-wound!'

"I caught him in my arms, and half carried him to my bed.

"'It's *here*,' he said, when I'd laid him down, placin' his hand on his breast.

"Quick as I could, I tore open his clothes, and close by the spot where I could see his heart beatin', was a round, red mark, with a slow stream of blood tricklin' from it. I'd seen bullet wounds afore, and know'd at once what was the matter.

"'I feel I am dyin', said the stranger, after layin' awhile with his eyes shut.

"'I hope not,' says I—'I'd go for a doctor, but there's none nigher'n ten mile.'

"'T'wouldn't be no use,' says he. 'No doctor could get at where trouble is. I'm fillin' up with blood inside, and it'll soon choke me.'

"'I know'd what he meant. He was shot in the chest, and was bleedin' inwardly.

"'There's one thing I want you to do,' says he, 'on your word of honor to a dying man.'

"'What is it?' says I.

"'Will you give your word to do it?' says he.

“I will,’ says I, ‘if it’s a thing an honest man may do.’

“I wouldn’t ask you nothing else,’ says he—‘not in my last moments. I’ve got my death from one I’ve always loved dearly. Should he be discovered and punished for his crime, it would disgrace a name which I prize more than life. No one seen me come here. When I’m dead bury me in some secret spot and say nothin’, and then nobody will ever know my fate but you and the man whose conscience will be his own punishment.’

“I looked down in the pale face turned up to mine. There was somethin’ so beseechin’ in it, that I hadn’t the heart to say ‘no.’

“I took his hand and pressed it—it was fast growin’ cold.

“I promise,’ said I.

“He lay quiet for a spell—then took away his hand, and from an inside pocket took out a thick wallet.

“Take this—it is yours,’ he said, puttin’ it in my hand—‘there’s no one else I would wish to have it.’

“I pushed it back, but he said:

“Keep it—it’s my last wish.’

“Then his eyes turned glassy. I dropped the pocketbook, and catchin’ him in my arms raised up his head. He give one or two long breaths and sunk back dead.

“I laid him down gently, folded his arms across his breast, closed his eyes, and covered his face with the sheet.

“I’d been too long out there on the border to fear bein’ alone with a dead man; and of any possible consequences to myself. I was too confused then to think.

“Afore I know’d, daylight was streamin’ in at the window.

“I must keep my word,’ said I; and I got up and went out and got my spade. Down near by my cabin was a shady nook where the wild grapevines had growed up over the trees, makin’ a sort of nat’ral arbor.

“There’s where I’ll lay him,’ says I; and I went to work and dug a grave at a spot where the vines hung down like weepin’ willers. Then I went back to the house, and windin’ the body in my best sheet, carried it in my arms and laid it in the grave.

“Earth to earth and dust to dust!’ says I, before shovelin’ in the clay.

“When I had finished, and had scraped back the dead leaves over the grave so’s to hide the spot, and was just turnin’ away, who should step out afore me but Jess. Roker.

“‘Hev you been diggin’ ginsang, neighbor?’ says he, with an inquisitive grin.

“‘No, I hain’t,’ says I, a little crusty, and walkin’ off, for I never liked Jess.’s pryin’ ways.

“‘Well, some days afterwards, I was sittin’ in my cabin reading my Bible one evenin’, when a squad of men rid up and come in without waitin’ to be axed.

“‘You’re my prisoner!’ says the one at the head clappin’ his hand on my shoulder.

“‘What for?’ says I.

“‘For murder!’ says he.

“‘And then they begun sarchin’ the primises, and presently they found the dead man’s pocketbook, which I’d put away after countin’ the money.

“‘Where did you git this?’ says the man who’d spoke afore.

“‘I won’t tell,’ says I

“‘Why not?’ says he.

“‘Because I’ve give my word to a dead man,’ says I, ‘and won’t go back on it.’

“‘I’ll show you where the dead man is,’ says Jess. Roker, comin’ forrid with his sneakin’ grin.

“‘Then I know’d Jess.’d been eavesdroppin’ at the funeral, and had give information agin me. I made a dash at him, but a dozen hands seized me and held me fast.

“‘Jess. led the way to the grapevines, and in a few minutes the body I had buried was removed from its restin’-place.

“‘What have you to say *now*?’ says the sheriff.

“‘Nothin’, says I, remembering my promise.

“‘Then a strange man present spoke to the sheriff in private. They examined the pocketbook together. Then I was handcuffed and took away thirty mile to jail.

“‘T’would be too long a story to tell all that passed till I was tried. A young lawyer took up my case. For a long time I wouldn’t tell him anything. I insisted I’d given my word to a dyin’ man, and couldn’t break it. But the lawyer was a smart chap, and outargued me. His main p’int was that

a lawyer was bound to keep his client's secrets, and anything I told *him* would be safe as with myself. Besides, he said, whatever promise I had given, the law would imply a condition that I wasn't bound to keep it at the risk of bein' hanged; and even if I agreed to be hanged sooner'n tell, 'twould be agin public policy and void. I give in at last, and told him all.

"Well, after some delay the trial come on. The witness that swore to seein' the murdered man last afore his remains was found, was his own brother, which was the same man that had held the private powwow with the sheriff the day I was took up.

"He swore that him and his brother had come out to buy land, and had been stoppin' for some days with a settler in the neighborhood. His brother and him had started out one afternoon to take a look at the country, but he had got tired, and not feelin' very well, had turned back, while his brother went on, intendin', when the night come, to stop at the nearest cabin. After that he had never seen his brother alive, but he fully identified both the pocketbook and the body. The pocketbook had three thousand dollars in it.

"My lawyer cross-examined this witness very sharp, and mixed him up a good deal. In fact he contradicted himself so much that more'n one of the jury begun to look doubtful.

"All at once the truth flashed onto me.

"That's the man that done it!' says I, springin' up and p'intin' at the witness. 'I know, now, why the dyin' man didn't want notin' said!'

"The officers forced me back into my seat, and the witness took out his pocket-handkercher and begun weepin' vi'lently. He could stand anything, he said, sobbin', sooner'n bein' charged with is brother's murder.

"This scene powerfully affected the very jurymen that just afore had begun to show signs of doubt; and they, too, took out their handkerchers and wiped their eyes and blowed their noses, and then shook their heads.

"The young lawyer made a good speech for me, but 'twan't no use. When a murdered man's money and body's both found on the prisoner, it's easy to see he don't stand much chance.

"The jury brung me in guilty, and the judge pronounced sentence.

"As I'd got to be hung, I'd a been glad to have it over; but the judge give me a couple of months to prepare for death, and said he hoped I'd improve the time repentin' of my great offence.

"Them sixty days passed mighty tedious. Every one of 'em was spun out with sufferin'. Hold your hand in the fire a minnit, and I guess you'll think it's a full hour.

"To add to it all, Parson Piget kep' teazin' of me to confess. He said he couldn't offer me no hope unless I did. I told him my hope wan't in him; that I put my trust in One that didn't want no lyin'

confessions. I felt sorry after wards for bein' so sharp with Mr. Piget, for he was a good man, and I have no doubt meant right.

“Then come my last night. I'd been long wishin' that all was over; but that night somehow, the horror of my situation came before me more distinct than ever before. I'd been listenin' durin' the day to the carpenters puttin' up the gallows, and my measure had been took for my coffin.

“When the night come I threwed myself on my bed and thought over my past life. I begged forgiveness for all the sins I had actily committed, and tried to pray that he, too, might be forgiven for whose crime I was about to suffer. This was uphill work, but I trust I done it sincerely. But, oh! the bitter agony of the thought that I was to die a shameful death, and that all them that had loved me, could never again hear my name without a blush.

“Wore out with anguish, I fell asleep at last, and dreamed of the happy days of childhood, and of my dear mother, havin' a sort of confused notion that, for some reason, I felt glad that she had died years ago.

“I slep' till they woke me in the mornin'. The sheriff, his assistants, and Mr. Piget was there.

“The sheriff read the death-warrant. Then Mr. Piget he prayed very fervent, and my heart said 'amen!'—for he didn't speak no more of my great crime, but only asked the Heavenly Father to have mercy on me.

“The sheriff took the rope from his pocket. I started back at the sight. Much as I had thought over all that was to come, I found I was not yet prepared for the horrid reality.

“‘Hold on, Mr. Sheriff,’ says my lawyer, rushin' in and holdin' up a paper. ‘I've been ridin' night and day for three days, and thank God I am in time.’

“The sheriff took the paper and read it.

“All right, Mr. Mopson,’ says he—‘you're a free man; this is a full pardon from the gov'ner!’

“I won't try to describe my feelin's. it's enough to say that the truth had come out. The murdered man's brother, who'd got the pocketbook and money after my conviction, got mortally stabbed in a row over a gamin' table, and afore his death confessed that he's shot his brother while attemptin' to rob him, but the latter had escaped after receivin' his death-wound. This, of course, explained the fact of both the pocketbook and the body bein' found on my primises.

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