

The Last Dodge

by George Erastus

Clint Thompson was a rogue of more than ordinary sagacity, and a villain of desperate character. A large reward had been placed on his head for more than a year, and yet no arrest had been made.

I was not a detective, strictly speaking, but, having some little taste in that direction, and perhaps a little talent, and finding nothing in particular to engage my attention at just that time, I resolved myself into one, determining to do my best to bring the man Thompson to justice. Something of an advantage was in my favor, as I had been personally acquainted with Clint in his college days, and knew very well in what direction his genius naturally ran, and further than this I had been victimized by his villainy to that extent which made me feel that no little satisfaction would be afforded in seeing him suffer the full penalty of the law. It was, of course, well understood that the task before me would not be an easy one, for he had slipped through the mesh of every network sprung upon him.

Thompson was one of those wily fellows who is never where you expect to find him, and always turning up just where no one is looking for him. He was not over forty years of age, pleasing in address, indeed he was absolutely winning in manner; his bright, dark eyes would twinkle with a peculiar and pleasing light whenever his conversation became animated, and his voice, over which he had perfect control, could be softened down to a tone as musical as that of a flute; being a complete mimic his disguises were numerous and always effective.

The time of which I write was before railroads had lined many parts of the West, and before telegraphic wires were tying together towns and cities alike throughout the Mississippi valley, and when the saddle and the stage coach were employed almost entirely as means of conveyance. It was winter, and I had been shifting from point to point for some two months, always on the track, and several times near trapping the game, when I brought up one Saturday at the village of F—, a river town, and losing the trail here concluded to remain over Sabbath.

Just at nightfall Sunday, sauntering out without any fixed purpose as to where I should go, I fell into a crowd that was moving towards the largest chapel in the place and was drifted almost involuntarily thitherward.

The organ was playing when I entered and seating myself about midway of the church. I had a fair view of what was going on. From the conversation of a party with whom I had taken a seat, I learned that a new minister was to preach, a stranger, and about the time this information was received, the pastor of the church entered with a gentleman dressed in black, wearing a short cloak and a Scotch cap.

After the usual opening ceremonies the chaplain introduced the Rev. Mr. Wheeler as the speaker of the evening. The man announced came forward to the desk, carelessly turned the leaves of the Bible until he came to the first chapter of Proverbs and the fourteenth verse, when he read as his text:

“Cast in thy lot among us; let us all have one purse.”

No sooner did I hear the voice and catch the glimmer of the eye of the speaker, than I recognized him as being no other than Clint Thompson, the black-leg! I was completely dumbfounded, and my first resolution was to denounce him at once and prevent the sacrilegious imposition upon the people, but upon second thought determined to devote the time in which he was speaking to planning as to the best means of capturing the rogue after the exercises were over.

The text which at first struck me as being very peculiar, was in keeping with the man, in a literal sense, but he handled it in an apt manner, and delivered a powerful discourse. He swayed the audience at will, now painting a picture of human benevolence and sorrows so vividly that but a few dry eyes were in the house. Again he wafted away his almost inimitable oratory to the realms of delight, bringing over the saddened countenances a smile of contentment and faith. I watched him closely to determine whether or not he had detected my presence, and from his manner believed he had not, for he was perfectly collected during the entire unhallowed proceedings.

When the benediction had been pronounced, I took my station at the only door for exit with the purpose of arresting my man as he attempted to leave the church. The vestibule was dimly lighted, but this I considered to my advantage, as he could not well recognize me while I could detect him by his peculiar cap and cloak.

Nearly every person had left the house when the pastor, a tall, aged man, came along bearing in his hand the Scotch cap and cloak, and I heard him remark to a parishioner that Bro. Wheeler had by some mistake or for a little pleasantry taken his overcoat and silk hat and departed.

“Heavens and earth!” I articulated half aloud, “he saw me and has outwitted me again.”

“What say you?” asked the pastor in a kind voice.

“That man is a villain,” I replied.

“A villain?”

“Yes; no other than Clint Thompson, the blackleg.”

“Come with me,” said the reverend father in a low tone; “I would see you alone.”

At this we stepped from the church and arm in arm were moving away when our attention was directed to a group of people agitated to such a degree as to indicate that something serious had happened.

“A horse has fallen upon the ice and killed the new preacher!” was the first information we received as to the trouble.

Thompson had, on his escape from the church, mounted a horse and on attempting to ride rapidly away forced the animal upon an icy decline and received fatal injuries.

I saw him at the house of the minister the next day, and but a few moments before he died. His last coherent words were “That was the last dodge.”

His valise contained several watches and a snug sum of money which he had picked up without being suspected while visiting among the “brethren.”

The Iola [KS] Register, February 27, 1875

St. Helena [CA] Star, March 4, 1875

Stanislaus County Weekly News [Modesto, CA], March 5, 1875

Lyon County Times [Silver City, NV], March 7, 1875