

My Debut in Thief-Catching

Bob Flanders was noted as a connoisseur in horseflesh. He could enter a stable in the dark, and straightway pick out the best animal there. Unfortunately he wasn't always careful as to whose stable it was, and his indifference on this point sometimes got him into scrapes—on one occasion, indeed, into the State's prison. But Bob was too great an enthusiast to succumb to trifles, as was evidenced by the fact, that shortly after his release, he and a certain likely bay filly, to which his chain of title was far from perfect, disappeared together. The result was a fresh indictment, and a warrant for Bob's apprehension which it became my duty, as sheriff of the county, to execute.

I had just been elected, and this was my first official service. I could have wished it had been simpler, for Bob was a cunning rascal, up to all sorts of dodges, to which I had nothing to oppose but the rawest inexperience. Besides, I had never seen him, and had nothing to go by but a rather vague description.

Criminal warrants ran throughout the State, so that I could take Bob wherever found, provided, always, the State line wasn't crossed.

At length a rumor came that he was skulking in a neighboring county, where he had some friends. Feeling bound to follow up the clew, I took an early start one morning, trusting the event might justify the confidence reposed in my sagacity by the independent votes of Muddycreek.

At the end of several hours' ride, a respectable-looking stranger overtook me. We passed salutations, and, as both happened to be going the same way, agreed to travel in company.

My companion I soon discovered to be a man of shrewdness and intelligence, as well as of agreeable manners. He seemed well acquainted, too, with the county and the people thereabout.

Thinking it a good chance to gain information which might be useful in prosecution of my search, I took the stranger into confidence, disclosing, without reserve, the object of my journey. He took a lively interest in the subject, willingly communicating such facts as might facilitate my purpose. Bob Flanders had relations in the neighborhood whom he sometimes visited, and with whom he might be hiding. The stranger had once seen Bob himself, of whom he gave me a better description than I had yet had. It was the duty of all good citizens, he said, to aid in bringing rogues to justice, and he would be only too glad if any hint he had thrown out should prove to be of service. "Here looks like a good place to bait ourselves and horses," said the stranger reining up before a cheery wayside tavern.

Being of the same mind, we both dismounted.

Man and beast, we did the landlord's fare the ample justice it deserved, and were about resuming our journey when a third horseman alighted at the door.

My companion started with surprise.

“Observe that man,” he whispered.

I glanced him over hurriedly. His appearance was far from prepossessing. His face was dogged and sullen, and not one to invite confidence or sympathy.

“Don’t you recognize him?” asked my friend, still lowering his voice.

“No,” I replied; “who is it?”

“Bob Flanders!”

It was my turn to start.

“I should never have known him by the description,” I answered. “He looks much older.”

“He has disguised himself in a grizzled wig, don’t you see?—that makes the difference.”

I waited to hear no more. Taking out my warrant, I approached and accosted the newcomer.

“Your name’s Flanders, I believe.”

Instead of turning pale, or sinking at my feet, the man only gave me a scowl and said:

“No it isn’t.”

I smiled incredulously.

“You may as well own up,” said I. “You see I know you, Mr. Flanders, and—” laying my hand on his shoulder and speaking impressively—“by virtue of this warrant I arrest you for horsestealing!”

“Confound your impertinence!” roared the stranger; “I tell you my name’s not Flanders, it’s—”

“If you said it was that of the presiding judge himself,” I interrupted, “it would do you no good. You can’t deceive *me*.”

He dashed my hand indignantly from his shoulder. I seized him by the collar. He resisted. I called on the landlord and my late companion for assistance. After a hard struggle the prisoner was handcuffed and tied upon his horse.

“You’ll find out who I am, and to your cost, soon enough!” he growled.

I paid no heed, but thanking the host and my friend for their timely aid, mounted my horse and rode off, leading the prisoner’s by the bridle.

It was late when I reached home; so taking the prisoner directly to the jail, I locked him up for the night.

Next day court was to begin. Early in the morning I reported Bob Flanders' capture to the District Attorney, who requested me to have him at the courthouse when the judge came, as he wished to arraign the culprit without delay.

Accordingly, at ten o'clock, the prisoner was escorted to the courthouse between myself and head deputy.

Apparently the judge hadn't arrived yet; but the lawyer and spectators seemed expecting him every moment.

Imagine my surprise when the prisoner, stepping from between me and the deputy, coolly advanced and took his seat upon the bench, exchanging salutations with several of the lawyers as he passed.

I *had* made a mess of it. Instead of Bob Flanders, I had arrested the chief-justice of the circuit!

I think his Honor was in doubt, for a time, whether to hang me for high treason or imprison me for life for contempt of court. At any rate he looked very black at first, but the lawyers laughed so, and the affair was so ridiculous, that the judge, at last, concluded to leave me to my own reflections, thinking, doubtless, they would be enough for me, and they *were*.

I retrieved my reputation finally, by nabbing the genuine Bob Flanders, who, as the reader will surmise, turned out to be no other than the amiable gentleman who had given me so much valuable information.

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