

The Robbers of Markham Swamp

The following story is founded on fact and as the author aptly said "everybody in this part of the country who is not deaf has heard of the gang at Markham Swamp." The story was first published in 1886. It will run as a continued story in The Liberal.

SYNOPSIS

The story starts about eighty years ago in a small village near the town of Little York. Mr. Roland Gray is fleeing for his life as the result of having shot Mr. Ham in a duel caused by the affection each has for Miss Astor who lives with her father. Gray is captured by the chief of the robbers of Markham Swamp. While held captive he learns of the evil doings of each member of the gang. In the previous chapter he hears how one under the assumed name of Rev. Mr. Jonas preaches every Sunday in a nearby church as well as performing a minister's duties during the week. While doing this he steals, commits murder or carries off to the swamp any one he may choose. Nancy also begins to tell Gray her life history before being taken captive.

She warns him against Silent Poll and Joe who are his deadly enemies but Gray has no fears. He learns that The Lifter is his friend. This strengthens the hope he has of securing his own and Nancy's escape from the den in the near future. He tells Nancy of his plan and a new light comes into her life as a result of the utter faith Gray has in her.

CHAPTER VIII Underground Mysteries Of The Swamp

Now that the reader may feel himself upon sure ground as to the facts of this true story, I may state that Roland likewise learnt from Nancy that the gang had a rendezvous in a piece of dense wood known as Brook's Bush, close to the mouth of the Don River. It is also a fact that when the den at Markham was broken up finally, some of the surviving desperadoes took up their permanent abode at Brook's Bush, where they kept an illicit still. Down to fifteen years after the date of my story the community was every now and again startled by tidings of robbery, outrage or murder at the Don; and the notable act of the gang was the murder of the editor of the Colonist, one Hogan, a member of the legislature. His taking off was done by a woman who struck him on the head with a stone which she carried in a stocking. The body was then thrown into the Don where it was picked up a short time afterwards.

As for the people of Markham, they lived in constant terror of the miscreants lodged in the bush so near their doors; and they established an efficient staff of special constables for the protection of life and property. Markham Township had been settled about forty-five years before, principally by a number of Dutch families which moved thither from Pennsylvania; but to the rather picturesque little village of the same name, nestled among the pines that fringed the River Rouge, came straggling immigrants or persons grown tired of the solitude or privations of backwoods life. But to distant parts of the province this thriving village came to be known rather through the thrift, comit and progress of the people. So much then for the "dry" but essential facts of this narrative.

On the following morning the chief and Murfre were away again; and in obedience to the command of the hag, our hero accompanied by The Lifter, who had instructions to shoot him if he attempted to escape, proceeded to a portion of the bush not far distant to cut firewood. Although he had "roughed it" for many a season in the woods, Roland was clumsy enough at the regular work of wood-cutting. But taking off his coat he began bravely, and The Lifter swung his axe with a will a short way distant. After they had cut what would make about a horse load, they carried the billets upon their shoulders and threw them into a hole about thirty paces distant from that by which they descended to the subterranean abode. The pieces struck with a dull sound a considerable distance down; and The Lifter informed Roland that "down there" was the woodshed.

"But I suppose you are curious to hear something about this underground place? All strangers are."

"I am certainly much interested in it. I cannot conceive how your gang could have hollowed so large a place as this seems to me. Why, it has been an enormous task requiring I should say a hundred men many months to perform."

"Our 'gang' did not make this hollow. But if you'll excuse me, I do not like the way you have of styleen or party. 'Gang' isn't a nice word."

"Who did the excavation then?"

"God," replied The Lifter, with an assumption of solemnity that really was comic.

"Pray, cease this blaphemy. I do not wish to hear any more of it. I am over-sick of this hypocrisy now."

"But God it was all the same who did this; and I shall tell you how you know the River Rouge did not always enter Silent Lake at the place

where it runs in now. It entered down there; see where that old beech tree stands."

"But this makes the matter no clearer."

"Well, you know, the ground here is very shaky, and the swamp beneath the shores of trees is softer than porridge. A long time ago, during a heavy spring freshet, the river became dammed about a quarter of a mile from the lake, and the whole body of water was turned in another direction. But instead of flowing over the land it sank into the great mass of soft bog below, and forced its way underground, till it reached the lake—there by that old beech."

"The clay into which the roots of the trees had fastened themselves was quite solid, and was held fast in the thick tangle of roots. So for many years you could hear the river flow beneath the ground with a subdued gurgling sound. Hunters avoided the wood, for some careless persons had come here and fallen through the holes into the rusheen tide. Their bodies were afterwards found floating in Silent Lake. One day my grandfather and two of his men came to see the treacherous underground river; and they moved cautiously down the stream till they came where it sank into a hole in the ground, that looked like a huge sluiceway."

"My grandfather looked at the strange sight for a time, and then at the great bridge of trees and boulders that lay across the original course of the river. They wondered why he gazed at all so earnestly; and why his eyes grew so bright. Then he slapped the capteen, who was yet a boy, upon the back, and said:

"Just the very place we want. Here we will have a quiet castle of our own, where no limb of the law can find us."

"But you surely would not think of liveing in this dismal swamp?" They all said at once.

"My intension is nothen else," he replied. "Let us go away for the present." Then they left the wood, the young men wondering what my grandfather had in his head. A few days after this, my grandfather and all his friends came with picks and

axes, and crowbars into the swamp. No one knew yet what plan he had formed. Leaden them to the bridge that I have described, he said:

"I want that bridge cut away."

"Why?" they all asked.

"Can you tell," he replied what will happen when this bridge is cut away?" Then they fell athinkeen and my father said:

"The stream will go by the old bed, and will no longer run under the ground, but will run by the old bed."

"Ah, father," the capteen shouted, "you are the wise one after all. We will have a first-rate castle under the forest in the stream's tunnel!"

"Exactly my son." It was all quite clear to our hero now. For a full quarter of a mile did this tunnel covered over with shallow turf or a treacherous stretch of moss, extend.

"Well," continued The Lifter, "they waited till the tunnel became dry and then they made a house and sleeping places underneath. The whole length of the tunnel was tested, and wherever they intended the roof should be strong they propped it up; and those places they used as bridges."

"Ah, it is plain now what the chief meant about all the unfortunate men who dropped through the swamp and were never heard of more."

"So he has been telleen about these. Yes; they came tumblen down through the holes as they crossed, and they fell so sudden that they had no time to cry; and before they could know where they had got, we come along and killed them. In the night they were dragged out and put in the lake. I remember how tired Silent Poll and myself were with the heavy draggon. Then it was so hard to get stones that were heavy enough to keep the body under; and that you could tie easily." While the toil of carrying the wood went on, The Lifter continued to describe many deeds of horror committed in the dark pit. In the afternoon Nancy joined the two, and they examined the mouth of the passageway. But the casual eye would not have looked twice at the spot, for young trees were so planted at the edge of the lake, that their boughs thoroughly screened the opening. She informed our hero that the other end was filled in, and trees were growing where once the flood rushed down with the speed of a mill-race. The greater part of the autumn was spent in cutting and carrying firewood, and the chopping continued till one day the hag announced that there was "plenty in now till next summer."

"Be on the lookout now for the treachery of the old woman and Silent Poll," Nancy said when the chopping

was ended. You can be of little more use now, and I am satisfied that you are marked for vengeance. I suppose you carry your pistols?"

(To Be Continued)

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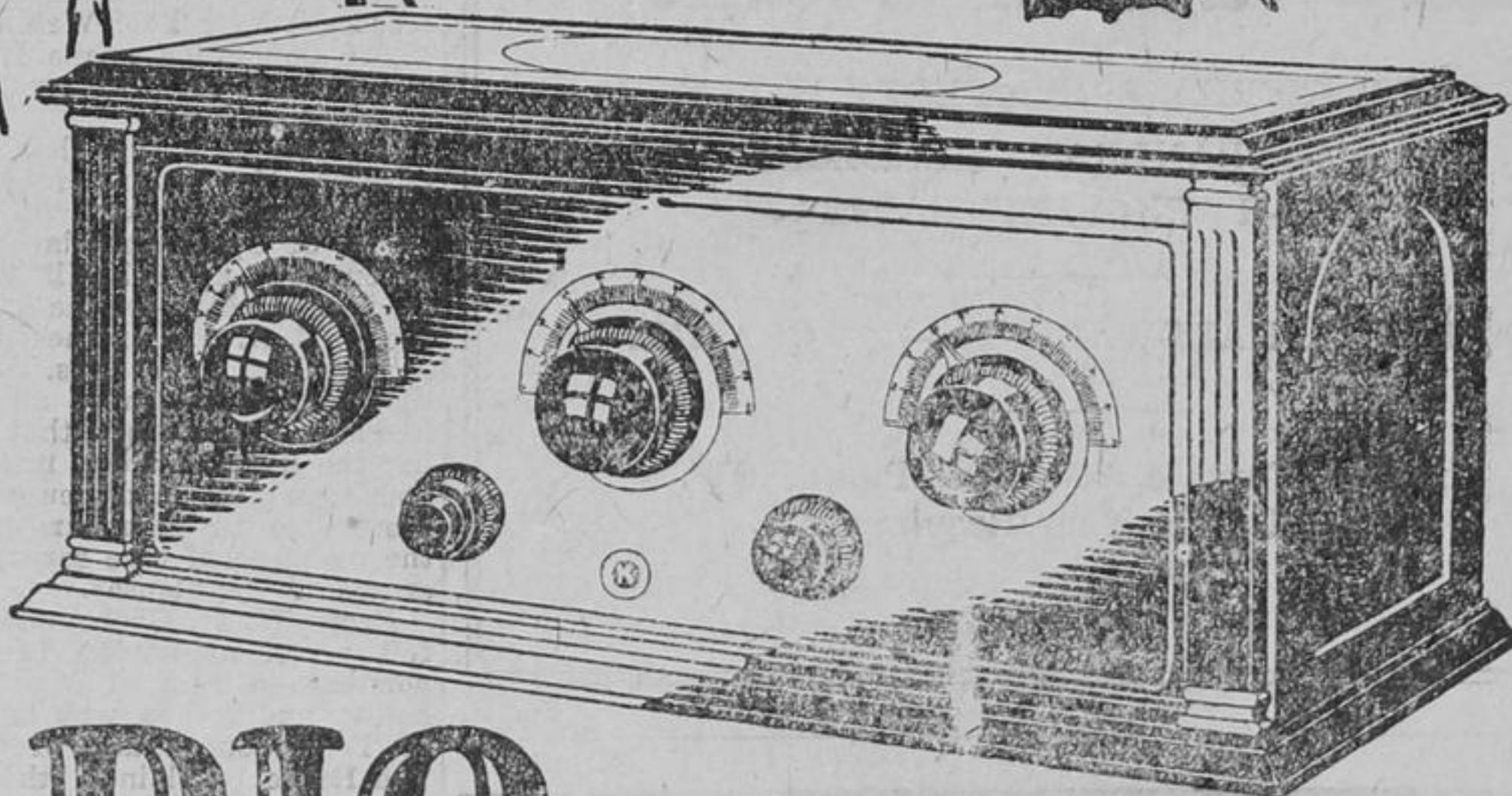
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