

The Robbers of Markham Swamp

The following story is founded on fact and as the author aptly said "everywhere 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 fear. 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.

"I desire one and all to know why this punishment is inflicted. It is for treason. My mother was about to take vengeance for insult offered her by this man," pointing to Roland, "but my son interfered in a way that you all know. Now I am glad that my mother did not succeed, for I have an object in keeping this young man here for the present. Nevertheless the fact remains that The Lifter broke the compact which binds us loyally to one another. Hoist him up, Murrey!"

This burly robber threw the rope over an oak limb, and directed the Lifter to stand "plumb under." Murrey now tightened the rope but could not raise The Lifter from the ground. "Since this punishment is for the promotion of one of the great virtues," chimed in the Rev. Mr. Jonas, "I may help you."

The exertions of the two robbers availed and in a minute the unfortunate Lifter, his face convulsed with agony was hanging by one arm four feet from the ground. Our hero had looked on, a silent spectator, while this brutal act progressed, lamenting his powerlessness to prevent it. But when the robbers coolly took their pipes and began to smoke, paying no heed to the agonized moans of the victim, a courageous resolution formed itself in Roland's brain. "To save my life," he thought, "this poor wretch incurred and suffers this punishment." He had no sooner made up his mind than he made a step from his seat towards the group.

"How long do you propose keeping him there?" The captain did not reply, but Murrey made answer. "Perhaps an hour, perhaps two. But what is it of your business? Do you wish to get strung up?"

"It is so far my business, that if I can release him, not ten seconds longer will he hang there," and saying these words he strode towards the tree. Facing in such a manner that the entire gang was in front of him he drew his pistol, and by the aid of his left arm began to make his way up the tree. He paused on the first limb, for he perceived that Murrey was about to spring upon him.

"The first man or woman that makes a move to hinder me, I will shoot," Murrey stood irresolute, then moved a step nearer to the tree, whereupon Roland promptly covered him with his weapon.

This was more than the bully had looked for; and upon noticing that no one seemed disposed to assist, he turned away and joined the group. With one blow of his knife, then, Roland severed the cord, and The Lifter fell like a log upon the turf.

Descending then he found that the miserable wretch had fainted from his suffering; indeed for a time he could discover no trace of a pulse.

"Nancy fetch me a glass of brandy immediately."

Nancy looked at the chief as if to ask his permission, but he merely said:

"I have no concern in the affairs

of this whelp."

"Then I will go," the girl said and darting below, she soon returned with a flask. Forcing open The Lifter's mouth, Roland poured in about a glass of brandy, which in a few seconds brought back the sufferer's pulse. When he had recovered his consciousness, he said in a low voice:

"Stranger, you have made me your friend. You are a man."

Meanwhile the old woman had begun to storm and gesticulate. "What has this place come to?" she screamed, "if the master is to be bullied before us all. Is there no one here who will take this impudent upstart and tie him up?"

Nobody moved. "Pack of cowardly curs," she screamed, "to allow a thing like him to frighten you so."

"Peace, Mother," interposed the Captain. "Some things are to be punished, others to be tolerated. I think you may safely allow all these matters to remain with me. For the present let nothing further be said about this business." The old woman subsided with a scowl; and Murrey's eyes gleamed like a beast who has resolved that his prey shall not escape him. The robbers threw themselves around on dried bushes strewn about for such purposes; but Roland and The Lifter took their guns and set out through the bush to hunt partridge.

"You saved my life to-day," The Lifter said, as he looked in our hero's face; "and if ever the opportunity comes I will show you that wicked as I am, I can be grateful."

"Peace. There is nothing to be said on that point. You saved my life; and we are square."

"Ah but it was different. I did it among my friends; you among your enemies."

"I should like to ask you a favor in return for what you consider my generosity, then," Roland said, looking at his companion.

"Name it; and if the thing be possible, I shall do it."

"I would not think of asking if I did not know it to be possible."

"Well, the favor is not for myself, but for another." His eyes sought those of the robber, and held them in their earnest, entreating gaze.

"And who may it be that you ask this favor for?"

"For yourself." The Lifter was exceedingly astonished; and did not interrupt by words. "Yes; my greatest wish is now that you will do me the favor of doing something for yourself."

"And what is that?"

"To make the resolution, to give me your word, now, here, that as soon as possible you will give up your life of crime, leave this odious lair, and seek your living among honest men."

"Ah, his companion replied, with a deep sigh, 'you ask me to do what is impossible.'"

"And why impossible? Is it that you are too deeply attached to the ties of this place to your mode of life to break the one and give up the other?"

"It is not that; no indeed. But what would become of me were I to leave this place? I am not so good at disguises as the rest. I would certainly be caught and given the gallows."

"You will allow that I know as much at least as you can know on that matter. I do not consider the risk great at all. Your disguise would carry you through Canadian territory, and once in the United States you would be free to go among good men and earn your bread. It is true that you never can make thorough reparation for all the crimes to which you have been an accessory, or all the misery you have helped to create. But you can atone to some extent for the past. You have many gifts, and I am sure that you would win a comfortable position in a world that guessed nothing of the early chapters of your history."

"Suppose that instead of doing this you may elect to remain here. There is one chance that you may go free through all the dangers of your blood trade; but there are ninety and nine chances that a violent death or the halter shall be your ultimate fate."

"Besides, you may be sure that the law will not much longer permit this lair to remain undiscovered. Your captain is now busy planning the abduction of some young lady, who is so far as I can judge, a person of note. This will once more incense public feeling against your band; and judge how it must fare with you should the law be triumphant."

"Upon earth there is noethen that I should prefer doethen to what you say. But do you really think it is something I ought to look to?"

"You have my opinion."

"Then I pledge myself to do as you desire, and I shall be ready to leave here when you say 'go' or 'come.'"

"It is well; it is a bargain. Leave you all the rest to me."

After they had roamed the woods for some hours—during which they secured a dozen brace of birds—The Lifter said:

"Are you aware that you are to be a prisoner to-night?"

"No."

"Well, there is a highway robbery on hand to-night, and I am to go with them."

"Do you know what the robbery is?"

"Yes, a negro lad, the servant of a very wealthy stock-raiser in a distant part of the township. The servant is to return home after moon rise with a large sum of money, from the sale of several droves. The cattle dealer is gouty, and he has no faith in anything. His servant brings the money home, because he will not trust the banks. The Captain does not care about entrusting you to the keeping of the women; so before we depart you will be fastened securely in your room. But you will have one friend at home, Nancy. I believe, like myself, would do much to serve you, although she is obliged for her own safety to pretend that she considers you both dangerous and unworthy."

When supper was ended that even-

ing Roland noticed that the robbers made unusual preparations. Before they departed, the chief addressed our hero.

"I have no reason to put any trust in you. Therefore you shall henceforth be treated like a mad dog. Go now to your room; for the door must be secured before I leave."

"My only regret to-night," replied Roland, "is that it lies not in my power to thwart you in your infamous plot. It is well that you set a watch upon me; else I should go from the wood and inform your intended victim of your designs."

"To your room, sir. Some time you may go too far."

"This is a point that I have no desire to discuss, you odious robber. My word you have heard, and you hear again, that I care not for your threats; that I defy you, and declare you to be as cowardly as you are bloody and bad." He had faced the band holding his pistol in his hand; and he moved backward toward the pit. He then noticed that Silent Poll was not among the rest; and he was unwilling to trust himself to the mercies of this creature.

"I shall not descend till the girl joins the rest," and he now stood in such a manner as to have a view of the robbers and the old woman, as



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well as of the tunnel's mouth.

The chief shouted, and Silent Poll came forth with an extremely hang-dog expression. Then Roland descended entered his room, and closed the door. In a moment it was securely fastened upon the outside with sturdy iron bars.

The robbers then set out through the wood for the road by which the unsuspecting negro must pass. The heavy clouds which had crept in upon the sky at the set of the sun now began to part, and, before the miscreants had emerged from the bush, the deep dark of their path was here and there parted by a shaft of silvery light. Through the tree tops a glimpse of the sky could occasionally be obtained; and although no leaf quivered in this sombre swamp the clouds raced across the face of the moon, sometimes shutting up the heavens in dark, again allowing the glory to stream forth and bathe the sky in pure splendour.

"We had better be mounted," the chief said "The negro is a good horseman, and he will likely have one or two others with him. We have little time to lose." The robbers then bent their steps to the stables, where the horses of the band were kept. A deaf mute cared for the horses, a man with a face so villainous looking as to be indescribable. Standing upon the top of the bleak common, with drifts of moonlight shot from the openings, with flying clouds above, every now and again falling upon it, it looked like the lair of mystery and crime.

(To Be Continued)

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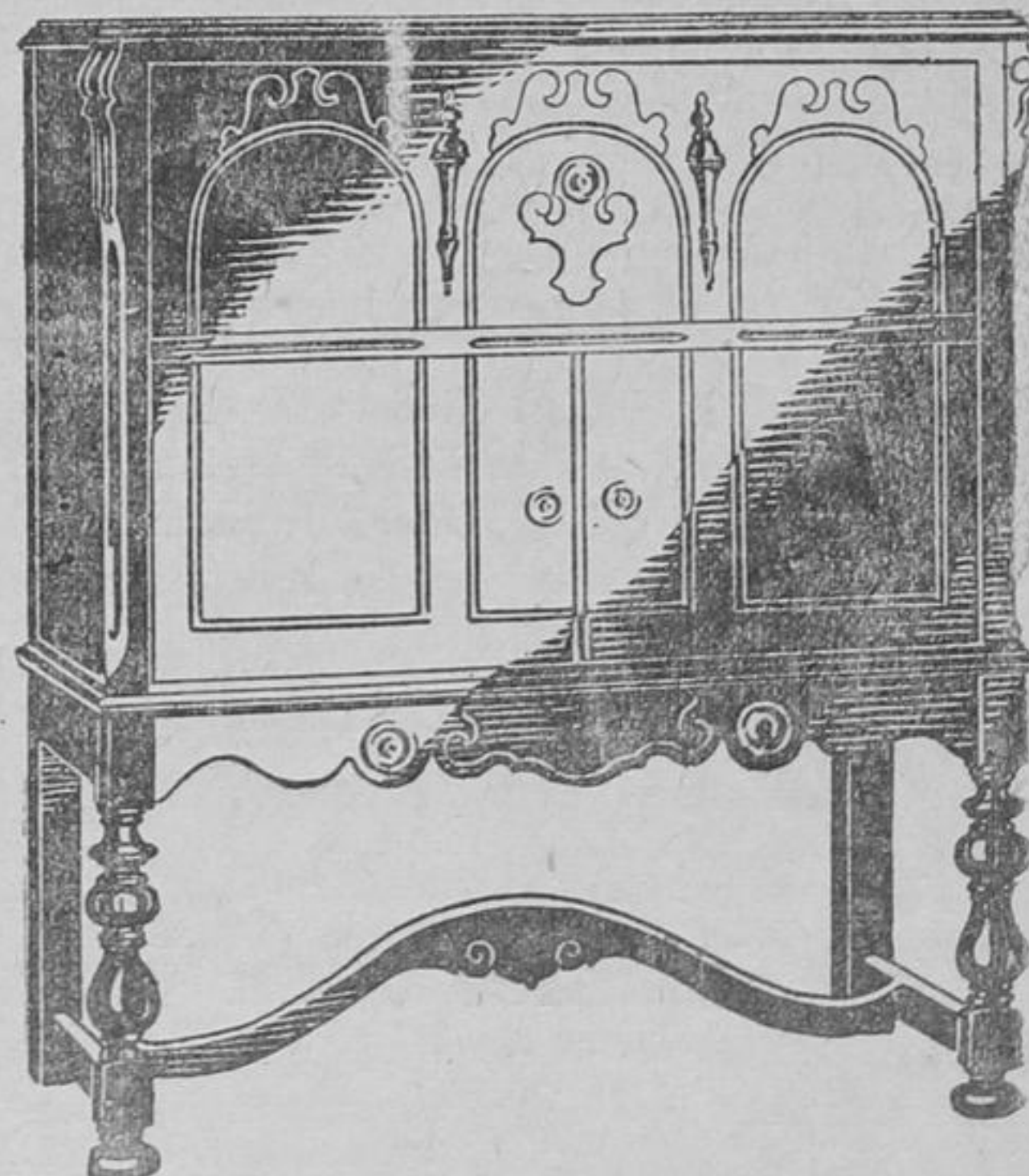
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