

A CLOSE CALL.

The firm of which I was the junior partner bought large quantities of wool. I usually made the purchases, and at times I was obliged to travel far into the Sierra Nevada...

One day we received a telegram that read: "Secure all the wool you can; it is sure to advance in price."

"That means a hard trip for me," I said, glancing at the yellow slip, "but the sooner I am off the more wool I can get."

The telegram reached us at five in the afternoon. At nine the next morning I was on the road, and had nearly four thousand dollars in gold coin.

For the first three days I gradually ascended the mountains, and by midday of the fourth had reached the summit. This did not mean a rapid descent upon the opposite slope, but a journey for several days over ridges rising from this central plateau...

I was desirous of reaching one man, who kept his sheep during the summer upon a high and rugged range some miles from my usual route. I halted for dinner at a small public house, lately built to accommodate teamsters engaged in hauling lumber from a new sawmill.

"Yes," was the reply, "but it's a hard place to find," at the same time giving me the directions as nearly as possible.

I shook my head as he ended, saying, "I could never find the place in a year's time. Is there no one here acquainted with the route, who can go with me?"

He hesitated a moment and then said, "There is Bill, the halfbreed; he knows the trail as well as old Rucker himself. I reckon you can get Bill to go."

Bill was promptly interviewed. "You pay me two dollars and I take my horse and go," was the brief but satisfactory reply.

The required sum was promised, and he at once prepared to accompany me. The moment dinner was eaten we set off. Instead of being sullen and morose like most halfbreeds, my guide was a talkative and intelligent fellow, and gave me much information about the surrounding region.

Upon reaching Rucker's camp we found the owner absent, and it took us an hour or more to find him and the sheep he was herding. He detained us longer to tell about the bears and panthers that annoyed his sheep than the time consumed in bargaining for his wool, and making the necessary arrangements for shipping it to us.

When we got back to the public house it was too late to go farther that night, unless I travelled after dark, and to this I objected on account of the gold.

The landlord said he could give me a straw bed, adding, "You see the place is new, and we have nothing better for ourselves."

I was willing to take the bed, and so turned my horse over to the halfbreed to take care of for the night.

Just before supper two more travellers rode up and desired to stop.

"Rooms are pretty scarce, as you can see, but we can feed you as well as not," said the host.

The men, like myself, were not particular as to beds, so remained for the night. They were rather talkative, and I overheard them ask the landlord my name and business. My suspicions were easily aroused, and I noticed that they seemed interested in me and the holsters I carried so closely.

"Mighty keener of yer holsters, stranger, you must have struck it rich in the diggin's?" I made some evasive reply.

During the evening Bill, the halfbreed, came into the bar-room two or three times, and the last time I noticed that he secretly beckoned me to go out doors. Waiting till he left the room, I managed to follow him without attracting attention.

On reaching the middle of the wide, dusty road he stopped, approached me closely, and said: "You see two men come on horseback?"

I nodded in reply.

He continued: "One a bad man; he rob stage and go to prison. Now he come back."

"A stage robber?" I echoed.

"Yes," was the answer; "five years ago he rob the stage, and sent to prison. Maybe he think no one know him. I remember. I tell you and tell the boss—so you look out for him."

I thanked the fellow and rewarded him in a substantial manner, for the warning was of value to me.

On returning to the bar-room, I now watched the two strangers with considerable attention. There was nothing of the ruffian about either, and I would have thought nothing more about them than any of the teamsters that stopped at the hotel for the night, had it not been for the halfbreed's caution.

As the host lighted me to my room he told me what the Indian had said to him, and warned me to be on my guard. Determined to be on the safe side, I pulled my bed against the door when I retired for the night, and securely fastened the only window.

I slept soundly till past midnight, when I was awakened by a movement of the bed. It appeared as though some one was slowly opening the door and causing the bed to move across the floor.

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I reached under the pillow, firmly grasped one of my pistols, and awaited developments. Inch by inch I could feel the bed move slowly over the floor. My senses were stimulated by the excitement of the moment, and I could hear the breathing of the would-be robber. The door was now sufficiently open to admit the thief. Thinking to capture him, I sat up in bed waiting for his approach.

It was too dark to distinguish his form, but I could tell his position from his deep breathing, as he slowly and cautiously approached the head of the bed. At that instant I raised my pistol and cried, "Stop, or I will fire."

Quick as a flash he sprang for the door, and I fired at the same instant. He gave a cry of pain, but continued his flight. I jumped from my bed, rushed to the door, and shot again at the retreating figure.

The ball evidently missed him, for it did not stop his mad race, and the next moment we heard the swift galloping of a couple of horses.

The house was in an instant uproar. Men came rushing from their rooms, each one crying aloud as to the cause of the shooting. The explanation was brief, but it took an hour or more to quell the excitement, and I am certain but few slept during the remainder of the night.

It was plain that the two strangers had made their preparations, and had their horses near by. Had they been successful in obtaining my gold, they would have disappeared in the night.

When day gave us light, spots of blood were visible upon the hall floor and on the stairs, but a search for some distance along the road revealed nothing of the robbers, so it was evident my shot had not been a serious one.

Trusting that I had seen the last of my assailants, I mounted my horse after breakfast and pursued my journey. My route lay for some miles through a picturesque scenic region. Volcanic rocks rose abruptly from the hillsides, assuming the forms of temples and towers. Here I fancied I could trace a ruined fortress, and there a moss-covered arch or massive gateway.

Absorbed in detecting these fancied resemblances to those most noted creations of man, I had ridden for a mile or more without seeing or hearing anything to break the silence of my lonely ride, when a low report rang out, my horse plunged violently, and a second later fell to the ground, carrying me with him.

"We have him," shouted a voice that I recognized as belonging to the man who had asked me about the holsters the night before.

I lay upon my side with my right leg under the animal. The two men, each with a gun in his hand, ran toward me from behind a neighboring rock. My situation was most critical. I was pinned to the earth and unable to move. Luckily my hands were free and I could reach one of the pistols in my holsters. Determined to sell my life as dearly as possible, I jerked the revolver loose, raised myself slightly, and fired at the robber nearest to me.

The ball struck him in the hand and caused him to drop his gun. With an oath he sprang back and the two sought shelter behind a rock.

I was still in imminent danger, for they could make a detour and approach me in such a manner that I should be at their mercy. Their advance and my shot took but a fraction of a moment, so that both were over ere the death struggle of my animal ended. In these he partially raised himself from my leg, and as his body was between me and the two assassins, I crawled on my hands and knees to a low rock within a few feet of me. "We will see whether you get that gold or not," I muttered to myself, as I rubbed my leg, bruised from the fall.

The rock behind which I had sought shelter extended several rods rising in places ten or twelve feet above the ground. I climbed up a few feet, and through a narrow crevice examined the situation.

I saw the glimmer of a gun barrel behind a low rock, and was thus enabled to locate at least one of my enemies. Stooping down, I ran to the further end of the ledge, hoping to get a shot at him. I was disappointed, for he was still hidden from sight. I saw that by crawling up the hill a short distance

I could gain the protection of a second rock. This I instantly did, yet every moment fearing they would make a dash for the gold, which was still upon my horse.

They evidently did not realize that I had moved from the rock near the dead animal, and were afraid to venture. Reaching the second ledge I found to my annoyance that I could not yet see the hidden robbers; but by pulling myself along behind a fallen tree I was at least within sight of them. They were crouching on the ground behind a low ledge, each peering around the end of it, intently watching the spot where they had seen me disappear. Though it seemed an age, it had really only been a couple of minutes since their first shot was fired at me, and they were evidently waiting till they could tell whether I was injured or not.

I now raised my pistol, took careful aim and fired. The ball struck the man who was holding the gun, killing him instantly. The other, with a cry of rage, seized the rifle and fired three shots at me in quick succession.

The bullets whistled near me, and one of them struck the log behind which I lay. This was so small that I dared not raise my head to get a return shot. I therefore turned around, still keeping flat on the ground, and crawled back some distance.

The tree in falling had struck an old log upon the ground and broken in two. Where the two crossed each other was a space under the broken tree through which I could see my adversary.

I rapidly cleared the earth away till I could get a shot at him. He had run up some rods nearer, and now stood partially behind a small rock intently watching the point where he had last seen me. Just as I reached the pistol beneath the log he moved quickly, but I fired, and knocked the gun from his hands.

I instantly sprang up, crying, "Another move and I will kill you."

He turned and attempted to gain the protection of the nearest ledge; as he whirled around, I fired again and he fell. I rushed upon him, but he was on his feet at once and caught the rifle. I fired once more, breaking his wounded arm and causing him to let fall the gun. "I exclaimed, "Stop, before I kill you."

Instead of complying he answered fiercely, "I will cut your heart out," and sprang toward me with a bowie knife in his right hand. By this time he was within reach and made a savage thrust at me with the knife.

I sprang aside in time to avoid the blow and once more pulled the trigger. No shot replied—the pistol was empty.

My only chance was at close quarters, and catching my revolver by the muzzle, I struck him a blow on the head, at the same time receiving a slight cut in the shoulder. He fell at my feet, and before he could move I sprang upon him, kicked the knife from his hand, and caught up the rifle he had dropped in the fight.

He cried, "Hold—I give up; don't murder me."

"Lie still then," I said, "and don't move." I now ran to my dead animal, pulled the holsters from the saddle, pushed the empty revolver into them, and took out the loaded one. Then I said, "Get up, now."

He was a pitiable looking object, and weak from the loss of blood. He had been twice wounded, once in the hand and again in the arm, while my blow on his head cut an ugly gash, from which the blood trickled down over his face. I took my handkerchief and made a bandage for his arm, and by twisting it tightly with a stick, managed to stop the blood.

I now bade the fellow go ahead, and taking my holsters in one hand and the loaded pistol in the other, I obliged him to walk in front of me back to the inn, where we had stopped the night before.

Of the excitement there caused by our appearance I need not speak. The nearest justice of the peace was sent for, a coroner's jury impaneled, and the statement of myself and the wounded robber taken down. I was exonerated from all blame, the body of the man I killed was buried, and in the course of a few weeks his wounded companion was sentenced to a long term in prison.—S. S. Boynton, in Overland Monthly.

Certainly a Cold Meal.

Tramp—I say, ma'am, can't ye gimme a bite of something cold to eat?"

Mrs. Pancake—Why, yes, poor fellow! go and take one of those icicles off the fence.—Judge.

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