

# The Invisible Harp

## A Musical Ghost Story From a Western Homestead

By J. A. HOLDEN

NOTWITHSTANDING the objections of my parents, who maintained that in three years I could save the price of an improved farm from my modest salary, I had resolved to go homesteading. Vivid word pictures of the dreary life of the solitary homesteader, doomed for six months each year to a hermit-like existence far from civilization, failed to shake my purpose. Though I knew that much of what they said was true, still the idea of choosing my own piece of earth, a piece unsullied by the touch of man, fresh, as it were, from the hand of the Creator, and shaping it to my own ideas, exercised some subtle fascination over me, as it doubtless has over the minds of thousands.

This, then, accounted for my presence at Roscow, a new Northern Alberta town in the centre of an undeveloped but promising district where land was rapidly being taken up. At the hotel the evening of my arrival I had engaged in casual conversation an elderly man, evidently a resident, and had asked if he knew of any good government land thereabouts.

"Settlers have been coming in so fast lately," he replied, "that you'll have to go out some six or seven miles for a first-class quarter-section. There's a hundred-acre fraction up the river, though—a little rough, but pretty. Mile and a half above town."

"Why, that's just what I want!" I exclaimed, delightedly. "I would like nothing better than to be located on the river, especially if the view is good, and I wouldn't care a snap if it was not a full quarter-section or even if the land was broken or poor. A mile and a half from town! Why, that's not much outside the town limits, and if this place becomes a distributing point, as people expect, it will be part of the city some day."

"Right you are, and you never saw a prettier view in your life," he replied; "fine meadowland, sloping gradually to the river. Good spring on it; lots of timber for building; the soil ain't so bad, either."

"Then why has it not been taken long ago?" I asked.

"Ah! that's quite a story, my boy. It has been taken—twice; but now it's open again. It has a history—that homestead has. The first man that tried to prove up on it hanged himself; the second we had to send to Ponoka, crazy as a loon. There's something wrong with the place, lad. No Indian will cross it if he can help it, and never would. Nobody wants that place, and if you take my advice you'll leave it alone." His voice sank to a whisper. "It's haunted!"

"Oh, go on!" I remonstrated, laughingly; "I may be fresh from the city, all right, but surely you don't expect me to swallow any such yarn as that."

"Well, I was just telling you." He drew a newspaper from his pocket and commenced to read.

I considered for a moment; somehow he did not look like a frivolous person given to stringing tenderfeet. "Come, now, don't get offended," I apologized; "let's have a drink and tell me all about it."

We had a drink—two or three, in fact. With a bottle in my pocket to keep the old fellow's talking apparatus lubricated, we went up to my room, and there, seated on the little bed, he related the following strange story:

"It was about three years ago, when Roscow was a mere fur-trading centre, and railroad communication was unthought of, that Banjo Sam drifted into the community. He was a little dried-up nigger, and that's the name we gave him, on account of him everlastingly twanging that banjo of his. All the dancing folk—and that was about everybody—were a little tired of Old Michael, who was a good trapper but a mighty poor fiddler, and Sam, who really could play, was a welcome relief. Being a good-natured nigger, though he had some mighty peculiar ways, he got to be right popular, and he 'lowed he was goin' to settle down here, so he takes up a homestead—that fraction I'm telling you about."

THE speaker paused and gazed at the ceiling reminiscently. Presently he continued:

"Well, sir, no sooner does he go to live on that place than his queeriness begins to stick out more pronounced-like. When he comes to town he's always talking about inventing some new musical instrument. No one ever saw his invention until after his death, but folks passing his place at night

could hear some queer sort of music, like a cross between a banjo and a harp.

"Well, finally, it having been some three weeks since Sam had been to town and I was happening to be out that way, I thought I'd drop in to see him. No friendly smoke curled above his chimney as I drew nigh. The door swung back and forth on cranky hinges. A rabbit bounded out the door as I approached. There was poor Sam, hanging by the neck from the middle rafter. He had been dead for some time, so the Mounted Police said when they cut the body down. His banjo and a crazy-looking instrument were lying on the floor—both can still be seen at the barracks."

"Well, that part is not so very strange. Other homesteaders have shuffled off the same way. But here's the queer part. Whenever a bad storm raged at night Sam's banjo can still be heard; not the tinkle of any human-made instrument, mind you, but a wild, thunderous, discordant twanging, accompanied by a horrible, weird sound, something like a fiddler makes when he rubs his finger up and down the E string."

"Two or three that had a kind of hankerin' after that place decided it would be just as well to file on better land further out when they got hold of its history."

After a generous pull at the bottle the narrator resumed his tale:

"Well, Heusler wasn't that kind of a chap at all. Just laughed when he heard the story. Said that sort of rubbish wouldn't sound so bad if it happened in an old-settled country, like England or even Eastern Canada, where there are decayed houses that look ghostly enough, but in a new country it was ridiculous."

"He was a fine, strappin' fellow—young Heusler was—and a good worker, too. Well, sir, he filed on that homestead and went out there every night, but we noticed that, for all his big talk, he didn't sleep in Sam's cabin, but built himself another close by. For over a month he came in regularly every morning to work on the new Methodist Church, him being a carpenter by trade. Asked how he liked associatin' with Sam's ghost, he called us a lot of old grannys. 'I did hear some sort of hummin' one windy night,' he says. 'I suppose that's what you imagined to be Sam's music, but you bet it didn't scare me none. 'Twas only the wind whistling through the tree-tops.'

"WELL, Heusler seemed to get along all right, and we that had heard the ghostly music are beginning to think we'd only imagined it, after all, when one night there comes a terrible storm. The next morning Heusler didn't show up, although it was a bright, clear morning. Along in the afternoon he came down the road, unsteadily, like a drunken man, only he was a man that never let liquor get the best of him. His face was very pale and haggard and most of his talk was rambling-like, all about harps on high and angels singing and such. As he passed the poolroom, where a squeaky phonograph was disturbing the peace, he got quite agitated. Altogether, it was quite plain that Sam's ghostly banjo had got the best of poor Heusler, so we sent him down to the asylum; though we heard later that he got all right again in a few weeks. He's never showed up around here, however."

"So there you are, my boy. If you don't believe it, ask the Mayor of the town, or the newspaper editor, or anybody that's lived here a year. Nobody has monkeyed with that place since. It'd sure make a nice piece of property—so close to town. It's too close to go unclaimed forever. Someone will lay the ghost and realize a tidy little fortune when the town grows up. If you've got the nerve, why go to it, young man."

Next morning I walked out to the mysterious homestead, easily recognizing it by the description given. It was truly a beautiful place. About half of it lay on the top of a flat bench; the other half sloped gradually in soft, undulating rolls of green meadow to the river, on which a motor-boat was pattering cheerfully. Clumps of bushes here and there gave it a park-like appearance. The few dead trees that slightly marred the landscape could easily be removed, I decided. Along the top of the bench lay some forty acres of open meadow almost ready for the plow. But back of that, back of the narrow strip that extended along the brow of the bench—

ah! there was the discordant note. There lay a dense forest of dead trees, fire-killed many years before. Leafless and barkless they stood or leaned on each other in all manner of grotesque positions, white, withered, crumbling skeletons of the long ago. No underbrush relieved their ghastly nakedness; only crawly, slimy vegetation flourished in that swampy desolation. It seemed like a bit of this fast earth blasted by the breath of God. I stood gazing at this picture of desolation and death for some time; then turned toward the river. How different the view in that direction. As beautiful as the other was abhorrent!

CLOSE to a spring that bubbled forth a streamlet of sparkling water, stood the log cabin of Banjo Sam. I entered and gazed at the rafter from which the unfortunate negro's dead body had been cut down. Ugh! it was a creepy-looking place. I was glad to get outside. Some little distance off, near two tall trees, stood the well-built cabin of Heusler, the carpenter. This I decided to pre-empt—for I had already resolved, ghost or no ghost, to become the possessor of this beautiful estate. The dead forest could be burned easily, I thought, and probably the swampy land could be drained and made tillable.

Returning to town, I made some discreet inquiries. The Mayor and two business men assured me that the strange story I had heard was true in every particular. All three of them had heard on stormy nights a distinct sound, as of a banjo or harp, when half a mile or more from the place. They could offer no explanation of the phenomena, but all were quite certain they would not stay there alone at night under any circumstances. The newspaper editor showed me his file, and I read the account of Heusler's experience. No paper had been published when Banjo Sam committed suicide.

Having learned all I could, I entered the local land agent's office and filed on the fraction—a ten-dollar bet with the government that I could fulfill the requirements necessary for a patent, the chief one being residence on the place six months each year for three years.

I hired a drayman to haul some furniture and provisions to my homestead, bought a saddle-horse, and prepared to live on the place six months, or until late in the fall.

The first night I did not sleep very well. From the abyssal depths of the dead forest came a dismal creaking and moaning that my vivid imagination was only too ready to interpret as the struggles of departed spirits. At irregular intervals a coyote gave vent to his mournful cry—a long, drawn-out wail like that of a woman in agony. However, the night passed uneventfully and I felt encouraged. The next night the coyote and the dead trees disturbed me hardly at all, and after the first week I did not feel even the least tremor of fear.

In town I was an object of curiosity, the local paper having printed a lurid history of the so-called haunted homestead, together with an account of myself and my "bravery" in sleeping there alone. When questioned on the subject, I answered in a light, disdainful way, as if such exploits were as nothing to a daredevil like myself. The young ladies were not averse to getting acquainted with me, and in my own estimation I grew more and more important as time wore on.

But, as ever, pride goeth before a fall. I was awakened one night by a humming noise; something low and vibrant, like the wind blowing against a stretched rubber band on your bicycle, but louder than a thousand rubber bands. Sitting bolt upright in bed, I clasped my pistol and listened for a repetition of the sound. I did not hear it again, and finally sank into fitful slumber; but when next questioned regarding the ghost my manner was not quite so cocksure.

FOUR months passed. With joyous anticipation I looked forward to an early return to my father's luxurious Edmonton home—to theatre parties, to the society of innumerable friends, to all the comforts of life that only the lonely homesteader can properly appreciate.

Then came the terrible night of the storm. As I retired, after an unwise indulgence in one of Poe's morbid tales, that somehow gave me a creepy feeling in spite of myself, the wind swept around the cabin in fitful gusts, and the skeleton forest moaned more dismally than usual, I thought.

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