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AN HUMBLE HERO

BY THOMAS
P. MONTFORT
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"Land of graces," another exclaimed, "if that had 'a' been me in place of Jim Thorn, I'd 'a' been skinned plumb out of my skin, an' I'd 'a' 'a' tore the earth up an' knocked the bark off all the trees round that a-gittin' out of them woods."

If the truth had been known, the only reason Jim Thorn didn't knock the bark off the trees getting out of those woods was because the bark was too tight to be knocked off. But that was something no one save Thorn knew, and he had no idea of mentioning it.

Then Jim Thorn had to go out to Sim Banks' woods and show where the body had been found and explain in detail just how it had lain. He had to show the exact position of the head, the feet and the hands and describe in full the precise attitude of the whole body.

After that he had to show just how he had made the discovery and how he had acted and what he had done and everything about it. All this he did by going through a rehearsal of his movements.

He placed a stick across the path where Melvin had fallen to represent the corpse. Then he went a little way off and, turning, walked back slowly, with his head down, just as he had been walking that morning. At a certain point he raised his head. His eyes fell on the stick, and he stopped short in his tracks. For a minute or so he stood there, looking calmly on the stick, then quietly walked by it on his way to the village.

All these things the curious crowd drank in with open mouthed wonder, leaning eagerly forward and craning their necks in order to catch the smallest and most unimportant detail of the movements.

Then, having absorbed the last particle of information Jim Thorn possessed, the crowd fell to speculating regarding such things as Thorn could not explain. Sam Morgan started it by saying:

"I wonder whar the feller that done the killin was when he fired the shot?"

Then everybody looked around in search of what might be considered a likely place, and two or three were on the point of hazarding a reply, but it was Jason Roberts who spoke.

"Thar's only one place," he said, "whar the feller that done the shootin could 'a' likely stood, accordin to my way of figgerin it out."

"Whar's that?" somebody asked. "Behind that big tree whar Pap Sampson killed the six squirrels is."

"Seven squirrels, Jason Roberts," Pap quickly corrected; "seven squirrels if thar was one."

It was a curious fact, but in the excitement of the moment no one noticed it, that was the first and the only time Pap Sampson took any part in the talk that day. He, the oracle of the village, the first always to give an opinion, lapsed into a silence from which nothing save the old force of habit of opposing Jason could arouse him. It was strange, passing strange.

"Behind that tree whar Pap Sampson killed the squirrels," Jason repeated uncompromisingly, "is the only place whar the feller could 'a' been."

Then he took a stick, to represent a gun, and went behind the tree and demonstrated just how the murderer had hid there and how when Melvin came along down the path the gun had been thrust out and the fatal shot fired.

Everybody saw and readily admitted the wisdom of Jason's conclusions, and two or three hastened to assure the others that they had formed that same



Watte listened with interest. conclusion the moment they arrived on the ground. These last belonged to that class of ready livers who abound in every community, that large family of "I told you so's."

While the interested crowd was still talking a stranger appeared among them. It was Mr. Waite. No one there knew him, for none of them had ever seen him, and the moment he appeared all conversation ceased, and everybody stood with his eyes fixed inquiringly on him. Looking coolly around, he asked:

"What's the occasion of all this excitement?"

There was a momentary silence, during which every one turned his eyes on Jim Thorn. That worthy, understanding what was expected of him, stepped forward and said in turn:

"Why, stranger, ain't you hearn?"

"Hear'd what?" Waite asked. "Why, Lord, 'bout the murder." The stranger shook his head and looked surprised.

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"Murder!" he exclaimed. "Why, have you been having a murder here?"

"My land, I'd sassin. I'd leaved everybody knowed 'bout it before this. An you ain't hearn a word of it?"

"How should I when I just arrived in the neighborhood?"

"Oh, you jest now come, did you?"

"Just this mornin. I passed through here a few days ago and engaged board with Mr. Jenkins. Then I went on down the country and am just now getting back. But about this murder. Who was it that was killed?"

"It was a feller named Melvin," Thorn answered.

"One of your citizens, I presume?"

"No, he was a stranger. He'd only been here a few weeks. Stopped over to Jonathan Turner's as claimed he was a prospect for mineral."

"Oh, that's the man, eh?"

"Yes. Did you know him?"

"No, I didn't know Mr. Melvin, but that day I passed through here I stopped at Mr. Turner's, and I remember hearing him speak of him. So that's the man that was killed?"

"That's the man."

"Well, do you know anything of the particulars of the murder?"

Then Thorn embraced the opportunity for which he had been waiting and proceeded to repeat the story he had been telling all day. He even went through the pantomime of his discovery of the body, not forgetting to show how calmly he had viewed it and how fearlessly he had passed by it on his way to the store.

To all this Waite listened with seemingly the greatest of interest, and Jason Roberts was encouraged by that to demonstrate for his benefit just how the murderer must have fired the fatal shot from the shelter of the big tree.

If any one had been observing the stranger's face closely, he must have noticed that it became quite pale as Jason proceeded with his explanation, but Jason was claiming everybody's attention at that moment, so no one saw.

"What do you think?" Jason asked when he had finished. "Don't you believe I'm right, stranger?"

Waite gave a little start.

"Eh?" he exclaimed. "Oh, yes, very likely you are right; yes, very likely."

"Bound to be," Jason said. "Ain't no other way it could 'a' been done."

"I guess that's so," Waite admitted. "But what was the object of the murder, do you think?"

Pap Sampson, who had followed the crowd about all day in silence, listening to all that was said, leaned forward and waited expectantly for the answer to this question.

"I don't know," Jason said. "I ain't no notion."

"Do you suppose it was robbery?"

"No. His money an his watch an everything was found in his pockets untouched."

"Humph! He couldn't have had an enemy in this section. He was a stranger here, I believe you said?"

"Yes."

"It seems to be rather a strange case. You have no idea who the murderer could be?"

Sam Morgan looked down at the ground and trembled, while Pap Sampson leaned forward again and waited breathlessly for the reply.

"I ain't no idea in the world," Jason said; "not a ghost of an idea."

There was a short pause. Then Jim

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Thorn spoke, saying significantly: "I wonder whar Sim Banks is." Sam Morgan started and turned pale. Pap Sampson walked away, leaning heavily on his cane, murmuring: "It's come at last! Oh, my Lord, it's come! I was afraid of it all the time. Fore Sim! Fore Sim!"

CHAPTER XIX. LOUISA.

Louisa Banks felt that her cup of misery was full, but there was more, much more, to be poured in yet.

When Sim did not appear at breakfast next morning, she went up to his room to see if he was there. It was then she discovered the little pile of money and the papers he had left on the table. With a premonition of what was to come she pushed the money aside and eagerly took up the first paper and unfolded it. It was the poor little note Sim had written to her. She read it through, then sank into a chair and, pillow her head on the table, burst into tears.

It would have been a hard heart that would not have been affected by the simple pathos of Sim's words, and Louisa was not hard hearted. She was touched, deeply touched, by the manly, generous manner in which he absolved her from all blame and bravely took it all on his own shoulders. That note presented him to her in a new and a far more favorable light than she had ever seen him. It showed how truly he could love, how good and generous his heart was and how grand and noble his nature.

She realized now that in losing him she had lost one of the purest and truest souls that ever lived, and she regretted, deeply and sincerely, that she could not love him.

"But I tried," she told herself. "God knows I tried, to love him and wanted to love him, but I couldn't. Yet I was not worthy of such a man of of such love as he gave me."

Presently she took up the deeds and read them over. The tears started fresh to her eyes.

"More of his goodness," she thought. "No other man would have done such a thing. Oh, Sim! Poor, heartbroken Sim! How I pity you!"

Later in the day she went out and stood by the gate, looking down toward the wood, the way she had seen Sim go the previous evening. Her heart was heavy, and her thoughts were all of him. Before he went she had always thought she could never be happy except with him, and now she felt that she could never be happy again under any circumstances.

Presently Mary Mann came down the street on her way home from the store, where she had gone to view Melvin's remains and to learn all the news about the tragedy. Louisa had not been from home that day, and no one had visited her, so she was entirely ignorant of all that had transpired to set the community in a tumult of excitement. Mary Mann knew this, and glad of an opportunity to tell the news and at the same time inflict a cruel wound on one she hated, she stopped when she reached Mrs. Banks and accented her sweetly, very sweetly, with:

"Howdy, Loueey? I'm right glad to see you. You rale well?"

"I'm very well, Mrs. Mann," Louisa replied coldly without looking up.

"I'm glad to hear it," Mrs. Mann said in her sweetest tones, ignoring Louisa's coldness. "I'm rale glad to hear it. Loueey, but I must say you ain't a lookin' very well."

"I'm very well, I thank you."

"Yes? And Sim—I suppose he's well?"

"I presume so."

"Is he at home today?"

"No."

"There is he, Loueey?"

Mrs. Banks, remembering all she had heard of the relationship existing between this woman and Sim, flashed angry in an instant.

"I don't know," she replied scornfully, "that it's particularly any of your business where he is."

Mrs. Mann did not allow her feelings to be ruffled by this curt answer. Her time to deal a deadly thrust was coming, and then her revenge would be so full that she could well afford to wait. Quietly she said:

"Oh, you feel that way 'bout it, do you?"

"I do."

"Waal, I s'pose it's nat'ral, Loueey, that you should. I reckon it's even nat'ral that you should feel that it ain't nobody's business."

"Whether it's natural or not, Mrs. Mann, that is just how I feel."

"Jest so. But, for all that, Loueey, there's many as will feel different 'bout it. There's a heap of people, an especially the officers, who will think it's a right smart of their business."

Louisa raised her head and gave Mrs. Mann a look of scorn.

"I know of no reason why they should," she replied, "nor do I presume you know of any."

"Lal! Is that so? Then you've not heard 'bout all that's been goin' on today?"

"I have heard nothing."

Now had the time of Mrs. Mann's revenge arrived—revenge for the loss of Sim and all she had suffered in consequence of it. Bluntly, almost brutally, she said:

"Then you didn't know that your lover, James Melvin, had been found dead with a bullet hole through his heart. It was a cruel blow, cruelly dealt, and Louisa staggered under it. Her eyes opened wide, her face became deathly white, and for a moment her heart stopped beating. She reeled and would have fallen had she not clung to the fence for support. Her lips moved as if in speech, but no sound escaped them.

Her suffering was intense. It was pitiful. Even a heart of stone must have been touched by it. But Mary Mann was impervious to pity. In her heart there was no compassion. She

had dealt a hard blow, but she had a harder yet to deal, and she did not hesitate. Relentlessly she said:

"Yes, your sweetheart has been killed, an it was your husband murdered him, an you, Loueey Banks, are responsible for it all."

With one wild, heartrending shriek Louisa fell back in a dead faint.

Two hours later a group of men were standing in front of Hicks' store discussing the murder. Some there were who talked, and some there were who only listened. Pap Sampson, Jason Roberts and Sam Morgan were of the latter. Jim Thorn, still occupying the position of supreme importance in the village, was saying:

"No, sir, men, I've got nothin on earth ag'in Sim Banks, an thar's not a man in the world I'd befriend quicker than I would him, but in spite of all that I can't shunt my eyes to the plain fact that ever'thing goes to show that Sim Banks fired the shot that killed Melvin."

"I hate moughtily to think Sim could do sich a thing," Hicks remarked, "but I'm afraid I'll have to own that ever'thing seems to point pow'ful strong ag'in him."

"Of co'se it does," Thorn agreed. "Lord, Jake, as much as I hate to say it, I got to own that it's a plumb plain case. In the first place, Sim had a reason for killin Melvin, an thar wa'n't nary another soul in this whole section that did have a reason. You know that's so, don't you?"

"I'm afraid it is, Jim," Hicks admitted.

"Then jistly evenin, jest before Melvin must 'a' been killed," Thorn went on, "Sim was seen goin down into them woods with his gun on his shoulder. He knowed Melvin was at the store here, so doot, an would be a-sassin through them woods on his way to Turner's. What more likely than that he went down thar an hid behind that tree till Melvin come along, then upped an drapped him?"

"It 'pears to look like it mought 'a' been that a-way," Hicks replied. "It does shore."

"Then on top of all that," Thorn added, "the fact that Sim Banks is gone or else is in hidin somewhar. Now, why would he run off or hide if he wa'n't guilty of somethin? And what could he be guilty of if it ain't this murder?"

Hicks sighed and shook his head. "I reckon you must be right, Jim," he said, "though I hate wuss'n pizen to have to say so. Yes, it looks like Sim must 'a' done it. It does shore."

"Of co'se he done it," another said emphatically. "Lord, that's jest as plain to my mind as the nose on your face. I don't see how anybody'd man-

age to go 'bout doubtin with all that evidence ag'in Sim. It's too plumb plain for doubtin."

"'Tis so," agreed another. "ben he added, "My land, what you reckon they'll do with Sim for it?"

"Lord, they'll hang him, of co'se," some one replied. "They're shore to."

"I dunno," Hicks said. "If Sim done it, he had a right smart cause for it. I guess mebbe the court would find some of them extenuatin circumstances to sorter help him out. Anyhow, Sim ain't ketched yet, an ketchin comes afore hangin."

"By Josh, Jake, that are a fact! Sim ain't ketched yet, an I bet he ain't nary a to be ketched nuther. No, sircel. He's got clear plumb away 'fore this."

"Don't you go an fool yourse' 'bout that," Thorn said. "It takes a moughty eight smarter feller than Sim Banks to keep out of the way of the law, an if he ain't ketched in less'n a week I'll be pow'ful fooled."

"Waal, if they do ketch him," Hicks remarked, "I hope they won't do nothin in much to him."

"Oh, they won't do nothin more than hang him," Thorn observed, "an my notion is they're most shore to do that. Them kind of circumstances you spoke of while ago ain't a-goin to cut much figger in Sim's case. Anyhow they'll shore send him up to prison for life at the very best."

"Gosh, Jim Thorn," somebody said, "you 'pear to be dead set ag'in Sim. What makes you so pizen hard on him?"

"I ain't. I'm jest talkin facts."

"They're mis'able blame hard facts, then."

"I can't help that. I didn't make 'em hard."

"Waal, I hope they won't never hang old Sim now. Gosh a-mighty, fellers, that'd jest be awful, wouldn't it?"

"It would so," Hicks agreed, "an I wouldn't have it done for a purty."

"Say," called Sam Morgan, "who you all reckon that stranger was that come 'long over thar in the woods today?"

"Lord," Thorn exclaimed, "if I hadn't gone an clear forgot all 'bout him! But I ain't no notion who he was now."

To be Continued.

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