

The Daily Astorian

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ASTORIA, OREGON, SUNDAY JANUARY 18, 1885.

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DYING FOR HIS MASTER.

An old man and a young one met in an uptown museum the other day and found mutual interest in discussing a den of snakes. "If you would care to hear it," said the old man, who was old only in years, his sturdy form indicating that not more than two-thirds of his life was behind him. "If you would care to hear it I will tell you a story about a snake, not a home-bred rattlesnake, too common, I suppose, to find a place here."

"Tell it," said the young man, "snake stories are always interesting. And so it came about that fifteen minutes later the two sat at a table in the quiet corner of a quiet restaurant with a bottle of Tokay, for which the place is famous, between them. The old man lifted the wine glass between his thumb and finger, watching the exquisite light playing in the red depths of the glass, and thus began:

"My name is Thomas Wilman, and I live in Philadelphia, where my son Harry is a prominent business man. Thirty-one years ago yesterday I married in Great Barrington, Mass., as pretty a girl as that village (famous for its pretty girls) ever sheltered. She had been well brought up, but had no fortune. I had \$1,500, which I had made by running a sawmill. We were young and had the world before us, and we concluded to go west.

Going west in those days didn't mean, as it seems to now, going beyond the Mississippi. Going into 'Yonk state' was going west then. I had a cousin in Cattaraugus, a little village on the Erie railway, thirty miles east of Dunkirk, and we concluded to go there. It was late in August when we reached Cattaraugus. My cousin gave us a hearty welcome, and I set about looking for a spot to build. Cattaraugus is a curious sort of a place. The village is surrounded by hills, and the wonder to me is that it doesn't slide down into the wash-bowl-like valley on the side of which it is built. A little creek runs through the village, and a mile to the west finds itself in a deep narrow valley, with almost perpendicular sides, 100 feet high. This valley is called Skinner Hollow, and is one of the most picturesque spots on the Erie road. I went down into the hollow prospecting. The sides, where they are not steep, were covered with a heavy growth of first-class pine, and for miles around the hills were thick with the same timber. I saw there was money in a sawmill right down in that hollow, and I built one on the stream, which I could see was a good-sized creek most of the year. It is one of the branches of Cattaraugus creek, which empties into Lake Erie thirty miles west of Buffalo.

"I built my mill there and close to it a little house, so close in fact, that my wife and I were within ten feet of my wife's door, there and we began housekeeping. That was well into the winter, and I began logging at once. I hired a gang of men to help me, raised money by contracting my lumber ahead, and started in. We cut logs on the hill close to the mill, rigged up slides, and ran them down to the log-way. I tell you it was music to me when the saw ripped into the first log and a clean-cut slab dropped off from the teeth. We had a little jollification. That was the first log ever cut in Skinner hollow, and people drove ten miles to see it. Business was good. There was lots of snow, which made it easy work getting logs to the mill and drawing the lumber out to the village, besides giving me all the water I wanted. In fact water was running over the tail of my flume every hour from the time I turned it into the race until the middle of July. Then a dry spell came on, and I had to shut down for two or three hours every day to let my race fill up.

"But I didn't mind that. I had a tip-top season and made money. I had logs enough at my door to keep me busy for a year, and I knew where there were plenty more when they ran out. And, besides, I had two to look after instead of one. You wouldn't think if you'd see Harry, with all his refined ways and education, that the first music he ever heard was a saw tearing through a pine knot. But it's so. He was a pioneer's son and knocked around a saw-mill until he was in his teens. Well, when business was slow I worked around the house, fixing up things for Katie, so as to make her more comfortable. She couldn't have been more contented. She used to think that sawmill was just about the pleasantest place in the country. Hour after hour she'd stay out there with me, and we'd keep up the conversation while the log was running back and stop when it went to the saw. Dear me! Dears me! Why, I can see her as plainly as if I stood there with her to-day. She used to jump on the log and ride up pretty close to the saw, and then just as I would get scared and jump to drag her away, off she'd go. Nobody was ever happier than we were, and we have never been so happy since, though we have been pretty happy, and are yet."

The yellow sunlight flickered into the room where the two sat, and the old man looked like blood as the dancing rays shone through it. The old man was lost in happy reverie, and the young man ventured to remind that there was a snake story promised. "I'm just coming to that. I lost myself thinking of those old days,

There were snakes then, and we had killed them.

"Rattles used to come out on the ledges of rock and lie in the hot sun. One or two had come around the mill, and I had shot one in our door yard. But we thought nothing of that. People living in the woods or in wild places get used to things that would fill them with horror in a settled country. We expected to find snakes, and as long as they kept their distance or gave us a chance to shoot them when they got too near we didn't mind them.

"As I told you, I fixed things up around the house during the slack time. One of the bits of furniture I knocked together was a bedstead. It was more like a broad lounge than a bedstead, for it had neither a head nor a footboard. One end was raised a little like a couch, and that was the head. We had some bearskins and blankets to sleep on and more blankets to cover us. It was a big improvement on the floor, where we had been sleeping, and after a day's hard work handling logs I used to think it about as comfortable a spot as I know of."

"Well, it got along into the fall and we began to have chilly nights. The equinoctial gave us a big rain, and for a fortnight I had all the water I could use. Then it got dry again. One afternoon, after several days of threatening weather, it began to rain. Hour after hour the rain came down till about 9 o'clock in the evening, when it suddenly cleared off and turned cold. It was late in October, and we kept a fire burning on the hearth, nights, more for the baby's sake than for our own. Our bed was parallel with the fire-place, and stood out near the middle of the room. We had an English shepherd dog named Leo, which we took with us from Massachusetts. He was a black-and-white beauty, and my wife, who had raised him, thought about as much of him as she did of the baby or me—at least, I used to tell her so. The dog was fond of me, and I made a great pet of him. He was a noble fellow, and all he wanted was for me to whistle just once and he'd come. We let him sleep in the room at the foot of the bed. Sometimes in the morning I'd wake up before my wife, and I'd whistle just once to the dog. Up he'd come over the foot of the bed, and wake Katie by licking her face.

"That night we were just going to bed when it turned cold. I threw an extra pine knot on the fire and Leo went to the door and looked out. I shall never forget that look, for it was the last time I ever stood there and saw stars above the Skinner Hollow. I closed the door and went to bed, and soon fell asleep. I slept on the side of the bed nearest the hearth, my wife slept on the farther side, and the baby lay between us. For some reason I didn't sleep long, and when I waked up I couldn't go to sleep again.

Finally, I got out of bed and put another knot on the fire. Leo was stretched out on the floor with his nose between his paws. He eyed me sleepily as I walked around the room, and gave me a loving look as I stooped down and patted his head. I went back to bed and fell into an uneasy sleep. All at once I awakened with a start. It must have been past midnight. I seemed to be fully awake the moment I opened my eyes, and such a sight as they rested on God grant they may never see again. I was lying on my left side, facing my wife, who was lying on her right side. The baby lay on its back between us. As I opened my eyes a dark object glided down from off the baby, and just then the knot burst into flames and flooded the room with light. A rattlesnake, fully five feet long, had slipped down from between my wife and myself, where it had been stretched out presumably to get warm, and started, no doubt, by some movement I had made in waking, had thrown itself into a coil on the bed at two or three hours every day to let my race fill up.

"Somebody asks if life is worth living. I think it is as a general thing, but if life had many such moments as that I should say emphatically that death were preferable. For a moment I lost my head. I did not move, fortunately, but I seemed to drift entirely out of all consciousness. For a moment only this lasted. Then my senses came back to me, and I felt that from the reaction I would probably tremble from head to foot. I ever managed to keep my body rigid I don't know, but by an awful effort I did. I know that to stir was death, perhaps for myself, perhaps for my boy, perhaps—for my God! the thought was agony—for my wife. Outside I could hear the eaves dripping from the rain, and I could detect the sound of water running to waste over the flume. To-morrow, I thought, I'll have plenty of water again. To-morrow! Would I ever see to-morrow again? And if I did would I not meet it alone? In spite of all I could do a shudder ran through my body.

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