

BY-AND-BY

"By-and-by," the maiden said—"by-and-by He will claim me for his bride."

How McCracken Went Up.

The robbing of the Deadwood coach had become the rule instead of the exception, until the only way to get the treasure box through was by strategy.

Pete, the driver, in talking with us, had said that this was the most dangerous point in the route; and sure enough it proved to be.

There were two passengers within—myself and a shrewd New Englander, named Perkins, on his way to the Black Hills, with a view to speculation.

Strange as it may seem, my companion, Perkins, carried no weapon of any kind.

I supported a revolver, and I had my hand on it at the time the startling summons to surrender reached us.

There were five of the highwaymen together, and they instantly closed in about us. The leader thrust his hand into the coach with his pistol pointed, and ordered us to get out.

The robbers were disappointed. There was a treasure box in the stage, and there was the glory of Perkins to come in!

Perkins claimed that his time piece was a full half century older, and I don't doubt it; but my New England neighbor, with all his simplicity, possessed a vein of shrewdness which was sure to stand him well.

He was worth considerable money, and he had prepared for this contingency by putting it in such a shape that no one else could get hold of it.

Perkins and I would have been glad to earn such a comfortable little sum, but we didn't see our way quite clear to perfect our arrangements just then.

When it was evident that McCracken and his pals had made a "water haul," there were considerable threats and mutterings; and Pete, the driver, who remained on his seat all the time, made some jesting remark to McCracken.

This horrible proceeding appalled us for a time, and we scarcely spoke until the gang were gone. Then we picked up poor Pete's body, placed it within the coach, took the seat ourselves, and drove by turns until we reached Deadwood.

Everything indicated that Perkins had striven to invite the attack from the first. The open secret of the treasure box, the withdrawal of the guard, the timing of the arrival at the gulch—all these showed that Michael McCracken was specially invited to come forward and take the booty.

"If you have put something else in there," said I, tapping the box with my foot, "instead of money, I will see to it that you get it."

I've been thinking over the thing, and I've got it fixed. Do you want to jinx me?"

"Yes, provided I know the nature of the undertaking. In a matter of this kind, I don't propose to go it blind."

"The moon was up so that we could see each other's faces with the greatest distinctness."

"Not even to McCracken?"

"What are you talking about? You ought to be ashamed of yourself to speak with such disrespectful remarks."

"Very likely," I answered, hoping to draw the scheme from him by a course of cross-examination, but in that respect I was disappointed.

I couldn't gain the least inkling of the nature of his plan, and I began to suspect I had committed a piece of stupidity in consenting to go in his company.

A man who ventured into the Black Hills country without carrying fire arms of any description could not be looked upon as a very formidable sort of personage.

During the succeeding few days it became generally known that the stage which was to leave for the East on Thursday would carry a large amount of gold dust, consigned to Perrin & Brothers, St. Louis.

In accordance with the custom, this was placed in an iron box, which was fastened to the bottom of the stage in such a secure fashion that it would be the work of hours to loosen it.

On the day before starting, Perkins gave me to understand that if I wanted to see the fun I was to register and start on an Eastern trip in that stage.

I had noticed during the previous few days that Perkins seemed to be in the confidence of the Stage Company. He held frequent conferences with them, and was evidently a party to some arrangement that he had hinted about to us.

The fact that two other men applied for and were refused passes in the same vehicle indicated that some unusual scheme was under way, but Perkins took good care that its precise nature should remain unknown to all, including myself.

When finally the stage rolled out of Deadwood, it carried the treasure box and nine persons. One was the driver, Perkins and myself were two others, while six men, armed to the teeth, formed the guard of the treasure box.

"No wonder Perkins says there is no danger," I thought, as these terrible fellows clambered in and took their seats. "I should say they were able to take care of a regiment of McCrackens. I suspect there will be considerable shooting going on, and it won't be the easiest thing in the world to dodge the bullets."

This was a very natural conclusion, but I failed to see any particular brilliancy in the plan of Perkins.

A company of armed men was sent out in charge of a box of gold dust. There was reason to apprehend an attack from road agents, in which event the road agents would receive a hot reception.

That was all there was in that; and where was the glory of Perkins to come in!

anything smart about it. We will simply disappoint them, that's all; and poor Pete learned the danger of that."

"All you've got to do is to wait—" "Halt!"

It was the same sharp, peremptory command to which the stage drivers and passengers to and from the Black Hills have for a long time been accustomed to.

The team stopped on the instant, and, as before, the dark figures, with the rifles leveled, summoned us to come forth and surrender.

A minute later, the driver and we two stood at the roadside.

"McCracken," said Perkins, in a whispering voice, "I want to ask a favor."

"What is that?" demanded the outlaw with an oath.

"I guaranteed to put this thing through all right and you've caught us. I can't bear to see all that gold gobbled right up before my eyes. Let me and my friends retire where we can't look upon the touching scene. 'T would break my heart."

This ridiculous request provoked laugh all round, and I couldn't avoid a smile myself.

McCracken said that we might go up the bank for all he cared, for he certainly incurred no risk in allowing us liberty.

So we scrambled up the steep bank, and plunged in between the sparse undergrowth beyond.

"Be quick, boys," said Perkins, in a panting undertone. "It's life or death."

The next moment I understood the meaning of this excited warning.

We were not fifty yards away from the road, which it will be borne in mind, was a deep gully and hidden from sight, when there came a thundering explosion which made the earth tremble beneath our feet.

Turning our frightened gaze backward we saw a sheet of flame and fire shooting upward from the road, as if from the throat of a volcano.

The treasure box, instead of gold, contained nitro-glycerine!

McCracken and his gang, and the stage and horses—where are they!

It was a clever scheme of Perkins, but had I known the dangerous contents under the seat, I am sure that there would have been one less passenger in the coach when it left Deadwood.

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