

How a Grave Saved a Grave Situation

By A. B. WILLIAMS

Aged and time-worn buildings not to exceed a score. Weather-beaten houses, a "hotel" and a store; A schoolhouse where the young-sters still acquire their A B C's; All nearly overshadowed by a virgin growth of trees— You'd little think, with casual glance at Ophir Bend today, Visioning that relic in its somnolent decay. That it was once a teeming camp of a thousand souls or so. And yielded up in millions a stream of yellow glow.

Now, if you were observant, your glance would surely dwell Upon another antique who'd escaped Time's muffled knell. Sitting neath the hotel porch in an old-time barroom chair, Rests a venerable relic with a vacant, steady stare. His face is heavily enshrouded in a snow-white bushy beard. Like the patriarchs of old whom the Israelites revered. A bulldog pipe rests in his mouth from which no smoke ascends— The composure of a statue with the silence which attends.

You'd be told that he was "goofy" if you should inquiry make. But peaceable and harmless and endured for old times' sake. Say, you might approach him— he's a pleasant sort of chap. And has a fund of information stored beneath his frowzy cap. Come on, I'll introduce you—it may be worth your while. You'll find him really sociable, without a hint of guile. "How-de, Cap. here's a stranger would like a chat with you. Might regale him with some history and old-timers that you knew."

"How-de, son. How are ye? Ah, it does me good to see A stranger take an interest in an old worn-out like me. Give you some ancient history? Well, I got some cached away In this bald-headed dome of mine. Go in back to early day. Say, son, but before I begin a spreadin' of my patter. Might I ask for some tobacco? You know it helps the chatter. Thank'ee, sir. And now (puff, puff) just where will I begin? Lo! me see. What sort of tale might you like to hear me spin?"

"Somethin' of the past, huh? Well, now, what shall it be? Say, son, an event of interest has just occurred to me. Do you see that little clearin' over thar on yonder hill? That has a history that I guess just about would fill the bill. We'll backward have to go for some seventy year or so. When this camp was just beginnin' on its steady feet to go. This has been a camp secret that I've long kept stored away But all the rest are dead and gone so here goes the tale today.

"Well, as I said before, when this camp was very young. It wasn't a far stretch from crime to a man-a-bein' hung. We pioneers had to formulate our own order and our law. And justice there was speedy and it made the halter draw. Now, there was an unwritten law that in a game of poker. You had to play it on the square and not try any joker. Which law was well observed and men played it on the level. They took their losses dignified, seldom tried to raise the devil.

"But there was one exception—a man named Daniel Sneed— He overworked some talented stuff that was very rare indeed. We might have death more lenient for this stepplin' over the bounds. But suspicion rested on him upon some other grounds. So when he was detected a-cheatin' with the cards. And for time-honored customs a-showin' no regards. But one thing was there to do—an example must be made.

As a warnin' to all others that sin's wages must be paid. "Sneed duly was arraigned before a jury and a court. And we listened patiently to the witness' report. Sneed was allowed his chance to put forth his defense. And then upon a verdict we were ready to commence. The defendant was found guilty, then we argued for awhile. For hangin' was the most of us, but some favored an exile. But after much discussion we unanimous agreed. That the rope should be his end, and so it was decreed.

"The proceedin's were quite regular and entirely undisputed. And from a tawny pine tree limb Sneed was duly executed. And when we allowed he's dead as ever he would be. We planted him in proper form neath the execution tree. We then went 'bout our business as the nothin' had occurred. And 'twas soon a closed affair that we gave no further word. A report got into print a few weeks later on. In the San Francisco papers, but we heard no more anon.

"Time flitted by and no one the incident revived. When one went to the camp on the stage a maid arrived. It just happened that I was the first one she approached. And with few preliminaries her cause of errand broached. She'd heard a man was hung here by the name of Daniel Sneed— That that was her father's name— was he victim of the deed? She wanted information if about the case I knew.

"And what would I suggest as the best for her to do. "Holy mackerel!" thinks I. There is sure a pretty mess. And my wife went galleyvantin'. I will readily confess. Then I said to her, 'Now, miss, I'd advise you just to wait. And I'll do what's in my power to get this matter straight. I'll round up the men in camp and make investigation. And report to you tomorrow all my gathered information.' 'All right, and thank you, sir,' she modestly replied. Then returned to the hotel and quickly stepped inside.

"You bet I wasn't slow in spreadin' the news around. And in less time than an hour each man in camp was found. Like when you molest an ant, as probably you've done. It won't be two seconds till the whole nest's on the run. I explained the situation to the assembled group. And I never saw the spirit of that camp take such a droop. Just what we were to do was a puzzle shore to us. And we'd just about begun to think we'd got tangled in a mess.

"Until by mutual consent we deferred to Abner Veeder. As we always looked on him as a general sort of leader. 'Well, boys,' says he, 'first thing there's got to be another grave. That's the only one solution the day is comin' to move. The one there of her father—we won't disturb that plot. We'll make a dummy of another a short distance from the spot. Then we'll report her father was murdered by a scamp. And that it was this murderer who'd been strung up at this camp.

"And we'll further say to her that the news that she had heard. Had got confused in transit and the facts were badly blurred. But let me tell you if this plan is the one agreed upon. We'll have to all stand by it until each of us is gone. We must make a solemn vow the secret to maintain. And to any who divulges it dire penalty the pain."

And then and there we all agreed to Abner Veeder's plan. And solemn bound the compact from the lips of every man.

"And now," says Abner, 'let's get busy upon the other grave. And each man, while we're at it, must silently behave.' And each with picks and shovels, we went out into the night. And 'bout five yards from Sneed's, by a lantern's guarded light. We made a dummy grave and made it to appear. As tho it was a little old by puttin' on a smear. Of old leaves and pine needles, and I'm a-tellin' you. We did a rather artful job before we all withdrew.

"Next mornin' the young lady quite early was astir. And by previous agreement Abner was escort to her. She was taken to her pappy's grave and then a scene occurred. That put a shame upon me an' my eyes got sort of blurred. There, said Abner, 'is the grave wherein your daddy lies. He met a most untimely death, there's no one here denies. He was the victim of a bad man too ready with his gun. Who we drew up to a limb—to that end was justice done.

"You can see right over there another little mound. Where the man who 'done' your daddy was planted in the ground."

And in your misfortune, miss, deep sympathy we feel. Your daddy was a good man from the heart out to the peel. She knelt down by her pappy's grave and burst into sobs. Spent a few moments in a grief which gave us all some throbs. She gathered a few flowers from among the poplars. And placin' them upon the grave, sobbin'ly bid it farewell.

"As soon as she returned those who could the courage muster. Spoke kindly words of comfort, lyin' like a broncho buster. She departed the next day with a gentle, friendly greetin'. And straightway we resolved ourselves into another meetin'. 'Remember, boys,' says Abner, 'we must keep up the pretence. That girl must never know how her father journeyed hence. We'll keep the matter to ourselves until death releases all. And have a final reckonin' when we get the judgment call.'"

"As I said at the beginnin', that was seventy year ago. And the pledge has not been broken, at least so far's I know. I have stayed here all these years and kind of kept a guard. To see the spot was not molested and by no vandals marred. Three or four times since then the lady has returned. And went over to the spot, but the truth she never learned. The last time she came here she was gettin' old and gray— 'Twas high on thirty year ago— an' I guess she's passed away.

"To my knowledge I'm the only one of that group's that left today.

And I know it's very certain I can't much prolong my stay. And I can see no harm, now they're marshalled over you. A-tellin' of this incident that I have just dwelt upon. Now, I suppose there has been played in the great recordin' book. A mark against us all, but I fancy we've you look. You'll find it sort of softened by a note of what we did. To keep her fillin' faith preserved and her pappy's transgressin' hid.

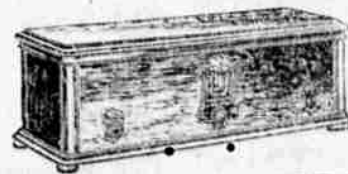
"Son, might I have another pipe from your tin of smoke tobacco? A pretty goodish grade you use— it surely is by cruddy. And (puff, puff) I'm really glad you called on me today. He pleased to have you call again, tho it's probable you may find me among the missin', for the end is drawin' near. And a man ain't got much leeway after passin' ninety year. Say, do you know my mind seems to sort of be at rest. Now that this long-kept secret at last is off my chest."

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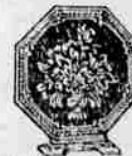
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