

**THE LUCKLESS
TRAPPER**

OR

THE HAUNTED HUNTER

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER,

CHAPTER I.

A CORPSE IN THE STREAM.

There is a peculiar hiss when a rifle-ball passes in close proximity to one's head, a sound that no doubt chords with some musical note, yet upon most ears the noise is apt to fall rather unpleasantly. So the trapper, though thoroughly seasoned to danger and the thousand chances and mischances of the bush and plain, dodged his head suddenly, with a movement more energetic than graceful, at the same time uttering, though not above a whisper, an ejaculation of surprise and discontent. In the midst of his reconnoitering it seemed to him that he had been reconnoitered, and that to some purpose. There was danger in the atmosphere.

Carefully he peered around him. He caught no sight of the hand that had fired the shot; he could see nothing and could hear nothing that gave sign of hostile intentions. Through the bushes that were spread before him like a curtain he anxiously gazed, with one hand pushing them aside.

"Where the dickins c'u'd that 'a' come from," he muttered. "Some one hez hed a line shot on this hyer old hoss an' cum mighty nigh a-sendin' him under. Ef I could only git a site at the varmint ther'd be a case o' suddint death, sure—ah!"

The soliloquy ceased, for on the small level spot on the opposite side of the stream, standing out bold and full in the clear moonlight, there appeared two men. The distance was not great, their actions evinced no knowledge that any other human being was near them, and as they broke into conversation every word they spoke was

wafted distinctly to the ears of the listener who lay concealed in the close hanging bushes.

One of these two men was tall and shapely in build. His form gave token of strength and activity, while the moonbeams that fell upon his face lit up a countenance that was more than ordinarily handsome. One hand rested upon the muzzle-end of a heavy rifle, the other was extended in a shunning gesture, the palm outward as if waving back the man who faced him.

The other was, if any thing, shorter in stature, but made up for any lack of height in breadth of build. His shoulders were almost Herculean in shape, his hands were large, his neck thick and powerful—altogether his appearance promised strength rather than activity. His face could scarcely be distinguished, but even in the shadow one could fancifully map out a countenance indicative of boldness and resolution.

Thus the two stood in the moonlight, scarcely three yards apart and facing each other.

"You're quick on the trigger," said the short man; "and if it had been daylight I might have gone under. I'm not one to bear malice, though it's a rough old joke to be shot at. If I was some men you'd not be standing now."

"I know it. Yet daylight or dark, if I had not discovered my mistake in time, *I* should have been standing and you down. As I pulled the trigger I raised the barrel for I saw it was the wrong man. The right one is near me somewhere though, and had you been he, the scores would have all been wiped out by this time."

"I thought so. I kinder saw you hitch up your iron, so I knew you had made a mistake when you threw the tube to your shoulder. It was sudden though—and not the first time a white man has drawn sights on me. I've been watching you since you came around here; I've been waiting for you to show your hand, and I want to know to-night what your game is. If you are on the square, with no infernal curious kinks in yer nature, well an' good. But if ye want to know more than ye see, if ye must take a hand in what don't concern you nor your'n, then take a fool's advice—an' *move on*."

"See here, Martin, if that's your name, don't borrow trouble about me. You're not my man. I don't want to know more than one thing, and that is, where my man is. Then I don't want to do more than one thing. I want to lay sights on him. After that it's a matter between him and Killemquick, and the chances in Killemquick's favor."

"That's all right; but s'posin' 'your man' is one of my men—I want to know something about that; fur down here along Back Load Trail there's a few on us as hang together mighty close. Ef you get them double-sights pulled on some as I knows on, mebbe there'll be the like on you with a quicker finger on the trigger."

"Very well, old man, you know all I can tell you. My name is Winkle, and I'm laying out for my man. I've heard of Back Load Trail and I've heard of Dick Martin that rules it. I'm an honest man and a square man, and I tell you there will be some fancy shooting done along here before long. If it's to be war between you and me let us know it now and I'll play my hand careful. Remember, I'm not going to interfere with you except as I have to; but if so be that there's danger in the air for one of your friends, more's the pity."

"Yer mighty indefinite, stranger. Ef you've ever heard of Back Load Trail, as ye say ye have, ye must know that outsiders that sometimes try to ring in here, occasionally git the'r last sickness. We run things down here to suit ourselves purty much, an' ef you've got a grudge ag'in' any one it's all right, so he's an outsider, too. But, ef it's ag'in' one of us Free Trappers, the bullet is already run that puts yer light out. I don't know of any strangers on this trail but yerself an' one more, an' he only come down from the mountains last night. Ef it's him, all right. Ef it ain't—look sharp. Ef it's me, but ye say it ain't, I'm here now!"

The voice of Dick Martin rolled out round and full as he uttered the words, "I'm here now"; there was even something heroic in his tone, just as there was a world of bitter warning in the first part of his address. But he seemed to make little impression on his *vis-a-vis*, who looked at him steadily, and answered him coolly:

"I neither know nor care if the man I'm seeking is a Free Trapper, or whether he just came down from the mountains. I know I'm a dead shot and I know I'll shoot him dead. When you find a corpse lying on the broad of its back with its left eye shot out you may calculate that my mission is accomplished and that I'm done with this region. As for any threats you make, I care nothing for them, I fear for nothing, nothing can harm me. I am above all chances, for I am a minister of Fate, and until Fate has been served, the lead is not run nor the steel forged that can harm me."

"By heavens! yer either a gritty man or yer crazy. Ther's not many men stood up lately and talked that way to my face. I like pluck and I like grit, so I'm goin' to hold on a leetle longer till I see yer game. It's not often I take a likin', but I half like you. I come down here to where you were camped intendin' to do some plain talkin',

but I've altered my mind a leetle on it. Turn in, stranger, Dick Martin bids ye good-night."

Something in Martin's voice gave evidence to the other of the sincerity of his words. Though, on their very faces, as much as from their conversation, you could plainly see their wide dissimilarity, yet Winkle's voice lost something of its hard, steely ring as he responded:

"Good-night then. We understand each other pretty fairly. Watch my hand and you may see what I play. I don't think it's against your game, but if it is I say nothing against your doing your best. Each man for himself and—"

Whatever else the taller man was about to say was suddenly interrupted by a wild cry proceeding from the opposite side of the stream, a cry that startled both men. Martin dropped at full length upon the ground, while Winkle brought his rifle to a ready and gazed in the direction from whence came the sound.

The bushes which lined the bank seemed to be violently agitated, there was a noise as of two men engaged in a fierce and well-contested struggle. This lasted but for a few seconds, then a dark body shot out into the moonlight and fell into the water with a sullen splash.

Both men cast curious glances at the spot where the body had disappeared. Great waves circled out and out, but there was no further struggling, and for a time no sign of what was the object that had fallen into the stream. But at length, as the two spectators looked curiously at each other, there rose into the clear moonshine, that lay broad and silvery upon the surface of the water, the face of

a dead man; while from his breast, as a center, there irradiated a crimson fluid that dyed the water with its stain.

Henry Winkle took a few steps forward and gazed anxiously at the body that was slowly drifting down with the current. Apparently he was satisfied, for he turned around with what might have been taken for a sigh of relief. But when his eye explored the little plateau it rested not on any living thing—Dick Martin had quietly glided away.

CHAPTER II.

AN APPARITION.

Although there was nothing in the sudden disappearance of Martin that could particularly alarm Winkle, impressed as he really was with the present good faith of the man with whom he had lately been conversing, still from some cause or other he felt by no means at his ease. Who might be upon the other side of the stream yet remained a mystery, and until that was solved he could not follow the advice lately tendered him and "turn in." He gave a quick glance up and down the stream, a sharp look at the bushes that lined the other shore, and then, with a quick, noiseless step, turned into the woods from which but a few moments before he had emerged.

It was his purpose to move up the stream for some little distance, and then, crossing over, beat carefully down the bank, keeping a look-out for traces of the parties whom he had no doubt had been engaged in a deadly struggle at the time the cry had interrupted his conversation.

All about him was silent, and he met with no haps or mishaps for the time. As he came down the bank, however, his eyes wandered in every direction, every clump was carefully examined, and his progress was necessarily slow. At first nothing rewarded his search; but at length something caught his practiced eye and by even the uncertain light he could plainly discover a trail, leading in the direction in which he was proceeding. Immediately he halted for its examination. Almost a glance showed him that it was a careless and unconcealed one, and that it was made by a white man. A

moment more and Winkle decided within himself that it was made by the man whom Martin stated had just come down from the mountains. It led on down the stream, and the explorer followed cautiously upon it, not forgetting to look from time to time at either side, in search of further information. When he arrived opposite to the spot where he and the Free Trapper had held their late conversation, the track suddenly turned at right angles and it seemed to him as though the man who made it had from this spot acted with more caution. And as he cast his eyes to one side he saw the marks left by the footsteps of a distinct party.

His movements were governed by the utmost caution, but he went rapidly and noiselessly to the spot. The footprints that he there found appeared to give him more trouble than the former ones, for it was some time before his mind was fully settled; then he looked up with the one word, "Indian," on his lips. He noticed that from their direction both trails led into the bushes in such a manner as to cross, or at least meet each other at about the spot from which the body had been projected into the stream—and accordingly he noiselessly followed the second trail, with every sense and nerve on the alert to catch the first signal telling of the proximity of any living beings. It was not long before he found the trail most suddenly ended, for he came to a spot where the ground had been beaten and the branches and shrubs most evidently disarranged by a short but desperate contest. It was too dark for him to see if there were any traces of blood, but he had no doubt in his mind but that they were there. Carefully pushing aside the boughs, he saw that he was immediately on the bank, and in a position not only to see clearly the spot where he and Martin had met, but near enough to hear every word of what was then and there said. This much he

noted, then turned aside to seek for further traces of the probable survivor.

He was not there; and, it was some time before Winkle, practiced as he was in woodcraft, could discover any sign to indicate in which way the victor had left. Evidently the man had dropped his carelessness and was now as cautious in concealing his trail—and he evinced no mean skill in his efforts—as he was before thoughtless or careless about the matter. At length, in the dim and hazy light, the search was rewarded, and Winkle was enabled to tell in which way the man had departed.

Following a trail that is made carefully and with the intent of leaving no trace, is at best but slow business. At night it is infinitely worse. More than once in a dozen rods Winkle paused and scanned the ground narrowly. At length he came to a halt, completely puzzled—no mark of bruised grass, imprinted earth or broken twig was to be seen. A few moments' hesitation and he decided to adopt the plan best adapted to such a case. Going back to the last spot it was discernible, he took a careful survey of the surrounding ground, and then turning to the right he began circling, with a diameter of some rods. Even this method at first seemed fruitless, but at length, as the perimeter of the circle almost touched the bank of the stream, he found a faint trace that sufficed to set him again on the trail. The man had evidently gone down-stream for several yards, and then, turning to the left, either taken to the water to conceal his track or else crossed over to the opposite side. Which had he done? Without hesitation Winkle pushed ahead, and on gaining the opposite bank discovered the trail, this time leading *up* the stream.

This was a discovery indeed, and, while feeling some little uneasiness, he felt more determined than ever to follow the trail and gain a sight of this mysterious stranger.

Under the shadow of the trees the traces grew more indistinct and were once more lost; but allowing himself to be led by instinct, he hurried on, with his rifle ready to swing to his shoulder at a moment's warning. A noise fell upon his ears and he halted. At some distance, and in the direction of down-stream, he heard horse's hoofs rapidly approaching, the animal, however, being evidently under the control of a rider.

This appeared to put a new aspect on matters, for, although it might be Martin, or a friend, the chances also were that it might be an enemy. Rapidly thrusting his hand in his bosom, Winkle drew therefrom a whistle, and placed it to his lips. A moment more and a sound peculiarly shrill and trilling arose on the air. Then the man bent forward in expectancy. Right ahead, at the distance of a dozen yards, sounded the neigh of a horse, followed by the noise of a plunge, and something that resembled the sudden fall of a heavy body. Then bursting through the underbrush in answer to the call came a noble white steed, that approached his master at a gallop and placed itself alongside of him. From the direction in which the animal had come might have been heard other sounds, but Winkle's whole attention was now given to the approaching rider. He stood with one hand outstretched, and resting on the neck of his horse, his eyes riveted on the open sword which, between the trees among which he stood, glittered and shone clear.

Behind him there was an exclamation, the sound of a struggle and the voice of some one:

"Dar now, dis chile has yer, suah! T'ink yer steal dat hoss, did yer?"

But at the same time a horse and rider flashed into the anxious sight of Winkle.

And that rider was a woman!

For just a moment were they visible, but that moment seemed sufficient to produce a terrible effect on the gazer. He threw up his hand and uttered a sharp, unearthly cry; his eyes eagerly followed the slight and graceful form that so easily swung in the saddle; bent forward he caught the last glimpse of her as her riding-dress fluttered away again and was lost in the enfolding branches.

Then followed the sound of another horseman. Again a steed and rider glided across his plane of vision like a shadow on a curtain or a moving figure in some pantomime. For a moment only it appeared in view, and then disappeared in the same direction as did the woman.

Emotion was fairly overmastering Winkle. He shook like an aspen, his hands seemed to have lost their power; but hardly had the second figure disappeared when his rifle had found its way to his shoulder. But if he desired to use it with deadly effect, it was too late. Again stillness, and moonlight, and the nodding trees alone lay before him, while the retreating footsteps waxed fainter and fainter in the distance.

Mechanically he turned and pursued his way; he heard nothing, saw nothing—not even the dumb brute by his side, which faithfully paced along with a step corresponding in slowness with that of its master.

At length a huge rock or mass of rocks lay in his path. Moving a little to one side he soon skirted them, and as he did so, a light, as from a suddenly-stirred fire, flamed up before him, illuminating the side of the boulder and a small circle in front of it.

Into this circle of light Winkle staggered, and with his rifle convulsively clutched at a ready, stood gazing with a half-dazed look into the fire.

CHAPTER III.

DOUBLY WARNED.

It was no particular feeling of fear that caused Martin to move away in so quiet a manner, while the struggle was going on upon the opposite side of the stream. But, as Winkle was to him a stranger, and there might be some need of investigation, he thought it best that whatever might be done, should be done by his own unaided exertions. Moving cautiously, keeping himself well under shade and waiting patiently, he saw the man, with whom he had been so lately conversing, look around with a gaze of half wonder at finding himself alone, and then set forward upon an exploring tour. Not long afterward, at a point some distance down the stream, a man crossed; and, entering the woods, after a moment's hesitation, struck off in the direction in which Martin knew Winkle had camped, or intended to camp for the night. After a little, hard upon the trail came Winkle, himself. He would doubtless have followed on for the purpose of seeing the meeting between these two persons—if meet they should—when he was startled by the sudden appearance of the two riders. He, too, in a manner almost involuntary, threw his rifle to his shoulder and, in fact, had the pursuer fairly covered; but, instead of drawing the trigger, he lowered the weapon, listened a moment, and then, utterly disregarding the motions of the two men upon which he had been, but lately, so intent, followed silently on in the direction in which the woman and the pursuing man had disappeared.

A walk of a few minutes and the aspect of surrounding things somewhat changed—sufficiently at least to give token that some

man or men had made a permanent settlement near by. The sound of galloping horses had ceased; as he advanced, he thought he heard voices engaged in conversation.

Nor was he mistaken. At some little distance from the edge of the wood stood a cabin. In front of this the parties had halted. The man was still mounted, but the woman stood by the threshold of the cabin, facing her late pursuer, a steely look of defiance upon her countenance.

The man was speaking when Martin came within hearing distance, and his words fell upon the night-air coldly and distinctly.

"Listen, Edith," he said. "You know me so well, that I need not tell you that sooner or later I will be heard. I have not come all these miles to have you put me off with a hand-wave, and a 'begone.' We are, both of us, older than when we last met and care little for listeners; but must I say now what I have to say, or will you accord me a more fitting time and place?"

"As between us, there never can be either a fitting time or place for communication. All connection, all intercourse between us has ceased, and forever. I would refuse to willingly hear you, if you came as a messenger announcing my eternal salvation, and nothing that you can say or do shall cause me to alter my determination. If you would be safe, leave me. I am willing to forgive the past, even if I can not forget it, and I would not see you harmed; therefore I warn you away from these grounds. I caution you to return from whence you came, if you dare. And if you dare not, then seek some other place. Away, begone! for something tells me there is danger in the atmosphere for you here."

"Edith, again, I say, listen. I would speak somewhat of the past; but more of the future. Through me you have suffered, I admit, but through me I would have you return again—return to joy and life and youth and love. I have much that I would tell you. I have sought you long and faithfully; for three long years I have followed constantly in your footsteps, but you have as constantly eluded me. Now I find you here and I must speak."

"Yes, you *have* followed in my footsteps for three years, and for four, and for five. Through you I have suffered; but never, never through you did I or shall I sin. You over-shadowed, you darkened my young life, made for me existence wretched, pursued me with a thousand unmanly and mean arts, sought by foul means that which, I can tell you now, you might then have gained by fair, sought to coerce when you might have persuaded, actually hunted me down; and now you have sought me out in this last retreat. Charles Endicott, I tell you beware. I will not listen to you; I will not hear you; if you pursue I will fly; if you speak, I will hold my hands to my ears; with me you can do nothing. But I see trouble for you beyond, trouble black and deadly. Be advised before it is too late. I am no prophetess or soothsayer, but I tell you, sure as fate, if you linger here, you linger to meet your own death. Go your way then; I am dead to the world; I am dead to you; why should you waste time on a fruitless task?"

"I know you, Edith, and I know your resolution; but, for all that, I will not go. I am ready to meet death when it comes, for I am one of those that believe the lot of man is foreordered, and no whining or flinching can avail aught; but rest assured I shall not die without a struggle. If you refer to the men of doubtful stamp who are supposed to haunt this region, all I can say is, I am ready for them; though I count on no danger in that direction. I have heard of their

doings, and I have heard, too, the name of one who is supposed to exercise a control over their movements. Martin and I were once friends, and I do not think I count in vain, when I reckon on his support in all needed cases. Let this fruitless talk come to an end, and let me, if you will not appoint a more favorable time, come to that of which I would speak."

The man called Charles Endicott grew more in earnest. With a rapidity and ease almost miraculous, he threw himself from his horse. So quick was he, and so graceful, that before the woman fairly knew it, he was standing near and facing her. She shrunk back somewhat, then raised her hand with a proud gesture.

"No nearer, sir, no nearer! Think not I am unprotected because you see me alone."

Endicott stood for a moment gazing silently into the eyes that met his, fair and full, glowing and sparkling under the moonlight. There was no quailing in them; no unsettledness of purpose; they did not fall. He sought to read her soul through them; and all he could see was unflinching resolution. Poor encouragement to proceed was that steady stare; a chill crept along his spine, a shiver went through his brain as he gazed into that face, handsome as a dream, but thin and colorless as chalk. Her eyes dilated; her form, lithe and slender, straightened; the proud gesture grew one of menace, and again her lips opened:

"Yes, sir, I am no unprotected female *now*. I hold your life in my hands in a dozen ways. Times have altered, sir. We stand on a new stage with new spectators and a new cast of parts. A man more or less, is of but little importance; your corpse, found with face turned upward and dead-set eyes staring ghastly, would create little

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