

## HIRAM BELL

I had often heard of Hiram Bell. I had heard his name uttered in hushed and timorous voices in the small saloons and meeting places of the mountains of Grand Canyon, where, during my early expeditions in that mountainous region, I was wont to while away a few of my leisure hours, when wearied of my travels through the hills. Peaceful and hospitable were the inhabitants of this hamlet, so far flung from civilization. The lure of the gold fields had called them to the mountains many years before. At first their number was small, but as time went on, they gradually increased, and by degrees there arose among the hills the imposing little village of Grand Canyon.

Only one thing now caused the smile to fade quickly from the face of the villager; one thing caused him to look anxiously about, and slap his hand to his holster; one thing caused women and children to flee in terror; and that was the mention of the name of Hiram Bell.

"Who is this Hiram Bell, whose very name seems to strike terror into your hearts?" I one day asked a native.

He looked at me with a look of horror upon his face.

"Is it possible, Sir, that you know not the terrible scourge of these hills, and of this peaceful village—Hiram Bell?"

"I have heard of him," I replied, "but, that is the limit of my knowledge regarding him."

"It is evident, then," he returned, "that you have spent but little of your time around Grand Canyon, or you would know a great deal more than that."

"It is a number of years since the peace of the mountains was first disturbed by this strange creature, who comes from no one knows where. What brought him out here to wander through the hills is a mystery. Where he sleeps, or has his lair, has never been discovered, and, believe me, there are not too many in this village who will try to find out, for he is a crack shot, as well he lets us know when he pays us his unwelcome visits.

He comes out occasionally for provisions, and though he has never yet seriously injured anyone, yet he holds up *everybody* he encounters at the point of a revolver, shoots up the village, and then rides off with his plunder. He calls himself Hiram Bell, but that's all we ever got out

of him. I do not think it is safe, Sir, for you to be traveling through those hills alone."

"Perhaps not," I replied, and rode off towards the mountains.

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Six months passed. I was returning to my home at B—. The huge railway locomotive, with its long line of cars, was swiftly thundering onward. It was late at night, and the passengers, weary from days of travel, were reclining restlessly in the deep cushioned seats of the pullman. Visions of home and re-union with friends flashed in a delightful panorama through their minds. The train was rushing forward at a terrific rate of speed.

"At what time will we reach the terminal?" a passenger asked the passing porter.

"A quarter past twelve, sah. We're half an hour late, sah; we're trying to make up tam, so—"

He did not finish the sentence. There was a crash; a hissing of steam; passengers flung headlong from their seats; and the startled cries of men and women. Then followed the awful confusion which only those, who have experienced it, can describe; the terrible moans of those injured or pinned beneath the wreck; the wild call for doctors and ambulances, and for volunteers to assist the injured.

Fortunately, I was numbered among those who had escaped with slight bruises, and I quickly lent my services to alleviate the pains of the seriously afflicted. The scene of the accident was near a small town on the line, to whose hospital the injured travelers were quickly hurried.

Among those fatally injured was a man of middle years, with swarthy features, typical of the wild and reckless life of the prairies. He moaned incessantly on account of his wounds, and, when told by the physician that he had not long to live, a look of terror and utter despair broke over his countenance.

"It is the end at last," he muttered, "fool that I always was! Now what comfort does it bring me, to know that I have sent an innocent man to the gallows? In a few short moments I shall be called to answer for my deeds. Perhaps there is yet time for me to let the world know the truth. A pen and paper, quick, and write down what I shall say to you."



The doctor quickly produced the paper and began to write hurriedly the words of the dying passenger.

"I will be as brief as possible," he began. "It happened in my home town, Camden, fifteen years ago. There were never two men on earth such sworn friends as Jack Stanton and myself. We were always together. Jack was true as gold, and I was just as loyal to him. But now comes the bitter part. He stole my sweetheart. He married her. All my love for my old friend now turned to bitter hate. I vowed to have revenge, and the opportunity was not long in presenting itself. I became reckless, fell in with evil companions, became degraded. One night, under the influence of liquor, I became engaged in a quarrel with one of my low associates. Before I realized what I was doing, I drew a revolver and fired. I saw my opponent fall heavily to the ground. Just then a man came running around the corner—it was Jack. 'My God! Harry,' said he, seizing me, 'what have you done?' We closed in a deadly grapple. At that moment I perceived two police officers advancing in our direction. I tore myself away from Jack and fled, leaving my smoking revolver in his hand. The rest is easily seen. He was arrested, charged with the murder. In order to complete my revenge I went to court and swore against him. He was sentenced to be hanged. That night I left my home town forever. I have never heard of Jack's execution—nor—what became—of—his wife—and—little—daughter—Dorothy."

Death's heavy hand was pressing hard upon the criminal. The doctor had to bend his head over to catch the last syllables that came so faintly.

"Is that all?" asked the physician.

"That's all," he returned, gasping, "now give me the pen."

He feebly scratched his name to the bottom of the document. His eyes glared wildly into space. The pen dropped from his hand, and he fell back on the pillow—dead.

"Gone," said the doctor "to a higher court, but, thank God, he revealed this secret before he was swept into eternity."

Our attention was suddenly attracted to the young nurse, who was standing at the head of the bed, pale as death, and trembling violently.

"What did he say the name of his town was?" she gasped, almost in a whisper.

"Camden," I said.

"Camden!" she echoed. "Thank God! John Stanton, my father!" and fell fainting into the arms of the physician.

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A year passed by uneventfully, and I was once more among the hills of Grand Canyon. It was in October, and the Autumn winds were beginning to be tinged with the advance stings of old King Winter. Night was gaining the superiority over day, and its dark shadows fell quickly in the early evening.

So absorbed was I in my study of the picturesque mountain scenery, that I failed to notice that I had wandered far from Grand Canyon and my accustomed route. Night was falling fast, and with the night arose a cold and bitter wind, accompanied by unpleasant sprinkles of rain and biting hail. I turned my horse, and started off in what I thought to be the direction of Grand Canyon. The road seemed to become more difficult and strange at every step. The storm began to sweep down fiercely upon me. We were swallowed up in darkness. The terrible realization that I was lost among the hills began to dawn upon me. A weird loneliness and a spectral gloom began to envelop the mountains. The shrill barks of a coyote echoed cheerlessly around me. My horse struggled on bravely against the now fast driving storm; the noble animal stumbled—fell—there was a sensation of being hurled rapidly through space, a sudden striking against some object with terrific force, and I knew no more.

I awoke to find myself lying in what seemed to be a small cabin, whose only light came from a fire, which burned cheerfully in one corner of the room. I directed my gaze in the direction of this fire; and immediately my eyes became riveted on the singular looking individual who was seated before it. I beheld a man of medium height and size, with square shoulders, upon which sat a well shaped head, the features for the most part covered with a grizzly beard. His attire was such as might be worn by a highwayman; two revolvers hung at his side, this last seeming to establish his identity. While he gazed steadily into the fire, he seemed to be in an attitude of deep listening. I moved slightly. In a moment he was by my side.



"Coming around, eh?" said he, not unkindly, "Well, that's not so bad. I think you had better keep quiet for a little while yet, son, for, by the way you dropped from the mountain, I guess you got the worst of it."

I gazed up into the face above me. It was not the wicked face I had expected to behold. Surely those deep and earnest blue eyes gazing down so tenderly into mine, could not belong to a notorious bandit; that voice, devoid of harshness, fell upon my ears like that of a kind father; but the guns, the garb, the scraggy beard—I could not understand.

"Where am I," I said at length, "and how came I here?"

"I guess I might as well tell you," he replied. "A few hours ago, I heard a noise outside. I sprang out, not knowing whether it was the approach of friend or foe. I looked up and could dimly discern what I thought to be a horse and rider descending headlong over the side of the mountain. When you hit the ground, I ran over and turned my light upon you. I thought you were dead, but, on closer examination, I decided you were only stunned. I quickly searched you to make sure you were not an officer of the law. Having satisfied myself on this point, I carried you in here and did all I could to bring you through. Your horse was killed in the fall—its neck was broken. So there it is in a nutshell. But," he continued, "it seems strange that you should have wandered so far out here alone. That's why I thought you were a detective, but now I am sure that you are not."

"I became lost in the storm," I replied. "I remember my horse stumbling, my falling through space, and that is all, till I awoke here. No, I am not an officer, but why, may I ask, should you fear them?"

"Son," replied my rescuer, "you will stay here till you fully recover, then you must go as quickly as you came. I know that I can trust you, and I am going to do it. If I didn't you would never leave these mountains."

"Trust me!" I exclaimed. "You can do more than that. I feel deeply indebted to you for rescuing me, and for the kindness you have shown me. Some day, I hope, I shall be able to repay you."

"I wish you could," returned my host, "but it seems utterly impossible. I am doomed to spend my days in solitude, away from the sight of men."

For some time I remained silent, quietly contemplating this mysterious individual upon whose mercy I had been so strangely flung. Some great cloud of trouble or mystery seemed to enshroud him. What it was, I could not tell. But at least I might endeavour to find out. I braced myself to the occasion, and, looking steadily into his eyes, said:

"Isn't it strange that you should be living such a dreary life out here, away from the society of men?"

"Society be damned," he returned, "All men are traitors. That is why I am living a hermit's life out here, sharing the wild life of the deer and other beasts of the wilderness. In their own way they seem kinder to me than those who call themselves men. Why do I shun the society of my own kind? Why am I hunted like the deer or the coyote, searched for by officers of the law, with their guns and bloodhounds? Why am I a despised outlaw, when I should be a leader among men? Why did I flee from a happy home, a loving wife and child? Why, you ask me? It is because one who once called himself my truest friend turned traitor against me. That is why you find me what I am,—an outlaw. That is why I am known as the terrible Hiram Bell, hated by all men, when I should be enjoying the happiness of my own home. Oh God! If I could only be again what I was once; but that is gone forever."

His head dropped upon his breast, a sigh of grief shook his whole frame—and this man was the notorious Hiram Bell.

We were silent for some moments. A great wave of compassion for my strange friend swept over me. I was firmly convinced now that some great secret or mystery was locked within his breast, and I resolved, if possible, to draw it from him.

"You said you would trust me," I said. "That being so, won't you tell me your whole story, and perhaps I can help you?"

He raised his head and looked me steadily in the face for a moment, and then replied in a voice of sadness, "It is impossible for you to help me son, but, since you are so interested in me, I will tell you."

"I was not always the rough and hunted creature you see before you now. I once had a home, friends, happiness. There was not a happier man than I, with



my wife and little daughter. But such happiness as mine could not last. When Dorothy was three years old, the terrible blow fell that wrecked my home, drove me into exile, and made me an outlaw. I had a friend, once, a very dear friend, tried and true, but we fell apart. He accused me of unfairly treating him in some love affair and he became my bitter enemy. He drifted away from me, fell in with evil companions, became addicted to drink and in the end committed murder. By a strange coincidence I was accused of the deed. My friend came to court and swore against me. I was sentenced to be hanged, but, the night before the date set for my execution, I escaped from prison. I fled from home, friends, and all I held dear, and have since been most of my time among these protecting hills, despised by all, branded as a murderer, referred to as the bandit of Grand Canyon, and hated by those who once called themselves my friends. You are the only one to whom I have ever told my story, and I hope you at least will reserve a tender spot in your heart for Hiram Bell."

My brain was in a whirl. I was thunderstruck, amazed, flushed with excitement. My mind flew back to the train wreck of a year before; the dying passenger; the confession; the nurse, Dorothy; all flashed before me.

"What," I cried. "Tell me; what was the name of the town where you lived?"

"Camden," he murmured, perhaps before he realized it.

"Camden," I shouted, in an ecstasy of joy, "and you, you are John Stanton."

"My God, man!" he cried, "Who are you anyway?"

I reached out and grasped him by the hand. "I have the happiness," I replied, "of being the medium through whom John Stanton is going to be re-united with his wife and daughter, and everything he lost fifteen years ago. You are a free man, Hiram Bell, no longer hunted by the officers of the law, but eagerly searched for by your friends in Camden, where freedom now awaits you."

John Stanton was struck as one paralyzed.

"Tell me," he gasped, "is it true, man, or are you raving?"

It took but a few moments for me to reveal the whole story to my bewildered hearer, and to convince him that the brand of murder no longer rested upon his brow.