

An Iowa Doone Band

About forty years ago there flourished, in the rugged, heavily-wooded fastnesses of the Iowa River in Hardin County, a daring and unscrupulous band of outlaws. Like the famous robber Doones in the tale of "Lorna Doone", these Iowa desperadoes terrorized the law-abiding people of the community by cunning thievery and bold disturbance of the peace. They held sway not so much by the enormity of their atrocities as by the fear of the crimes they might commit.

As the Doones of old England found security in a natural stronghold, so the Rainsbargers of pioneer Iowa made their headquarters in secluded gullies that were seldom visited by others than their clan. Their remote cabins, half concealed by the trees and the semi-gloom of the deep hollows, could be reached only by lonely byways that led through thick woods and along the edges of dark, sheer-cut ravines. Even to-day the dense underbrush grows so close to the road that it scrapes the sides of a passing vehicle, and the heavy gold of autumn sunlight that pours through the crimson sumach leaves quickly fades to muffling dusk in mid-afternoon. In the early eighties only the most daring men ever ventured upon a night ride through this section of the country.

A story is told of an Ackley doctor who was visited one stormy night by a stranger who begged him to attend a sick woman, requesting, however, that the doctor consent to follow him blindfolded. Persuaded by the man's distress, the doctor accompanied his guide to a squalid home where the family lived in apparent poverty. He refrained from asking for his services a charge which evidently could not be met, but the man paid him liberally from a large roll of soiled bills. A few days later, when the doctor returned to see his patient, searching out the cabin by an obscure path, he found the house deserted. Shortly afterward, a rumor was circulated that a band of stolen horses which had been secreted in the caves among the hills had just been sent down the river, and that the thieves with the proceeds of this sale had decamped.

In this secluded river country the scene of this story is laid. Ever since the Rainsbargers held sway there the inaccessible region has maintained its mysterious privacy. To this day the steep slopes, thickly wooded with oaks and scattered birch, and the winding river walled in by a heavy growth of cottonwoods and grapevine tangles, which formed the setting for a tragic incident in the big drama of the Middle West, remain unchanged — inescapably suggestive of the Rainsbarger bandits and the outlaw Doones.

The entire family of Rainsbargers — William, Finley, Frank, Nathan, and Emmanuel; and Wil-

liam's boys, George, Joe, and John — were all reputed to be fearless freebooters. Their reputation for high-handed misconduct invited accusation of every crime committed in the neighborhood — sometimes perhaps unjustly. They were charged with such malicious offenses as cutting off cows' tails and hamstringing horses. They were said to steal cattle and horses and dispose of them at markets down the river. Sometimes stock was poisoned or brazenly driven off before the eyes of the helpless owner. A farmer declared that one day as he was picking corn, Fin Rainsbarger drove into the field, loaded his wagon with corn, and calmly departed. The outlaws had learned that it was safe to rely upon their reputations to prevent resistance.

The most generally hated and feared of the Rainsbarger family was Fin. He was more than a robber. On a winter evening of 1866 in the town of Steamboat Rock he had stabbed and killed a man during a quarrel — the first murder committed in Hardin County. Those who witnessed the deed said that the victim, Charles Voiles, was intoxicated at the time, that he threatened Rainsbarger and his brother-in-law, Henry Johns, and finally struck a drunken blow. Like a flash, before anyone could intervene, the tawny-haired Rainsbarger drove a butcher knife into the man's heart. Convicted of manslaughter, in spite of the best efforts of his attorney, H. L. Huff, he was sentenced to the penitentiary for six years; but at the end of thirteen

months he was pardoned because it was claimed that he had acted in self-defense. Later he was known to have been associated with several notorious outlaws, among whom was Enoch Johnson, the renegade father-in-law of Frank Rainsbarger.

Some of the Rainsbargers, however, were said to be "hard-working men, who had never been arrested or indicted for any crime or misdemeanor". William was president of the school board in his township for a number of years. Probably other men of questionable character were guilty of some of the evil charged against the Rainsbargers, but the people of the community believed, and are still convinced, that the Rainsbargers were a family of criminals and villains who were chiefly responsible for the lawless reign of the eighties. The score of petty molestations attributed to them prepared the way for a reckoning when an offense audacious enough to arouse the whole community demanded amends. The public was ready and eager to convict the Rainsbargers as the embodiment of all the crime in Hardin County.

In the early eighties a counterfeiting scheme was instituted into which were drawn many people, both reputable and disreputable. Enoch Johnson became an active member of the gang. It was his business to transfer the money made in Steamboat Rock to a confederate outside the State. He was finally apprehended, however, with a box of the money in his possession, arrested by Federal officers,

and indicted by a grand jury of which Henry Johns was foreman. Frank Rainsbarger, at the entreaty of his wife, Nettie, went bail for the temporary release of his father-in-law.

There was little joy in Enoch Johnson's homecoming, however, for he discovered that his wife, Mag, had sold their household goods during his detention in jail. The two immediately quarrelled, and Johnson went to live with Frank and Nettie. He urged his son-in-law and Nathan Rainsbarger, who made his home with Frank, to take out insurance on his life. Mag Johnson was the beneficiary of more than one such policy already, Johnson carried some insurance in favor of Nettie, and Frank was induced to secure a five thousand dollar policy, payable jointly to himself and wife.

Of course Johnson was not the only counterfeiter in the county. As soon as he was indicted efforts were made to persuade him to turn state's evidence against his confederates. The identity of other parties to the fraud was a mystery but there was reason to suspect that the Rainsbargers were implicated more or less directly. It was hinted that perhaps a threat from Johnson to expose those as guilty as himself had been the most effective inducement for Frank to furnish bail. Yet the fact that Henry Johns, a relative of the Rainsbargers, took the lead in trying to expose the counterfeiters would seem to indicate that the Rainsbargers were not members of the bogus gang — but maybe Johns did

not know what he was about. There is also a story to the effect that while Johnson was at liberty on bail he quarrelled with the chief of the counterfeiters who, fearing disclosure of the scheme, promised Johnson that if he peached there would not be enough left of him to feed the crows.

On the evening of November 18, 1884, while driving from Steamboat Rock toward Gifford, Enoch Johnson was killed. When he was found, within a mile of Gifford, appearances indicated that there had been a breakdown which shattered his buggy and that afterward he had attempted to ride his horse but had been thrown and dragged for some distance. His body lay about a quarter of a mile from the buggy, the lines were wrapped around one leg, and his clothes were pulled over his head. There was blood on the horse's withers.

The following morning Mag Johnson arrived unexpectedly at the home of Frank and Nettie Rainsbarger. She had gone to Ackley the day before, where she spent the night at the Revere House with Joshua West. About noon she received a telegram from West stating that her husband had met with an accident and was dead. She showed neither surprise nor sorrow at the news.

At first the opinion prevailed that Johnson's death was accidental, but at the coroner's inquest several suspicious circumstances were revealed which pointed to foul play. Two days after Johnson was killed the sheriff, W. V. Willcox, and the coro-

ner, Dr. Myron Underwood, visited the scene of the tragedy and found where a single horse had been hitched at the head of a ravine about sixty-five rods from the broken buggy; a few feet away the grass was trampled down and spattered with blood; the buggy had not moved after the wheel broke down; and a post mortem examination revealed that the victim's head had been fractured on both sides, which could scarcely have been accomplished by a fall from his horse. The coroner's jury decided that "Enoch Johnson came to his death by blows inflicted upon the head by some blunt instrument in the hands of some person or persons unknown".

So the matter stood. No arrests were made and Frank and Nettie Rainsbarger took steps to obtain their life insurance. Several times during the following weeks Mag Johnson came to visit her daughter and, after repeated persuasion, took her to Eldora where they made affidavits, on the strength of which Frank and Nate Rainsbarger were arrested and charged with the murder of Enoch Johnson.

Shortly after the preliminary hearing, Henry Johns publicly declared his conviction that the two men were not guilty. He was sure that Johnson had been murdered to prevent him from exposing the gang of counterfeiters. "I will stay by you until you are cleared and the real culprits are brought to justice," he is reported to have promised Nate and Frank, "if it costs fifty thousand dollars." The prisoners were bound over to appear at the

next term of the district court which would convene late in April, 1885.

On the night of April 16th, while driving home from Abbott Station, Johns himself was shot and injured so that he died within three weeks. He recognized several of his assailants and made a sworn statement of their names before he died. This statement was filed, without having been made public, in the office of the county clerk at Eldora, but it was taken from the files and could never be found. Perhaps the complete solution of the whole mystery was thereby lost forever. It is significant that no one was ever indicted for the murder of Henry Johns. Though Governor William Larrabee, nearly four years afterward, offered a five hundred dollar reward for the conviction of the guilty persons the bounty was never claimed.

Meanwhile the Rainsbargers had secured a change of venue to Marshall County and Nate's trial was set for December 28th. Great excitement prevailed in Hardin County. Counterfeiting frauds were forgotten while the counterfeiters undertook to allay suspicion of themselves by joining noisily with the outraged citizens to revenge the murder of Johnson and Johns and to exterminate the criminal element in the county. To that end a vigilance society was organized and thereafter the exploits of the vigilantes rivaled the notoriety of the outlaws.

On the night of June 3rd Dr. Underwood, who as coroner had incurred the enmity of the Rains-

bargers, was attacked by three or four masked men on a lonely road near the Iowa River. Several shots were fired and one bullet passed through the doctor's coat. He returned the fire. Just then two buggies drove up. Surprised at the sudden arrival of reinforcements the desperadoes disappeared down a ravine. The next day warrants were issued for the arrest of Ed Johns and William, Fin, and Manse Rainsbarger. Johns could not be found, William Rainsbarger was released on bail, while Fin and Manse were locked in the Eldora jail.

Thoroughly incensed by the series of murders and assaults that had occurred, impatient with the delay and uncertainty of judicial proceedings, and determined to inspire terror among evildoers by a striking example of sure retribution, a mob, led no doubt by the vigilantes, gathered that night near Eldora, deliberately entered the town, battered open the jail with a huge tree trunk, and attacked the two Rainsbargers. They resisted desperately. Manse was shot in his cell but Fin fought his way through the door, only to die at the hands of the mob outside. Then the lynchers dispersed unmolested, leaving the bodies of the two men lying in the jail yard riddled with bullets — a gruesome sight for the eyes of the curious who came the next morning to see them.

The case charging William Rainsbarger and Ed Johns with the crime for which their alleged accomplices were lynched was finally dismissed in 1889

because there was not enough evidence against them to justify further prosecution. A sworn statement has since been made that the whole affair was planned and executed by the vigilance society, of which many prominent citizens were members, for the very purpose of arousing the public to rid the county of the Rainsbargers.

It was a little over a year after the murder of Enoch Johnson that Nate Rainsbarger was brought to trial. Of medium height and powerful physique, his hair black and abundant, and his eyes dark and piercing, he seemed none the worse for his long confinement as he sat with his attorneys calmly confronting the prosecution led by H. L. Huff, the man who had defended his brother against a charge of murder twenty years before.

The State began with the testimony of Dr. N. C. Morse, corroborated by Dr. Underwood, that the murdered man had died from wounds inflicted upon his head before he fell from the horse — wounds which might have been made by brass knuckles in the hands of a powerful man. A witness was found who had heard screams in the vicinity of the tragedy between eight and nine o'clock on the fatal evening. Others claimed to have seen Nate and Frank Rainsbarger, identified by the light of a bonfire, as they drove south through Eldora about an hour before the screams were heard on the Gifford road. One man asserted that he had overheard the Rainsbargers plotting to put Johnson out of the way.

Against this purely circumstantial evidence the defense undertook to prove an alibi. The Rainsbargers secured witnesses who had seen them in Cleves, about ten miles from Eldora, as late as seven o'clock on the day of the murder, and others, mostly relatives, who confirmed the declaration of Nate and Frank that after leaving Cleves they had collected some money from a neighbor for thrashing, had stopped at the Johns place, had later called on their brother Fin to get him to help husk corn, and had finally reached home after eleven o'clock. It was a plausible story but the prosecution immediately introduced testimony impeaching the reputation of the defense witnesses for truth and veracity.

Day after day, as the trial continued, sentiment against the defendant increased, and the popular opinion that the Rainsbargers were guilty became more and more firmly established. It was for Nettie Rainsbarger, sister-in-law of the accused, to contribute the most damaging evidence of all. Pretty, ladylike, and composed, she made a very favorable impression despite her ill repute as she described the dramatic events on the morning following the murder. "Mercy sakes, Nate, where did you get that blood?" she recalled having exclaimed. Nate grabbed the lapel of his coat, she related, and drew it over the blood spot. "It is not blood; it is water or horse slobbers", he said as he rushed out of the room. Later she found blood on her husband's overcoat and mittens: it stained her finger when

she touched the spots. Then she remembered that Frank had taken his brass knuckles when he started for Cleves the previous afternoon. When she accused the men of murdering her father they became very irritated and tried to make her believe that the horse had killed him.

The trial lasted fourteen days. On January 13, 1886, the jury returned a verdict of murder in the first degree and recommended a sentence of imprisonment for life.

During the months that followed while Frank and Nate lay in the Marshall County jail—the one awaiting trial and the other an appeal to the Supreme Court—various untoward events continued to agitate the people of Hardin County. Joe Rainsbarger was indicted and later he was convicted of malicious mischief in shooting out the eyes of cattle owned by a neighbor. While that case was pending he was arrested for shooting at a man. Released on five hundred dollars bail he was eventually convicted and served ten months in jail. In April his father and Ed Johns were indicted for the attack on Dr. Underwood, who had become State Senator in the meantime. During the summer the Eldora jail was again mobbed by the vigilantes, but this time the marshal succeeded in dispersing the mob. In September a man who stayed with Mrs. Fin Rainsbarger was chased out of the county for stealing a horse.

Frank Rainsbarger was put on trial for the mur-

der of Enoch Johnson in February, 1887, and was convicted on March 10th. Five days later he entered the penitentiary at Anamosa under a life sentence. While Frank's trial was in progress the Supreme Court reversed the decision by which Nate had been convicted, because Nettie Rainsbarger had been allowed to testify as to his bad character and the commission of crimes for which he was not on trial. He was retried in November, again convicted, and followed his brother into the penitentiary on December 10, 1887.

Meanwhile William, Joe, George, and John Rainsbarger were arrested for assaulting a man who had testified against Joe in a recent trial. They narrowly escaped being lynched and were taken to Marshalltown for protection. Two months later they were acquitted.

It was nearly twenty-eight years after Nate and Frank entered the penitentiary when the door of the prison swung open and the two men, white haired and prison-paled, once more breathed the air of freedom and walked into the sunlight not striped with the shadows of prison bars. For more than a quarter of a century they had borne the stigma of convicts, during all that time they had steadfastly maintained that they were tricked into prison to protect the real murderer, and by their good conduct they had convinced the prison officials of their innocence. As the years passed the desire to avenge the death of their mob-murdered brothers and to

punish the people responsible for their own imprisonment had grown upon them. Now, as old men, they were free. Not quite. Their liberty was contingent upon their not intimidating "by word or threat any of those who were instrumental in their conviction" or who had "opposed their release in past years." They have never violated that pledge. Frank found employment with a construction company in Ackley and Nate went to work in a Marshalltown factory.

This is Iowa's Doone story. In vivid contrast to the lawless, counterfeiting days, peace and order now prevail in Hardin County and the turbulence of the eighties is only a dim tradition. And yet, in a narrow valley between the folds of two hills, where the country road is steep and tortuous and the bridges are old and rickety, a forgotten relic of the horse-stealing days may still be seen. There, half concealed by the cottonwoods and underbrush, is an old dilapidated stable. The thatched roof over a small dugout slopes down from the side of the hill and is supported by two growing trees. The door hangs by its rusty padlock but swings free from the broken hinges, and inside an old-fashioned sofa, with the twisted springs protruding, and the shell of a blue water pail evidence the necessities of an outlaw stable guard.

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