

Almost a Gruesome Tale

This is not a sketch of my army life nor a story of my experience as a commercial traveler, but simply an incident that occurred in the summer of 1865, soon after my return from the army.

I was not well and was on a trip to the Lake Superior copper regions where it was recommended I spend a month or two. I had done this and was in Winona, Minnesota, where I had formed a temporary partnership with a gentleman of some means. We planned to purchase and ship a quantity of butter and eggs west to some point on the Missouri River. As I knew something of the business, and he had the money, we were to offset his money with my experience and divide the profit.

We purchased our stock and went with the shipment west on the railroad to Rochester and Mankato, where it stopped and stage coaches and freight wagons (schooners) took over.

Imagine my surprise, a few miles out from Winona, when an army comrade and erstwhile "Professional Gambler," Geo. W. Brown, walked into the car. I had enlisted him in New York in 1864 and he had served with me till the war ended. He greeted me with all his old-time

courtesy and friendliness. As I made room for him in my seat, he remarked: "I've got something to tell you in a few minutes." Mr. Jones, my partner, and I had seats facing each other and there was plenty of room. I introduced them and Brown proceeded to tell both of us what he proposed, at first, to tell us. He took from his outside coat pocket a small buckskin bag tied with a string of the same material, and remarked: "That bag contains two thousand dollars in greenbacks I won from a man, who is in this car, while coming up river yesterday by steamboat from Dubuque. He is following me, hoping to get it back. He swears he will or kill me." This was rather exciting. He pointed out the man so we both would recognize him if we saw him again.

Most of the passengers were bound for Rochester, Mankato, and nearby towns but eight or ten, including the four characters of this incident, took stages at Mankato for western points. We rode from about twelve o'clock, when we arrived at the end of the railroad, until we came to a place called the "Half Way House," probably fifty miles west of Mankato. It was a primitive looking "tavern" but had a late supper all ready. The beds and rooms were in keeping with the looks of the house outside. There was no plaster in the building and partitions were made of flooring. Mr. Brown and myself slept together. Our room was on the north side, upstairs. Under our

window was a flat "lean-to," from which it would be very convenient to crawl into our room. The head of our bed was toward that window and about two feet from it.

Before we blew out the candle, my bedfellow took his wallet from his pocket and hung it on the bedpost nearest to that window. I protested: "Brown, why do you do that?" He smiled and said, "Who would look there for it? Would you?" When our room was dark we could see the cracks made by the shrunken flooring boards, from which all partitions were made. We were soon asleep. I was very tired. My bedfellow slept on the front side of the bed and was directly in front of the window.

About midnight I was awakened by the sound of a window being raised. Soon wide awake, I discovered a man between us and the window. His head was just coming into the window. He was very still. Brown was also wide awake, lying on his side, a revolver in his hand, pointed at the intruder. The visitor raised his hand, took the money from the bedpost, and was about to withdraw his head and shoulders from the window when a bullet from the revolver of my bedfellow put an end to the proceedings.

In a minute the room was full of men. The landlord was half dressed and had a lighted candle in his hand. No one spoke for a minute. They saw the dead man lying across the window

sill. Mr. Brown reached down and picked up his bag of money and, hanging it on the bedpost, remarked: "Gentlemen, that's my money in that bag. If you want it, any of you, you better come and get it. Landlord please see that that body is removed and at once." It was done from the outside and he turned over and went to sleep again, even after such a terrible experience. I did not sleep any more. We decided that the landlord was a confidant of the man who was shot and told him where to find the bag of money in the dark.

The next morning the man was buried. There was no funeral, no arrest, no complaint. We left at noon for the Missouri River. My comrade went east and I never saw or heard of him again.

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Following the experience recounted in my last article, Mr. Jones and myself continued west until we got to the Missouri River. At two or three "supply stations" on the river we sold our entire shipment of butter and eggs at a good profit and returned, the way we came, to Winona where we settled our business. Jones remained, as that was his home; I bought a steamer ticket for Fulton, Illinois, and boarded a boat waiting at the dock to start, in a few minutes, for St. Louis and intervening points on the river.

I was very weary and when shown to my state-room, I locked my door and hanging up my coat,

I crawled into the upper berth, from preference, and was soon fast asleep. I always sleep in the upper berth on a steamboat because of the ventilation. There was a narrow transom over the door through which a little light filtered. I must have slept several hours. The vibrations of the vessel caused by the machinery kept me fast asleep. I was awakened by two things, the stopping of the side wheels and their splashing, and the pressure against my head of a revolver accompanied by a voice that said, "Say you," to which I replied, "Well, who are you and what do you want?" "I want your money and I want it quick." "How did you get in here? I locked the door when I came in here." "Never mind about that. I was in bed here when you came in but you 'shell out' and do it quick or you will not live a minute."

I had forty dollars in my vest-pocket and forty-five in my pants pocket, in greenbacks, and had both garments on, as I had just thrown myself upon the bed. I was lying on my breast and as I raised up a little to put my hand into my vest-pocket, he said: "Hold on, don't move a hand or you are a dead man." I could see him a little and said, "You don't know much. You tell me to give you money or you will kill me; when I try to get it, you say you will kill me if I move. My money is in my vest-pocket. I am laying on it. Shall I get it or will you help yourself?" He said, "Get it and give it to me and no fooling." I thought he smiled

a little. I took the wad of paper money from my vest-pocket and handed it to him, turning over on my back as I did so, saying: "There is my pile, you've got the drop on me—if you are not the meanest man on earth you will give me back five dollars to get home with. Please point that gun the other way. I've got no gun; if I had I would have used it on you before this time."

That man laid my money on the bunk before me, counted it out and spoke: "Yes, here is forty dollars, thirty-five dollars will do me till I strike another victim," and he handed me a five-dollar greenback, remarking as he did so: "We are wooding up at a landing and I go ashore here. If you follow me or raise a row, I'll kill you sure." I replied, "I shall take no chances, go on and go quick, your room is better than your company," and slipping the bolt in the door he left with these words: "There is a linen coat you can have; it's a little small for me." I locked the door and never saw or heard of my "robber" again.

On the lower berth, neatly rolled, was a new, well-made "up-to-date" linen coat. It was just my size and fit. I kept it, reached my destination in safety, came directly to Ames for my first visit July 12th, 1866. I wore that coat as a "duster" several years and took pleasure in telling my friends "I paid thirty-five dollars for that coat."

K. W. BROWN