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Siam Gold

An unsolved murder, the lure of hidden gold, endless digging for treasure on a sequestered farm, a strange trial that unwound the mystery only to wind it up more tangled than before, disappointed lives and sudden deaths—all these weave in and out of the story of buried treasure near the village of Siam in southwestern Iowa. Back in the days of the Civil War and for some years thereafter southwestern Iowa was a sparsely settled region where more or less lawlessness prevailed. The James boys, Jesse and Frank, began their picturesque banditry about 1870, and lesser gangs emulated their example. Murder and robbery were not uncommon.

The strange weird tale of the Siam murder mystery came to light in July, 1915. At that time people of Bedford, the county seat of Taylor County, experienced a week of excitement such as had seldom if ever before stirred the feelings of that placid

community. Four old men, each well-known in his respective community, had been arrested for the alleged robbery and murder of a wealthy cattleman and his boy companion after a lapse of nearly half a century. Nathaniel Harrison (Hank) Damewood, a lank kindly-faced man, sixty-one years old, was the youngest of the group. His brother John, shorter and with the same pleasant type of face, was sixty-four. Sam Scrivner, a dark grim man, a splendid farmer and worth, it was said, \$50,000, was seventy-four; and Bates Huntsman, tall, lean, with the eyes of a mystic and the beard of a patriarch, was seventy-seven.

According to the story that quickly went the rounds of the town, these four men, together with Doctor C. R. Huntsman, Doctor A. M. Golliday, and Jonathan Dark, all three deceased, had waylaid a wealthy cattle buyer who had been lured to the vicinity of Siam in 1868. The victim, it was said, had travelled with an ox team and wagon to Taylor County from somewhere to the east, bringing a boy with him as a companion, and a trunk full of money, \$90,000 or thereabouts. This gang of daring young fellows, so the story ran, had met the two travellers not far from Siam, shot or clubbed (versions differed) the man to death, and dumped his body into an old well. The boy tried to escape during the confusion attending the murder of his older companion, but he had not run far before a member of the gang overtook him and killed him also. His body was

buried in a locust grove not far from the well into which the body of the man had been thrown. The gang then buried the swag, carefully making a plat of the farm and marking the location of the trunk.

It had been the intention of the robbers to dig up the loot and divide it when efforts to bring them to justice — if any should ever be made — had been abandoned. Before this time arrived, however, fire had destroyed the Huntsman cabin in which the plat had been hidden. All trace of the location of the treasure was lost. Years passed in a fruitless effort to recover the hidden gold, but to no avail.

The sensational disclosures leading to the arrest of the four old men came from Sam Anderson, aged seventy-two, a former neighbor of the Huntsmans near Siam. He had been hired by the Huntsmans, so he claimed, to dig for treasure, and had uncovered a box or chest which he believed contained money. Although he had been promised one-fourth of whatever was found, he had never received any pay for the long hours of toil spent in digging. Anderson, who in the meantime had moved to Lucas County, consulted W. W. Bulman, an attorney of Chariton, about starting a civil suit against Bates Huntsman to recover the pay alleged to be due him. Unfolding of the details of Anderson's strange story led Attorney Bulman to start an investigation which resulted in the sensational arrest of the four old men for murder.

According to Anderson, after his marriage some

thirty-five years earlier he had settled down on his father-in-law's farm adjoining that of the Huntsmans. Soon after he located on the farm he received a visit from his neighbors. They told him that he had better move on, as the farm was poor and the place haunted. Anderson replied that he was not afraid of "haunts", he did not fear dead men, was not much afraid of live ones, and proposed to stay where he was.

Later the Huntsmans came to him again. They told Anderson on this occasion that there was a lot of gold buried on the place — \$90,000 in one place, \$50,000 in another, and \$12,000 in a third. They wanted Anderson to help them dig for it and promised him one-fourth of whatever amount he found. "Doc" Huntsman explained that the money had been obtained from the sale of a large farm in Missouri. Fearing that he might be robbed by outlaws who infested that part of the country, he claimed to have buried the money for safe keeping on the land he was then farming. He had then made a chart of the burial places, but the fire which had consumed the Huntsman cabin a few years earlier had likewise destroyed the chart. Huntsman had forgotten the markings and now sought to recover the treasure by digging for it. Anderson agreed to help, and the three drew up a contract whereby the former agreed to dig whenever the Huntsmans wanted him to do so.

Then began a quarter-century search for the hid-

den gold. "One of the Huntsmans was always with me whenever I dug, sometimes both of them, and I know they watched me night and day", Anderson told reporters. Deep furrows were run here and there about the farm and trenches were dug in locations pointed out by his employers.

Not long after the search began the ghostly visitation about which Anderson had been warned made its appearance. One lonely moonlight night, when trees cast eerie shadows and the stillness of the night magnified every unusual sound, Anderson and Bates Huntsman were walking near the former's home. Off a hundred yards or so a shadowy figure made a sudden appearance, striding back and forth in a ghostly vigil.

"My God! There it is", exclaimed Huntsman.

Anderson ran into the house for his shotgun and returned to battle the apparition. One shot from the old muzzle loader was sufficient to send the ghost scurrying for cover. The specter never reappeared, but for days "Doc" Huntsman appeared nervous and shaken.

As the years drifted on and the search revealed nothing, the Huntsmans became more impatient and persistent. Anderson never knew just when he would be called away from his farm work to renew the digging. Sometimes he would have to leave his plowing or harvesting in the middle of the forenoon to do the bidding of the brothers.

On one occasion Bates Huntsman asked Anderson

to bring a team with him. He took the team over to the Huntsman place and hitched the horses to a plow-like apparatus for cutting the surface of the ground. Both the Huntsmans and Damewoods were present on this occasion, declared Anderson, and "Doc" Huntsman had an iron rod he would push into the ground here and there. After a time Anderson struck a soft spot with the plow apparatus, and "Doc" Huntsman said they would stop for the day. As Anderson and his brother passed this spot the next day they noticed that it had been dug out. Investigating the freshly turned dirt they found a bone about eight inches in length, apparently that of a boy. Anderson's brother took the bone and when Bates Huntsman came along, handed it to him. Huntsman said, "I never had anything to do with it", and his jaw fell.

Some time later while digging in a designated spot, Anderson uncovered three stakes set in a direct line. The tops of the stakes were charred as though by fire, and they appeared to have been in the ground a long time.

"We're close to it now. Keep on! Keep on!" urged "Doc" Huntsman.

Spurred on by the vision of one-fourth of the fortune which was to be his, Anderson dug away feverishly, while the doctor made no effort to conceal his eager anticipation.

"I first came onto some white sand", he told reporters. "I followed the sand up a hill a distance,

and found a box about as long as my arm. There was a rock on the box. The box was zinc or iron."

Thinking he could knock the top off the metal box Anderson hit it a whack with his spade. Despite the fact that the hole was twelve or thirteen feet deep and muddy at the bottom "Doc" Huntsman jumped into it forthwith, and ordered Anderson to get out as they would not go any farther that night. Anderson replied that they had found what they were hunting for and that he wanted his share as pay for his work. Just then Charles Huntsman, a son of Doctor Huntsman, came up. He said nothing, but he had a gun in his hand and Anderson crawled out of the hole. "Doc" Huntsman told Anderson that they could not count the money until later and then they would pay him. Trusting and credulous as he was, Anderson left the Huntsmans in possession of the box. He never saw it again.

The next spring "Doc" Huntsman died suddenly, gripped by a stroke of paralysis. "I have asked for the money once or twice a year since that but have always been put off by Bates saying he wanted to look a little further", Anderson told newspaper men. So the years ebbed on. Weary of long waiting for his share of the treasure which he believed he had uncovered, Sam Anderson at last unburdened his woes to Attorney Bulman.

In his investigation of the affair Bulman found other persons acquainted with some of the remarkable details of the strange story. Chief among these

was Maria Collins Porter, an elderly lady of Quitman, Missouri, who claimed that as a young girl she had seen some of the gang carrying the body of the murdered cattleman past her home; and afterwards had been compelled to wash the bloody quilt in which they had carried the victim. She had kept silent about the crime throughout the years because of the threat on the part of the gangsters to take her life if she ever breathed a word of what she witnessed on that fateful night. Hers was a story so strange that it seemed almost incredible. "It was a story of a murder gang, of stolen thousands, of a crime committed so far back that even the victim was a matter of uncertainty; one of those crimes that long since had been given up as a riddle beyond solution."

Following swiftly upon the story of Maria Collins Porter came the arrest of Bates Huntsman, Sam Scrivner, and John and Hank Damewood, the four surviving members of the gang. They were brought to Bedford and charged with the murder of a man of unknown identity.

G. A. Brunson, a special State agent who arrested Bates Huntsman told of his arrival at the latter's home and of finding the aged pioneer in his yard. After he had informed the gaunt old man of his arrest, Brunson remarked, "You've been expecting this a long time, haven't you?"

"Yes", was the answer.

"Is there any money on the place?" pursued Brunson.

"No, there is none here", was the reply.

"What became of it?"

"Well, you know the head man — ", and he became silent.

He started over toward the rain barrel and called the girls whom Brunson had noticed as he drove up to the place. "Go tell the boys the officers have come to take me to Bedford", he said, and added that it was something about "Klondike".

Brunson asked him if the little boy was the son of the man who was killed and he said he didn't know. "Do you know what became of the team that belonged to the man who was killed?" Brunson asked. Huntsman replied that he didn't know.

"Don't ask me any more questions", the old man begged, "and give my head a rest, and after a while I will tell you all."

Later Brunson asked, "Did John Damewood have anything to do with the killing of the boy?"

Huntsman looked at Brunson a little while and said, "No sir, I don't think he did."

The bringing of the four old men to Bedford by State and county officials created no end of excitement. Little knots of people gathered on every street corner of the business district "discussing the situation, recalling rumors that they had heard from childhood, and trying to make a connected whole of the fragments of information in their possession."

Residents of Bedford recalled the death of the eccentric Doctor Golliday seven years earlier and

the finding of some \$42,000 scattered here and there in his small drug store and frame shack adjoining. When found the doctor had been dead two or more days and the rats had gnawed his fingers. For years he had been a recluse, spending little and saving nearly every cent of his income from a dwindling practice and sale of drugs.

As a young man fresh from Rush Medical College he had settled down in Bedford and had at once entered upon an extensive practice in Taylor and adjoining counties and in northwestern Missouri as well. His drug business, from modest beginnings, grew to considerable proportions. Tall, handsome, with finely chiseled features, he was a popular citizen of the community. He was a man of courteous mien, brilliant, and well informed.

Then suddenly he became a recluse, shutting in his property on Main Street with a high board fence front and rear. His frame drug store occupied one corner of the lot facing Main Street, and within the enclosure, surrounded by a tangle of weeds and vines, was his one room shack where he lived alone. Unrequited love, his friends said, accounted for his strange behavior.

In 1908, the people of Bedford were shocked by the finding of his lifeless body in the old shack and the subsequent discovery of a hoard of gold, silver, and "Spinner" bills, a currency of Civil War days, scattered everywhere about his premises. Under his bed was a box containing \$1800. In pigeonholes,

among books, under papers yellowed with age, and in an old rusty safe searchers unearthed his hidden treasure. The money was taken across the street to the First National Bank in buckets. Banks at St. Joseph and Chicago refused to honor the old "Spinner" bills, but Treasury officials at Washington accepted them dollar for dollar. No small part of the old doctor's fortune went to the State for back taxes; the rest was inherited by his surviving relatives.

When the story told by Mrs. Porter linked Dr. Golliday's name with the Siam murder mystery, rumor at once found in this affair an explanation of the source of the old doctor's hoard of money. His intimate friends, however, vigorously resented and denied any such possibility. His extensive practice of an earlier day, profits from his drug business, and his frugal, even penurious habits, they declared, fully explained the accumulation of his wealth.

Speculation as to the identity of the murdered man and the circumstances of the tragedy became rife. From various parts of the country came statements from persons who believed they could provide a clew. A press despatch from Fresno, California, quoted C. P. Huntsman, son of the deceased Dr. C. R. Huntsman and nephew of the accused Bates Huntsman, to the effect that his father and uncle did bury the bodies and the \$90,000 belonging to the cattleman, but they did so at the orders of the James boys. According to his story, on the night in ques-

tion his father, who had been visiting at the home of Bates Huntsman, was summoned to attend Mrs. Floyd Collins, who was ill at the cabin of her son-in-law, Jonathan Dark. Bates Huntsman accompanied the physician. Just before reaching the cabin they stumbled upon the James boys and their gang soon after the murder had been committed. "The two men were backed up against a tree and then Bates Huntsman was forced, under the threat of death, to bury the two bodies while Dr. Huntsman buried the gold. Although members of the family sought to have Dr. Huntsman reveal the hiding place, he died without giving its location, although in his later years he was sorely touched by poverty."

Shortly after this story appeared in newspapers, Cole Younger, the only surviving member of the James gang, uttered a vigorous denial of any participation in the affair by the James boys. "Frank James was in California from 1866 to 1870", he declared, "and the gang was not organized until he returned." Both of the boys were far from Iowa when the murder was committed. "What's more", he added, "it's a joke to think of the James boys having anything like \$90,000, the amount they claim the cattleman lost. I frequently loaned them money in those days and I know they never had more than they could carry in their pockets."

As to the identity of the victims, the stories finally sifted down to two men, Nathaniel Smith, a rich ranchman of northern Missouri, who disappeared

in the late sixties, and William Hedrick, a horse trader, also a resident of northern Missouri, who dropped out of sight in Civil War days. Volunteer witnesses, however, came forward to show that Hedrick lost his life in border warfare in the early days of the Civil War, and so the remaining surmise indicated that Smith was the victim of whose murder the four old men were accused.

All four of the men denied any guilt in connection with the crime and none appeared greatly concerned about the outcome. They were released on bonds of \$5000 each and after consulting with their attorneys, James P. and Bruce J. Flick, they stood about the streets awhile and talked with their friends. All were dressed in their best clothes, and they carried themselves with considerable dignity. Their families stood with them. Sam Scrivner declared that he had never killed anything but chickens, cattle, and hogs. "I never stole any treasure", he said. "All that I have I have made in good old Iowa land the same as most of my neighbors." The Damewood brothers admitted digging for money, that is, some digging but not much. The hidden treasure, they thought, had been buried by bandits in the days when Taylor County was practically a frontier. Bates Huntsman, almost a patriarchal figure with his snowy white beard, had little to say other than to deny any part in the alleged murder.

Sympathy of the people in Bedford seemed to be wholly with the defendants. When Sam Anderson,

accompanied by his two brothers, Wilson and Robert, arrived in town for the hearing, considerable apprehension for their safety was felt by the officials. As the two walked up the street toward the courthouse mutterings were heard on every hand, and Anderson was pointed out as "That's the fellow that started it all!", and "There he goes!" An appeal was made to the townspeople by Wilson Anderson through two Des Moines newspaper men, asking that judgment be withheld until after the trial. He explained to the embittered townspeople that his brother "was not responsible for the arrest and incarceration of their neighbors on the charge of a murder committed half a century ago." The three brothers were accompanied to the courthouse by an armed deputy sheriff.

Bedford welcomed the day of the hearing of the murder charges against the four Taylor County pioneers as a holiday. At nine o'clock of the morning of July 13th a large crowd had gathered in front of the courthouse, and on every corner were groups of men and women discussing the case.

State officials, who had been drawn to Bedford through the unusual aspects of the case, were not altogether pleased with the way the matter had been handled. Both Attorney General George Cosson, and his assistant, C. A. Robbins, felt that the case might not develop properly owing to the hasty action of filing information before the evidence was apparently complete. Representing the State of

Iowa at this hearing were Attorney General Cosson, Assistant Attorney General Robbins, County Attorney R. T. Burrell, Assistant County Attorney Frank Wisdom, and W. W. Bulman. The firm of Flick and Flick, father and son, represented the defendants.

"With such a background of alleged crime, of fortune and strange quests, the trial began", wrote a reporter of the *Kansas City Star*. It was only a preliminary hearing before Justice of the Peace M. A. Sawyer, but the court-room was packed and jammed with curious sightseers both from Bedford and distant points. A tiptoeing, jostling line extended out into the hallway and every window of the dimly lighted court-room was filled with eager listeners that hot July night when the trial began.

Every eye watched fixedly the front of the room as Maria Collins Porter, a little, brown-faced woman with wisps of gray hair showing beneath her simple bonnet, took the stand.

There is no official record of the trial. Thousands of words of testimony were taken down in shorthand but to this day they remain untranscribed. The testimony of the State's star witness as given below is quoted in part from the *Des Moines Register* and in part from the *Kansas City Star*.

Attorney Bulman put the usual questions for the State. The little woman answered them quietly, but with a vigor that belied her years. She gave her age, told where she lived at various times, and her

acquaintance with the defendant, Bates Huntsman, who of the four accused men stood trial first. She told how her sister, Elizabeth, had married Jonathan Dark and they had come to live near the Collins homestead. She told how she and another little girl playmate had wandered one day into a cave near the cabin and had found there a lot of metal dies, acids, and some quarters and dollars. Afterwards, she said, they had seen the Damewood boys, Sam Scrivner, Jonathan Dark, "Doc" Huntsman, and "Doc" Golliday about the cave and wondered what they were doing there.

The examination proceeded to the events that transpired in that neighborhood on the night of the murder.

"I had come to Dark's house to take care of my sister's baby", she said. "About 11 o'clock I heard voices outside and I went to the door and looked out. Some men were approaching the gate. I stepped back in the shadow and watched them. I saw they were carrying a heavy object in a quilt or blanket. They were talking about 'Than'. I recognized 'Doc' Huntsman's voice. He was saying, 'I've felt his pulse and the old stiff won't be able to tell anything now.' I distinctly saw a hand and a leg dangling from the quilt."

The attorney interrupted. "How close were you?" he asked.

"As close as I am to Uncle Bates Huntsman", she replied, pointing slowly to the old man whose

fate hung upon her story. He was sitting as one in a dream, his face lit up by the same simple curiosity and interest which showed in the countenances of men in the audience.

"Dark saw me there", the story went on. "He swore, 'Damn you, I've a notion to kill you now. If you ever breathe a word of what you have seen I'll wash my hands in your heart's blood.' Bates Huntsman, 'Doc' Huntsman, Sam Scrivner, and 'Doc' Golliday were carrying the body. Hank Damewood was walking along by it. John Damewood was out holding the team. As they went on I heard them say, 'We'll divide the money later, when it is a more suitable time.'

"They argued about how to dispose of the body and one suggested throwing it into a well. Another said to put it in a ditch and cover it up. I don't know how they finally settled the matter, but I never saw the body again.

"The next day Jonathan Dark brought home a quilt. He told me to wash it and again warned me to keep quiet about what I had seen.

"After I moved away from there and went to Quitman, Missouri, Jonathan Dark followed me. He threatened me often. When he would get me alone he would say, 'I'm going to kill you some time because dead people never talk.' One day when he was at our place he declared, 'I've got you now,' and started toward me. My sister, Mattie Collins, shot him. He died in a few minutes. I held his head

with one hand and held a bucket to catch the blood with my other hand."

Such was the story told by the gray haired woman. So direct was her testimony, "so involving and enmeshing in its details the four strange men on trial, that it seemed there could be no escape for them." But when her story was submitted to the searching test of a vigorous cross examination, the emphatic assertions of the aged woman began to break down, and her memory appeared rather unreliable.

She described Doctor Golliday as but little above medium height, broad shouldered, and light of hair and eyes. He was, in fact, just the opposite of this description. Her uncertainty as to the date of the crime added to the confusion. In the main, however, she stuck tenaciously to her original testimony. She appeared to harbor no ill will toward the four defendants; but expressed her opinion in no uncertain terms about those who dragged her into the affair. Had she known that she did not have to come to Bedford on an Iowa subpoena she wouldn't have come, she said.

Sam Anderson, his once powerful frame breaking under the burdens and disappointments of time, took the stand for the State. He could only relate the "peculiar, unceasing search of the Huntsmans for the buried treasure." He knew nothing of the supposed murder; perhaps he had heard something of the sort, but he knew nothing definite. He only be-

lieved he had uncovered a fortune and he wanted his share of it. He had become acquainted with the Porters when they were neighbors in Missouri. His son had married Mrs. Porter's daughter.

The case of the State against the four old men might have proceeded further, but for the fact that it was impossible to establish a *corpus delecti*, that is, the existence of a man who was killed. There was no witness to establish definitely that Nathaniel Smith was in the vicinity of Siam at the time of his disappearance, and no one who could give positive evidence that he had been killed on the "Klondike" farm. The mysterious search for buried treasure, persistent rumors of highway robbery, and the discovery of a miser's hoard of old money could not be definitely connected with the alleged murder.

At the conclusion of the testimony offered by the State, Bruce J. Flick, the young attorney who handled the defense, moved that the case against Huntsman be dismissed. Following the motion and remarks by Flick, Attorney General Cosson addressed the court. The testimony offered by the State, he believed, established the fact that there had been considerable digging on the Huntsman place. Mrs. Porter, too, undoubtedly believed that she was telling the truth. Nevertheless, no one in the vicinity had seen the murdered man alive and his identity had not been established. In view of the age of the defendants and the circumstances surrounding the case he felt there was not sufficient evidence to bind

the defendants over to the grand jury. Therefore he recommended that the motion of the defense be granted. The court so ordered. Then he asked that the dismissal apply to all defendants in the case, and without comment Justice Sawyer complied with the suggestion.

"A cheer went up and the court room was thrown into a frenzy as friends and relatives of the old men flocked around them and almost fought to get to them for congratulations. Solemnly, their demeanor little changed by the fortuitous shift of circumstances, the four old men filed out of the court room."

Thus the strange case came to an end. Did the gang of young men near Siam murder Nathaniel Smith and his boy companion and rob them of untold wealth? Did Sam Anderson stumble upon the buried gold that once belonged to the rich cattleman? Was the Golliday fortune of some \$42,000, discovered at the time of the death of the aged recluse, a part of the "Klondike" stake? These, like many of the questions that arise in connection with the strange story of Siam gold and the "Klondike" farm, remain unanswered. Even to this day they puzzle all who try to find the answer to this unsolved mystery.

BRUCE E. MAHAN