

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Last Horse Robbery

O. A. Hall, who lived three miles northeast of Story City, had come among the very earliest pioneers that had located scatteringly over this part of the State. His house, which is still in existence, though moved from the original site to Lewis Beroen's farm place near by, was, it is said, the first white man's dwelling in that immediate vicinity. In it he and his family lived till the Civil War began, when he enlisted, leaving the homestead and farm in care of Anders Christenson Tjernagel and family. They were to live there until his return.

The stipulations were that the Tjernagels should have free use of the farm of one hundred and sixty acres in consideration of their furnishing Hall's wife, who was staying temporarily at Story City, all the flour she needed and enough corn to enable her to keep one pig. This was a very low rental, yet Anders found it hard to pay, besides procuring the where-

withal to support his own family and stock. They were obliged to subsist on corn-meal and wheat coffee for long periods, and were happy when they did not run out of these poor constituents of a decidedly meager diet.

Des Moines was about fifty miles away, the nearest town where necessary supplies in any considerable quantity were kept in stock. When the settlers went there it was only for very urgent reasons. They greased the wheel-hubs on their wagons and fared forth on the well-nigh trackless prairie, trusting to a kind fate and the stolid endurance of their oxen to bring them safely back.

With what delight the expectant children hailed the coming of papa's slowly-moving outfit when, after many, many long hours of waiting, it was finally seen, a tiny speck on the prairie, growing larger and larger, homeward bound. What we now deem commonplace necessities, appeared to them like treasures fetched from Aladdin's cave. One single stick of candy looked to them like — well, it didn't look like anything else at all, because in their estimation there was nothing worthy enough to be compared with it. It was kept to be gloated over, not eaten, at least for many weeks. This was during the early lean years when precious little was obtained from the patches of newly-broken land. And what other resources had they? As the virgin soil came more and more under cultivation and

horses were introduced to work it, added sustenance was wrested from the land and the pinch of poverty abated.

The original mooley cow did her best to brighten up things from the very start, but she was not always in milk and, besides, she needed careful attention and plenty of feed during the cold winter weather. The ration was often necessarily short, however, which caused the milk flow to be correspondingly scanty; and with the new calf claiming its natural proprietary rights the residue did not reach far. The porker, too, wanted milk, and yielded up his flesh only on the condition that he got his share and plenty of corn, thus enabling him to put it on. But as the times grew better the cow could lie down and chew her cud in peace and plenty, while the pig snored beside her in supreme contentment. Their well-being was reflected in the added abundance and variety of Aunty Helga's table fare.

Anders had lived about five years on the place, when my parents and their first-born, my brother Lewis, appeared on the scene, having come by team across the prairie from Illinois. They were made welcome until they could establish a home of their own, which after a few months they did, locating half a mile farther north. There the writer and six other children were born.

On coming west across the prairie my father drove

a pair of beautiful black geldings which, upon being turned loose after the long journey, were as spry as on the day they started out a fortnight before. One day, about three weeks after their arrival, the horses were turned out to graze a little to the south of the Hall place, the future site of the home of Jacob Charlson Grove. Toward dusk, when father went to fetch them home, their sleek bodies were seen glistening in the light of the setting sun. Father noticed particularly the striking silhouettes of their lithe, muscular forms against the darkening sky in the east. Three strange horsemen who at that moment rode by, Indian fashion, also regarded with keen eyes the details of the scene.

There was a small horse stable on the farm but this was only large enough to accommodate the horses of the proprietor, of which by this time he had been able to secure two. A primitive shed afforded shelter for the other stock. In one corner father had arranged a rude enclosure for his team, so as to hinder the other animals from being too familiar around them and being kicked for their inquisitiveness. No one skulking around in the darkness would suspect that in this ramshackle structure the pig and the lamb, the horse and the cow, with a self-satisfied rooster overhead, were wooing Morpheus in silent company.

The darkness, however, proved to be no protection for the animals in the stable; it was thoroughly ransacked that very night. Every one had gone to bed

at the usual hour in the evening with no suspicion of impending trouble. Aunt Helga had been up with her little son Lars at ten o'clock, and had gone outside for a moment; but nothing unusual attracted her attention. At eleven my mother was aroused by the loud baying of the dog, but later thanked Providence that she did not awaken father, for had he gone out he would have exposed himself to the murderous weapons of the marauders, for at that very moment, no doubt, the cowardly thieves were at work.

In the morning Anders found his stable empty, but our own beloved Frank and Charley, the chief attraction for the barn-breakers, had been overlooked. A search in the immediate neighborhood was at once begun, but it revealed nothing. Father called to mind the three riders who had passed by the evening before and concluded that they were the fellows who had taken the horses. No wonder that in the early days, as well as since, horse stealing has been considered a monumental crime. It placed the owner in much the same predicament as the fisherman whose boat drifted seaward and left him destitute of the means of earning a livelihood.

Later in the day it was learned that not only had the thieves robbed Anders of his team that night, but they had also made away with horses belonging to the neighbors, Francis Wier and John Pearson Börcha. Posses were formed which started in pursuit north-

ward and westward. Remnants of the raid were found on the way in the form of discarded pieces of harness which had been flung away in the flight to enable the rascally fugitives to accelerate their speed and outdistance their pursuers.

Near Lakin's Grove one of the horses belonging to Anders was discovered hobbled and cropping grass. It was extremely difficult even for his owner to catch him. Evidently the outlaws had hobbled the horses and let them loose to graze, but this one had refused to be retaken and they had been obliged to leave him behind.

About forty miles to the west, on the Des Moines River, is the famous McGuire's Bend, said to have been the greatest rendezvous of horse thieves in the country during the Civil War. The Des Moines Valley descends abruptly from the level prairie, and the numerous deep ravines therein afforded ideal haunts for the outlaws. This may have been the base of operations, but the trail of the thieves in question seemed to lead northward.

In Wright County there still stands an old log cabin that in the early days was said to have served as a stopping place for thieves and law-breakers. It was owned by a foreigner who, to judge from appearances, was somewhat of a hermit; but rumor had it that he derived rich profit from his dealings with certain clandestine callers and was an interested party in the divi-

sion of sundry unlawful spoils. The searchers obtained a clue to the whereabouts of the robbers from some Illinois land prospectors who reported having seen a band of questionable characters near this place.

Thither the party quickly made their way and, joined by the sheriff, arrived in time to recover some of their horses which were quietly grazing not far from the cabin. A few of the best horses had been tethered close to the door, and before the would-be captors could close in upon them the outlaws, seeing their danger, flung themselves upon these horses and were away like the wind. A few shots were exchanged. One member of the posse was killed. He was a young man who happened to be at his home in Story County on a short furlough from the war. So it came about that he laid down his life in the service of the government, though not in the national cause.

The skirmish was all over so quickly that the settlers rubbed their eyes in surprise and wondered what to do next. Anders never saw his best mare again. The leader of the gang had selected her as his special prize. Neither was the fine Börcha team ever recovered. The thieves, being thus better mounted than their pursuers, made good their escape. The sheriff and his deputies sadly returned with their dead, finding it useless in the circumstances to pursue the fleeing villains.

A protective alliance was formed by the farmers to guard against further outlawry, and, whether from the

fear thus inspired in the horse thieves or from some other cause, scarcely a horse has since been missed in that section of the State. There was a rumor abroad that the thieves had been finally apprehended and imprisoned; but during those troublous war times many conflicting reports were rife, with little or nothing to confirm them.

N. TJERNAGEL