

GOLDEN FLEECE

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These stories are fiction. If any character bears the name of a living person, it is purely coincidence.

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Hangman's Coin

by Thorp McCluskey

Illustrated by
JAY JACKSON

BLACK JEM WILLIS watched the crisply-aproned tavern maid pour boiling hot water from a shiny teakettle into his rum and sugar. At last he lifted a grimy hand.

"Have done, Miss Jezebel," he said, with a ribald chuckle. "Would you have me drinking pap, my pretty lass? And how far mought it be to Boston Town?"

She tossed her head, and her blue eyes crackled as she answered him, "I am not called Jezebel, tinker, but Rosalind. And it would seem that pap's too strong for you, if but a bit of rum and supper have loosed your tongue so disrespectful. And as for Boston Town, tinker, it might be eighty mile, and it might be forty, but from Hooker's Crossing, seven mile down the pike, 'tis fifty-eight."

Black Jem, unable quickly to think of an apt retort, contented himself with sliding two silver shillings across the table-top and burying his nose in the fragrant drink. The tavern-maid, head held high, scooped up Jem's platter with its knuckle bone and soggy scraps of bread, and marched into the kitchen.

Black Jem leaned back against the

pine-planked wall and watched the room through glowering, beetle-browed eyes. . . .

This small inn, huddled so close beside the Boston Pike, did, Black Jem enviously saw, a good business. Six or seven men, travelers like himself, were eating and drinking, preparatory to a night's slumber in the rooms overhead; the sounds of rigs in the yard outside and of men ahorseback were frequent and brisk. Black Jem, through a rosy, rum-induced mist, wondered savagely if he would ever have the gold with which to buy a place like this and settle down.

At a large table in the center of the room a party of young men were holding merry revelry. The center of the table groaned beneath two monstrous turkeys, now fast disappearing beneath the ravenous onslaughts of the youths, who were lubricating their esophagal passages with mighty potations from a stone jug of applejack, a drink authoritative as the speech of a Bishop.

Black Jem watched the jovial youths with interest. Only one, he saw, was not drinking, while the others were encouraging the lad on to some feat

which appeared to require both courage and self-assurance.

"She is a pretty lass," one was saying, his voice full of thick laughter and his eyes sparkling with fervour. "And she has promised you her hand if you but gain her father's consent. I must warn you, friend Andrew; his nose is as long and as cold as an icicle. And, when he scents a suitor, he is like a mad bull."

"Ho! Ho!" another laughed. "One year ago I approached him, and for a fortnight afterward the imprint of his boot was blue upon my buttocks!"

"Still," said a third, "he is purse proud. Andrew is no penniless suitor; unlike ourselves he has worked hard and saved his money. I think, Andrew, that if you show him the gold and tell him that once you have gained his consent you will use it to the purchase of a third interest in Ebenezer Phelps' grist mill, he will grant you his daughter."

For the first time Andrew Bennett spoke.

"I hope so, gentlemen; I hope so, indeed," he exclaimed eagerly. He touched a leathern pouch at his waist. "I have the money here, that Judge Hackaday may see for himself whether or not I am a suitor of merit. And now, friends, I must be gone. It is nigh twilight, and I have yet to cover seven miles of pike."

"Shall we go with you, an escort of forlorn suitors?" one shouted. Smiling, Andrew Bennett shook his head.

"It will be scarce dark ere I arrive, and the roads are quiet. And, too, I have a pistol. Wait here; I will return before eleven to take a nightcap with you."

Black Jem, with seeming unconcern, signalled to the little tavern maid for another rum and water.

But, fifteen minutes later, when the revelry had reached a new height, he slipped from the inn. Standing in the stableyard, he summoned the ostler.

"My roan mare," he said brusksly, letting his pack slide with a jingle to the ground.

"You beant stayin' the night, tink-er?" the stableboy asked, incredulously.

"No," Black Jem said sourly. "The roads are safe, and it is far to Boston. I ride on to Hooker's Crossing to-night. . . ."

THE September New England twilight had deepened into night. A storm was making, and more frequently than not the pallid, three-quarters moon was shrouded behind scudding ribbons of black cloud. The road, in the interval between twilight and darkness, had become abruptly deserted. It was not a pleasant night to be out, with the chill, easterly wind rising. . . .

But Black Jem rode in high good humour, urging his saddlebowed mare against the wind at what most men would call a fool's pace. The fewer people on the pike, the better for him. . . .

Thrice he passed men upon the road, men who were homeward bound or who were seeking the nearest inn, and thrice he pulled up his mare and stared into their faces before, cursing, he rode on. And now ahead, once again, he heard the steady clatter of a horse's hoofs.

"Ho there, friend!" Black Jem shouted, as he drew up beside a night-concealed figure riding at a steady, ground-covering pace toward Hooker's crossing. "How many miles to an inn, this night?"

The clouds lay black across the moon. Although the man riding beside him was no more than a moving

blotch against the night, Black Jem sensed that he was wary and alert.

"Who are you?" a voice came crisply. "I am armed; I have a pistol. . . ."

Black Jem grinned. The voice was the voice of the youth he had seen in the inn.

"I be Jem Willis," he said jovially. "Jem Willis, a poor tinker, a journeying to Boston Town. Let me ride by you. This night is not one for honest men to be out alone."

There was a long silence, broken only by the clatter of the horses' hoofs, before the youth answered.

"I ride only to Hooker's crossing. An inn is there at which you may find lodging. You may ride by me if you will."

Black Jem's mare drew close beside the youth's horse. "Thank'ee, lad," the tinker said heartily. "'Twill spell the loneliness." He squinted upward toward where the moon rode the sky, hidden behind a long tattered cloud that blotted out the stars. He must wait until the moon shone forth. . . .

They rode in silence.

And then the moon gleamed fitfully through the fraying cloud—dimmed again. But not for long, Jem knew. His right hand fumbled within his homespun jacket.

Abruptly the moonlight gleamed, with a cold, revealing pallor. The fine cambric at the youth's breast was a white blotch against the darkness. Black Jem's left knee dug into his mare's shoulder. As the horses stumbled together he struck, with a wide, strong, backward sweep of his right hand.

The youth's horse reared as he felt his saddle suddenly lightened. Wheeling, scenting blood, a shrill whinny bursting from his dilated nostrils, he thundered down the black road toward home.

Black Jem dismounted and stood over the coughing, twisted figure in the road.

"Ho, now, my fine friend," he said commiseratingly, as he swiftly slipped the blood-drenched pouch from the lad's waist and transferred it to his own, "I hope that that prick I gave you pains not overmuch. 'Twill not pain for long; the blow was fatal." He chuckled callously. "'Tis well for you—else I would have had to strike again. I would not have you live to know my face."

The youth's eyes, pain-widened, stared upward into Black Jem's night-shrouded countenance.

"You have killed me, tinker," he coughed, then, through blood flecked lips, "yet I will venture a prophecy. You have killed me for my gold, and my gold shall betray you. More, you will not live, tinker, to spend one piece of gold from that pouch, and you will die for this crime, dancing at the end of a rope. Though I die now, Justice yet lives. . . ."

A fountain of blood gushed over his shirtfront, cutting short his words, and he shuddered, stiffened, and relaxed. He was dead.

BLACK JEM shrugged, for he feared neither God nor man nor devil. Casting a quick glance about, he saw a clump of elder bushes close beside the road. Hurriedly he dragged the corpse behind their concealing screen. Then, a song in his heart, he mounted into the saddle and continued on his way.

As he rode he pondered what he would do. It was bad that Bennett's horse had escaped to give the alarm; he had planned to kill both horse and rider. The best strategy now would

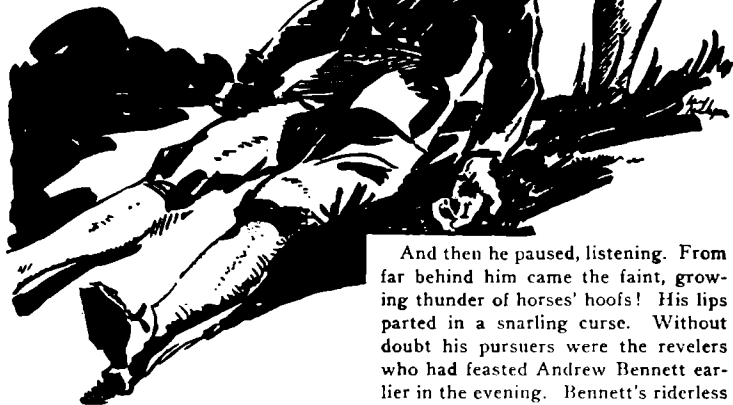
be to slay his own mare, and make his way aloft to Albany. People would be on the lookout for a tinker, riding a mare and carrying a pack. Once in Albany he would be safe.

A quarter mile down the road he led his mare deep into the wood, pushing into the very heart of a copse of young pine where, he was reasonably certain, she would lie undetected for many days. With commendable despatch he tethered her to a sturdy sapling and cut her throat.

Feeling considerably lightened at heart, Black Jem returned to the road and resumed his journey. Unburdened by mare or pack, his escape was as good as accomplished.

And now the infrequent lights of

Hurriedly he dragged the corpse behind their concealing screen.



Hooker's Crossing showed ahead, widely spaced, glimmering low down beyond the fields. The road sloped gently downward; the village lay in a shallow valley. And presently Black Jem was passing the low built, clap-boarded houses that blinked at him

through the darkness. He was alert as any hunted thing; he wanted no person to say, tomorrow, that a stranger had been seen this night walking through the village.

And then he paused, listening. From far behind him came the faint, growling thunder of horses' hoofs! His lips parted in a snarling curse. Without doubt his pursuers were the revelers who had feasted Andrew Bennett earlier in the evening. Bennett's riderless horse must have gone straight to the inn!

Black Jem decided quickly. He was passing a churchyard, its tombstones ghostly in the night, its elm-sentined quietude enclosed by a fence of white pickets through which an iron-latched

gate beckoned to the little church beyond.

The thunder of pursuit dinned closer.

Black Jem ran behind the church. And there, at his very feet, he saw a small trapdoor, leading into the church cellar. Tugging at this door, he found it unlocked. Hurriedly he let himself into the abysmal, damp gloom beneath the church.

Feeling his way through total darkness, Black Jem crept toward the rear of the cellar. Here he found a narrow stairway, at the top of which was a door. Opening this door, Black Jem tiptoed, an invisible shadow against vaultlike gloom, toward a small stained-glass window that cast a faintly tinted glow across the rows of straight-backed pews.

The horsemen were clattering past the church, were stopping in noisy disorder before a house a hundred yards down the street! Black Jem pressed his face close against the tiny diamond panes.

In the darkness, through those small colored panes, Black Jem could see nothing. And yet his position, there at the front of the church, so close to the street, gave him an odd assurance of security. He could not be surprised, and there was always the cellar trapdoor through which he could flee. . . .

TH**E**R**E** was a sound of many voices down the street, the opening and closing of doors, the running of men afoot. A solitary horesman rode at breakneck pace over the road Black Jem had come.

They were rousing the countryside!

In the cold, still blackness within the empty church Black Jem grinned crookedly. What matter to him if they

watched the roads and scoured the thickets? Who among them would think of searching the village church for a murderer?

Suddenly Black Jem stiffened. The clattering of men assembling down the village street was abruptly moving closer. A voice came loudly above the clamor—"Ho, now, Eben Taylor! Be you the key to the church about your person, or do it hang to home within the clock? Open up and ring the bell and call out more men!"

There was the groaning of the iron latch and the creak of the wooden gate. Black Jem, peering through the colored panes, could not see the man approaching through the thick grass between the tombstones. But no matter, the man was there. He was coming to open the church. . . .

But there was one place in the church where men never went, except to change a bellrope. The belfry!

Even as, silently and swiftly, he sought and found and climbed the ladder that led through a small square hole into the belfry, Black Jem was once more grinning to himself. They would ring the bell, and all the time he would be squatting in the belfry!

Somewhere, in the iron-solid blackness above his head, pigeons stirred and whispered sleepily, and Black Jem's nerves leaped. Then, with a grimace of disgust, he sat down upon a dusty beam and waited. Pigeons. . . !

Black Jem's fingers, sweeping the gloom in wide circles, touched the bellrope. Black Jem wondered fleetingly if it was a big bell. . . .

The church door, twenty or more feet beneath the beam on which he sat, opened. There was a brief pause, and then, suddenly, the thick rope slid downward between his fingers, swiftly,

scorchingly. There was a creaking, grating sound a few feet above his head, and the bell sounded, not loudly, but with a sort of anticipatory clatter. Black Jem grinned twistedly. It was a big bell. . . .

There was a swishing as the rope hurtled upward, winding half around the iron wheel beside the bell, a sudden rush of air as the bell gained momentum and swung through its mighty arc, then, at last, the heavy, reverberating boom of the clapper striking the upward swinging metal.

And suddenly the eight foot cubicle in which Black Jem crouched hummed and throbbed to the beat of the big bell! The bell was ringing as though its rope were in the hands of a man demented, rapidly, frenziedly, as though its ringer wanted to turn the heavy oaken cradle completely over and bring bell and iron wheel crashing down through the belfry floor upon his own head. It rushed and swooped through the blackness above Jem's ears—half a ton of savage, plunging metal, buzzing and humming like a gigantic bumblebee. And—"Swoop—Boom! Swoop—Boom!" its call went out across the countryside.

THERE was no grin on Black Jem's face now. His hands were tight pressed across his ears to stop the vibrations that beat against his skull like a million hammers; his mouth burst open. He turned his back to the bell and crouched close against the belfry grille, as though by doing this he might gain an infinitesimal fraction of the silence outside.

Like dream sounds through the thunder of the bell he heard the running of men, their shouts and oaths and the clop of their feet as they as-

sembled in the churchyard and on the porch of the church. The whinnying and stamping of excited horses mingled faintly with the booming of the bell, and dancing fingers of lantern-light, probing between the belfry grilles, sent crazy gleams and shadows spinning and swerving before Black Jem's eyes.

He could see the bell now, an iron demon whirling and raging above his head; he writhed and cowered, his face racked, his hands cupping his ears, against the dusty beams as the pigeons whirred into the night.

And then, small against the clangor of the bell, he heard a man's voice, shouting, "Ho, now, Eben Taylor! Have done with your ringing! Would you rouse the whole countryside 'twixt here and Boston? We are enough for the search; let the bell be still!"

Above Black Jem's head the bell obediently slowed its wild gyrations and hung motionless. But from the muttering, restless crowd below a voice suddenly shrilled:

"Look there, Judge Hackaday! Look there—a droppin' from the belfry-grille! Pieces of gold—bloody pieces of gold! Sure as Tophet the varmint as done this deed tonight's acrouchin' in the belfry!"

Black Jem's trembling fingers fumbled like bloody claws in the gaping mouth of the empty leathern pouch, the pouch whose thong had been cut almost in two by the knife-stroke that killed Andrew Bennett. The thong had parted now, parted in the darkness as Black Jem writhed beneath the booming of the bell. And the gold was gone now, gone from Black Jem's hands forever; it had slipped through the grille piece by piece from the crazily tilted pouch. . . .