

Playing With Death
or
Trailing The White Caps

My next case was a very dangerous one that led me into the old Smokey Mountains of East Tennessee, and among some of the meanest people that inhabits the globe.

It was in November '93 that I was sent for to come and hunt out the White Caps, of Seveir County. There had been a five hundred dollars reward made up by some of the good citizens, with a promise of as much more if I would undertake the job.

So I went up to look over the ground before beginning a campaign with them. And the way that every thing was at that time I knew that I could not do much with them, as the winter was coming on and I would have to be out nearly all the time, both night and day. So I did not undertake the case, but returned home.

The White Caps kept terrorizing and beating the people. They would go to a man's house and perhaps take him and his whole family out and whip them nearly to death, and he could not help himself. The best people kept writing for me to come and try them a round anyhow, until finally on the 11th of Feb., I went back and took up the trail of the gang. Pretty soon I began to accumulate some very strong evidence against some of the supposed-to-be, good citizens of the county. But to get a little nearer to facts. On the night of Feb., the 13th the White Caps had gone to the house of John Sharp and taken him out and whipped him til the blood driped from him and left him unconscious. Then they had gone over the ridge not more than a quarter of a mile to Enoch Hurt's house, and took one of his daughters and one son out ant treated them in the same maner that they had Sharpe. There was a boy and girl

Pg 2

of Hurst's that was not at home...that night, so the Gents of the Switch left a note for them to the effect that they would come back and attend to them as they had the rest of the family.

I heard of this outrage the next day and went over to see them. It was about six miles over there but I went and learned all that I could concerning it. The old man Hurst had recognized some of them, and one in particular as a man who lived just abut a mile from him. He recognized the gun that the fellow had the dress that he had on as one that he had saw a Mrs. Rollings wear at different times. o the man was Mack Rollings, a worthless sort of a fellow that lived there close. I had never saw any of them with their rig on, but I was destined to in a short time as they had left a notice there that they were coming back, and as the girl and boy had came home that they wanted to whip, I concluded to watch the house, and if they did come every body would know some of them the next morning. I fixed for them, I had two good Colt's sixes and a double barrel shot gun and plenty of shells loaded with buckshot, and the house was right in the woods and sit on one side of a small ravine not more than fifty feet wide with a little stream running through it, and the cabin door stood facing the stream. I hid myself just across the branch opposite the door in such a position that I could see every thing that came to the door.

The Caps always get in a bunch around a door just ready to rush in as soon as it is opened, and I intended if they came to let them get together and then turn both barrels of buckshot into them, and all that did not get it in the neck to pick off with my revolvers if they stayed in sight. I watched the house all that night and the next day I walked six miles over to another place where they had whipped a woman. It commenced snowing about the

time I got there, and after talking with her a while and getting all the information I could from her, I started back to Hurt's again, and, O, how it did snow! But I was determined on watching that house again that night. So on I went through the blinding snow. It was dark when I got there and so cold that I could not stand to be out all night without a fire, and of course I could not build a fire that would give the whole thing away, so I got one of the Hurst boys to relieve me every two hours, he going out and watching while I went in and warmed, so we kept that up all night, and yet no White Caps came. That somewhat discouraged me, but I thought I would watch one more night anyhow, but that day I had to go eight miles above Sevierville to find another man that I wanted to use as a witness, and I tell you it was a long walk for me to go eight miles and back that day for I was tired, as I had not slept any for two days and nights, but I made it. as I came back through Sevierville I stepped into a store to buy some tobacco, and while there one of the deputy sheriffs, W.M. Gass, came in and called me by name and asked how I was getting along and all about what I was doing, and when I was going back home and a lot of questions

Pg 3

That did not concern him. How he knew me or anything about me I well never know, but from the way he talked and actions he got my suspicious aroused at once. I knew that he was up to some kind of a trick and that if he did not belong to the White Caps he wanted to mighty bad, so I would not give him any satisfaction as to what I had done or was going to do, but instead left him and went over to Hurst's again. On the way I stopped at John Sharp's and he said he would help me watch that night. We went over to Hurst's and it was very cold; it had quit snowing and every thing was frozen up. We taken turns at watching until 11 o'clock when John said that he could not stand it to stay out any longer and that he would go up the ravine a little ways to another house and go to bed and send one of the boys from there to help me off. He went and I never saw any thing of him or the boy either that night. I watched until 1 o'clock, and I was so near wore out that I had to go in and rest. I went over to John's house and went to bed. There was no one there but his two daughters and two boys and they put me in the front room to sleep, they slept in a little back room. I was tired and not thinking of danger to myself I set my gun down by the door as I went in and pulled off my pistol belt and other weapons and laid them up on a quilt that the girls had been quilting and had wound it up just over my head and I laid my clothes on a chair at the foot of the bed and got in myself and was soon fast asleep.

I don't how long I had been asleep, but I was awakened by the door falling in on the floor, and as my bed sat just across the room in front of the door, and the room being small, it came near hitting my bed I knew that something was wrong at once, and I sit up in bed, and just as I raised up three men rushed in at the door and began shooting at me, these were closely followed by about ten or fifteen more, and from the racket that was going on from the outside, I think there was about fifteen more out there. Such fearful things they all had on. A sort of a mother-hubbard dress, and it was stuffed till it looked like a balloon full of gas ready to assend, and some of ugliest false-faces I ever saw. I remember one fellow put the muzzle of his Winchester against my breast and stood and looked me in the face for a full minute. His mask had a snout to it about ten inches long just like a turkey snout. All of them had guns of some kind, some had double barrel shot guns and some Winchesters, and they had belts with from one to three big pistols sticking in them.

I have saw Indians painted all colors of the rainbow in their war dances, but these fellows got ahead of that. They acted like crazy people; they would jump around on one foot and gave some of the most ear-splitting yells I ever heard. They wanted to kill me but like the noble red man, they wanted to have some fun out of me first. One great big imp of satan

got me by the throat with one hand and hit me in the face with his fist two or three times, and by that time another little lantern-

Pg 4

jawed coward stuck an old rusty pistol under my nose and he shot at me three times, but he was no good at shooting or his pistol was no good for he only hit me once and that was just above the tight eye. Then I made a brake for my gun at the door, but they got it before I could reach it, and then I kicked one of them in the stomick, butted one in the face and made a grab for one with my hand and tore off mask and all from his face, and just as I got straight again I heard a gun snap and looked around just in time to see one of them taking sight at me with a shot gun and I gave him the grand duck, and none too soon either, for just as I dodged down he shot and the shot cut all the hair out of the back of my neck and the powder burned my neck and face all over, but then I gave him a but that shut him up like a knife, and as I struck him we both fell which saved me again, for another one of them had pulled down on me, but instead of hiting me he shot a picture of Christ that was hanging on the wall all to pices. While I was down four or five of them jumped on me. They got hold of my arms and legs and carried me outside of the house, then they proceeded to beat me over the head with a pice of fence rail that they had used to knock the door down with. I grabed the rail with one hand and the man with the other, and we were having it all around there for the mastery, when one of them stuck a Bowie-knife in my back just under the right shoulder blade. Then I fell and played opossum on them. I let on like I was dead sure enough then, for I knew that I could not hope to get out alive if I fought any longer, and if I could play off on them as I was I had a chance of getting well after all I had went through, if they did not take a notion to shoot three or four holes in me while I was laying out there, but the snow was on the ground and the moon was shining very bright and I had strewn blood all around where I lay and I layed just as I had fallen. So they took it for granted that I was dead. Then they went in the house and got my clothes and took every thing out of the pockets. My money, eye-glasses and even to the tobacco and then searched around and found a little grip I had full of patent medicine and they cut that open and stamped the stuff all to pices, and took my shot gun and broke it all up and threw the pices at me, and they looked ever where in the house for my pistols but on the quilt. They never once thought of looking there. They finally came out and after giving me a farewell kick went off. I watched them til they got out of sight, then I got up and went in the house and went to bed. The girls and boys were so frightened that they could not be got out of bed to dress my wounds. I had to lay there the rest of the night in that condition, but I managed to make out. I got up the next morning and I was so stiff and sore that I could hardly move, but I knew that I would have to get out of there and go some where to have my wounds dressed and get some rest. So I gathered up the pices of my gun an other tricks that I could find and started out through those hills six miles to Powder Springs where Andey Henderson

Pg 5

lived and by noon I got there. He washed me up and fixed up my wounds, and his daughter, Miss Nannie, gave me some good coffee and biscuits. After I had dinner she fixed a bed for me up stairs and I slept all evening until about 7 o'clock when the old man woke me up for supper and to have my wounds dressed again. After eating a good supper and getting cleaned up I went back to bed again and had a good nights sleep. The next morning I was feeling very well, but I knew that it would be some time before I would be

able to do any more work, so at 9 o'clock I got on the steam boat and came back to Knoxville, and the next day after I came home one of those dirty rascals came down to see how bad I was hurt. After they found that I was not dead they wanted to see if I was hurt much bad and if I had recognized any of them, and if so, was I going to have anyone arrested or was I coming back there anymore, and if so how soon, and all that sort of thing. I was on to their game and in fact was looking for it, so that when the fellow came I played green with him. He introduced himself as a detective from North Carolina. He said that he was working on the same thing too, and if I was not going back he wanted me to give him all the points I could and every thing that I had learned: how many I knew, etc. I took it all in and then give him a great long song and dance about what I was supposed to know. I told him that I knew about eight of the gang and that I was coming up at court to have them all arrested. It was then three weeks until court met. I told him how I was coming up on the boat the first court day, and I just stuffed him up every way I could for I knew that they would all be waiting his return to learn the news, and I wanted to have him well loaded. For every thing that I told him was not so. I intended going just as soon as I possibly could then, sick or well. So on the 12th of March I started back on foot. I took a colored boy with me by the name of Boyd Browder. I and the boy walked up to Catlettsbourgh, three miles below Seveirville and crossed the river and went six miles above the town that day and stayed all night at Andrew Henderson's. Just as we crossed the river one of the gang, Mack Rolling, came along by us, and I knew then that it would do no good to try to keep hid, for the whole gang would know that I had returned before daylight the next morning. I was sure that they would try and dispose of me in some way if they got a chance, but I was not going to give them much chance if I could help it. So I and the boy sit out every night and watched if were in the range of the gang. Neither of us would go to sleep the first night at Henderson's, but got in the corn crib about thirty yards from the house just facing the front door, and if any of that crowd had come that night we would have tickeled some of them to death sure, for I hand a Springfield rifle and Boyd had a Winchester, but no one came. Next morning after breakfast we took a nap before starting out on the trail. We slept until dinner then we left there and went about three miles through the hills

Pg 6

to where old man John Newman lived. He was eighty years old and had the palsy so bad that he could hardly feed himself, and those dirty whelps had gone there and whipped the old man nearly to death and then told him that if he did not go to work they would come back and give him another, and he so old that he could not do five cents worth of work in a day. I saw the old man but he could not tell any thing about them. Then I went over to his son Jim's about two miles from there. They had whipped him too, but he was not at home. So I could not do any thing else but wait on time to bring up something new to look after, but I did not have long to wait.

Ike Wards, who by the way, is a spy for the gang came over to Jim Newman's and told me about some whipping that had been done about eight miles above there the night before. Two women had been taken through a course of sprouts and he said that if I would up there that night I would learn something, but I was not taking any chances of that kind in the dark where I did not know the road or any thing about the place, and it would have been just what, they wanted to have caught me out there in those hills and shoot me full of holes, but I did not tell him any of my thoughts, but made him believe that I was going right then; but when I got out of sight of the house I took to the woods and went back over to Henderson's and stayed all night. Next day I went up to Abe Knatchers, a blacksmith in

the neighborhood of where those women had been whipped. He was not at home then and his wife said he would not be at home till night, so I went over to Jim Clinton's about a mile from there where one of the women was staying, Florence Berdine, a young widow but she was gone off somewhere to work and would not be back till night, and the other woman had moved to Sevierville, so I just sat down and waited for Florence to come home. It was dark when she came and I had to talk in a hurry, but I learned that she knew three of them and could swear to them and one in particular, for he lost a handkerchief that she knew, and also Mrs. Clinton knew it for she had worn it around her neck on Sunday to church. It belonged to Geo. Stanton, a young man who had been going to see Kittie Clinton, but he was not one of the most honest fellows in the country, and Mrs. Clinton had run him away from her house once and he was afraid to come back in daylight, but he was in the gang that night, and also Jim Yarbeary and John Goforth. I told her to keep every thing to herself and I would go and have those men arrested and then bring her and Mrs. Clinton as witnesses. I had to do a lot of work then, for it was just four days until court met, and I had about forty miles of country to walk over to get my witnesses all up. I left her and went over to Abe Knatcher's. he had just come home so I went in and had supper, and then we had a long conversation, but he either did not know much or was afraid to tell it, for I could not get anything of importance out of him. I went to bed, the first that I had slept in

Pg 7

since I had been in the county, but as no one knew me there, I felt safe, so I took a good nights rest and we had breakfast about daylight next morning, then I set out for Seveirville, a nice little walk of ten miles. When I got within one mile of town I conclude that it would not do for me to go there, so I and Boyd waded the river and went into the woods intending to go to John Sharpe's where I was at the night I was shot and beat up. When we got in the hills away from the river we dodged every house so that no one would know that we were in that part of the country but when we had gone up on top of a big hill within two hundred yards of Sharp's and over looking the rolling place, some one over on the next ridge shot at us with a Winchester, then we pulled for the house. There was no one there but the two girls and we talked with them a few minutes and was on the point of going when the two boys came and they told me that they had saw Mack Rollings going up the hollow with a Winchester looking for me. when I heard that I thought I was liable to be ambushed and shot down at any time, but I was there, and while danger was lurking in every bush I did not run off but instead Boyd and I went over the ridge to Hurst's cabin. There was no one there but one of Hurst's girls and Andrew Keeler's wife, and just as soon as I went in they said that Bruce Rollings and his dady had passed the house about ten minutes before I came and they both had guns and pistols and asked if I had been around there, and when told that I had not they said they knew that I was in the woods some where and that they were hunting for me. I then left there and went up the ravine the same way that my foes had gone and I had gone about half a mile when I saw two men following me. I put Boyd behind a big tree and hid behind another to await the coming of these men, and when they got close enough we sliped out and covered them with our revolvers and called a halt, but when I had talked with them a little I found that they just wanted to tell me that the woods were full of men looking for me and I had better go slow. That if I was seen by them I would be killed. I stayed away from the pathes and remained in the woods until I had gone about two miles more when I was obliged to cross a big road and go through a field to get in the woods again and just as we got to the road and I was up on the fence in the act of jumping down some one a little farther up the road shot at me with a double barrel shot

gun. You just ought to have seen me get off that fence and hustle down the road, Boyd and I ran about half a mile until we got in the woods again then we rested and looked around but we could not see any one, so we went on and dodged ever house and open place until we got to Andrew Henderson's. it was just 12 o'clock and we had dinner and Boyd went out in the yard and went to sleep, and I was siting in the house talking to Miss Nannie Henderson, and the old man was in the other room, when Miss Nannie looked out and saw a lot of men with guns, and she told me I had better hide, I looked out and

pg 8

and saw a lot of men with guns, and she told me I had better hide but I looked out and there was about twenty-five coming through the barn yard lot. I stepped in the next room and got my gun and laid it across the mantle in such a way that I could see anyone that came to the door and they could not see me. I thought that they had come to kill me and I was going to get some of them for company on the long rail over the great devide, but in the mean time Andrew had saw them and he pulled a couple of Colt's sixes, cocked them and stepped in the door and asked them what they ment by coming in his yard armed that way. They asked him if I was there. He told them that I was and that it was none of their business who came to hid house and they had better get out quick. Just then a constable came round the house and said he had a warrant for me for murder.

Andrew told him to read it. He did so, then Andrew told me how it was. I set my gun down and went out. The officer read it over to me and I knew at once that it was a shame these White Caps had got up to get rid of me.

They already had Boyd. They had came up on him while asleep and taken his pistols away from him and had him tied with a rope, and of course I could expect nothing better.

After we had started to town, Mack Rollings tried to shoot me and would have done it if the officer had not knocked the gun up, so he shot in the air.

We went on to town and when we got there I employed a couple of lawyers, and by about a dozen witnesses I proved every where I was at and every thing that I needed to foil their little game. They smugled that warrant and re-arrested me for going armed. I was given a trial before Judge Caton and bound over to court. That was the 15th of March, and I was given a trial in court on the 21st and found \$74.30. then I was arrested on the same charge and had it put off until the July term of court. I gave bond for my appearance and came home.

Every thing went on straight until about the first of July, then I began to have trouble. The White Caps sent me word that if I came to court that I would be killed, but I let them know that I did not scare that way. So in a few days one of the gang, Sam Tinsley, met me on the river bridge and undertook to pull me out of a wagon, saying that as he had failed to kill me once he would try it again. Just as he took hold of me I hit the horse a blow with the whip and he jumped and ran so that Tinsley was knocked down and the wago9n rolled over him and I kept the horse going and ran until I got in town. After I had got out of his way I looked back and he had got up and was coming on after me, but I turned a corner and drove as soon as I could to the store where I worked and left the wagon and went to Squire Leahy's office and got a warrant for Tinsley. I got Deputy Sheriff Sam Jarnagan to go with me. we went back to the bridge and took the trail and in about an hour we found him in the White House in bed,

Pg 9

but we soon had him out of bed and before the squire.

He played the drunken racket, and swore that he did not know me from any one else. That he was just drunk, so the squire just fined him \$7.50 for drunkenness and he left Knoxville.

In about three days after that Fillman Atchley, another one of the gang, came to Knoxville. He came to the store and tried to get in difficulty with me, but I did not want to talk with him, so I went away from the store in order to get rid of him. He came back again that night just as we were closing up. He commenced to curse me and put his hand in a little grip he carried, as if to draw a gun. I was not taking any chances at that time, and just got a shot gun and told him to go. He went. He was no fool. He knew he had played and lost, and it was better to go.

He sent me word that if I came up to court that he would fill me as full of holes as a sifter bottom.

In a day or so I received a note saying that I might come to Seveirville but I would not get there, for just as soon as I crossed the Seveir county line that I would be filled full of buck shot.

I will admit that that was not much inducement for me to go, but I had every thing fixed to go anyhow. My friends came to me and told me that I must not go up there, but I told them I would have to go.

Just a day or so before the time to go I learned that the judge had heard of the threats that had been made against me and had expressed a wish that I would not come, but instead leave the state until after court, and let the bondsmen report that I could not be found and he would dismiss the case altogether.

When I learned that I waited until the day to start, then instead of going to Seveirville as every one thought, I went to Jellico, Ky., on the 15th of July. I stayed there all night and next morning I left there and went to Corbin. I stayed there all night, and next day I went to Louisville and stayed there a week taking in the sights of the city. Then I went up to Cincinnati, Ohio and stayed a couple of days.

Talk about gambling, but Cincinnati is the place for that. I never knew much about playing any kind of a game for any thing, but I struck a place there where you could go and play for a meal just as well as a hundred dollars, and as I had to eat and it did not take a large amount to play, I went in and tackled the tiger for super. I put five cents on the ace, and when she turned I won a big bowl of coffee and a bowl of soup and three big buns, just all that I could get outside of. Then I went down on the left to the highway mission and after services were over I took a bed on the floor along with about a hundred others, a part of Coxies army, but I faired very well and on the next morning I went back and played five cents again on the jack of harts and won a bowl of coffee and three buns. After disposing of that I went around and took in all

Pg 10

the places of interest until noon, then I left there and went to Indianapolis, Ind., and stayed one day sight seeing, then I went to Terra Haute, Ind., but I did not stay there but about an hour, when I got another train for Clinton, Ind., where I had some friends living, and I stayed there two weeks and went to Danville, Ill., and got a job on the Chicago and Eastern Ill., railroad and worked a month for that company all a long the road from Brazil, Ind., to Chicago. But at the end of the month I quit as I had heard from home and every thing was fixed up all right, so I came home and went to work again.

Thinking that as I could not handle the White Caps alone and being free from the case that they had brought against me for going armed I thought I would have no further trouble with them, but I was mistaken for I had not been home two weeks until I began to see

some of them come around and size me up and I caught them following me two or three times, so I kept an eye on them, but after they found out where I lived and that I was watching them also, five of them came to my house one night and tried to get in, but I met them at the door with a couple of good guns and told them that if it was fun they were looking for that I was ready for them. I had the drop on them this time and they were afraid to commence the game and went away saying that they would see me later.

One of them, Zeb Jenkins said that he would get me yet. That put me on my guard, so that I went ready all the time, but I did not see or hear any thing of them for about two months until I was awakened one night again by some one trying to get the door open. I called to them to know what it ment.

They said that they wanted to see me. I told them that I did not receive callers at that time of night, and if they did not leave at once that I would commence shooting through the door. They went out and I got up and went to a window and looked out and saw them standing across the street looking up at the window. They were in the shadow so that I could not recognize them, but I knew that it was some of the gang and that they were bent on getting me out of the way, for I knew more about them and their work than any other man alive outside of themselves, and they feared me so that they would not come face to face with me, but like all of their kind wanted to do me up in the dark from behind, but I never saw any thing more of them after that night until Wednesday Dec. 2, '94, then Zeb Jenkins and Joe Parton came up Prince St., from the river and went into Jake Frenche's bar, but came out in a few minutes and crossed the street and came by J. F. Scott's store where I was staying and stepped in a blacksmith shop next door. They stayed there about five minutes and came out and came in the store and bought some oranges. They were then pretty drunk, but they did not say any thing to me but went out and across the river to Jones' stable. There Jenkins had a horse and he in company with his brother, Sam

Pg11

Jenkins and Joe Partan left the stable and went up the road towards Seveirville.

When they had got as far as Anderson's store, three miles up the road, they stoped and while there J.W. Ellis came up and they asked him who he was and where he was going.

He told them he was Ellis and that he was going home.

They told him to come and drink with them and they would all go together.

Of course he accepted the invitation as he was pretty drunk himself. After the bottle had went the rounds they all left together and went about two miles further, when they stoped at a little house on the road where a widow woman, a Mrs. Ellen Deats, lived with three small children.

They tried to get into her house but she refused to let them in.

When they found that they could not get in they began shooting through the door and trying to break it down, but failing to effect an entrance in this way. They went around to a window and shot through it. The shot took effect in Mrs. Deats' body, and she died the next day.

After the shooting and the murder of a defensless woman, they went on their way home.

Possibly they thought as that was the way they disposed of people in Seveir County who did not do as they wished, that they could run the same game in Knox county, without having to answer for it before a court of justice. But they were badly mistaking in the people they were dealing with.

It can be said with credit that the Knox county officials do not stand in with a gang of cut-throats and thieves, nor do they let that class of people run the county affairs or terrorize the citizens without taking a hand in the game. It has been mighty few such cases

of the above kind that some of the gang have missed being chief mourners at a neck tie party or digging coal for the state.

There was no exception to the rule in this case, for the unfortunate woman was hardly cold before Sheriff Groner and his deputies were in the very strong-hold of the White Caps in Seveir county.

It was only a short while before they had arrested Jeff Jinkings and Ellis without a shot being fired, although Jinkings reached for his gun when he saw the sheriff, but he was not quick enough.

The bracelets were put on Jenkings and he was brought to the scene of his dirty crime and that of his associates, where he was given a trial before Squire Geo. Hines and bound to court along with Ellis.

The sheriff and his posse made it so hot for Parton that he came in a week later and gave himself up to answer to the charge of murder.

Their trial came up in the Criminal court Feb., 19, '95, but on account of a technicality in the name of the murdered woman, it being Ellen Jane Deats instead of Sallie, the trial was

Pg12

continued until the next term of court.

Now in following me through these pages you will see that I made a mistake in not getting legal power papers from the sheriffs of both Knox and Seveir counties before I went to work on the case. If I had done that I would not have had the trouble with them that I did have. So I say remember, watch all of these little points and remember them, and if sometime you may be caught like I was don't run but stand face to face with the foe, and let every thing work out according to destiny, which it surely will. You may be caught by some gang and disfigured or maimed for life, but will live to see the same gang hung or sent to the penitentiary.

I told this gang that there would be some of them that would not live to see another twelve months, and there has been five of them killed since and five of them with the charge of murder hanging over them, for which they must be tried and probably hung long before this little book reaches your hand.