

Jimmy Grayson's Spell

by Joseph Alexander Altsheler, 1862-1919

Published: 1903

in »Harper's Weekly« magazine

Re-published: 2016

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The night, after a beautiful, brown October day, came on dark and rainy, with fierce winds off the Rocky Mountains; and Harley, who was in the first carriage, with the Candidate, could barely see the heads of the horses, gently rising and falling, as they splashed through the mud. Behind him he heard faintly the sound of wheels amid the wind and the rain, and he knew that the other correspondents and the politicians, who always hung on the trail of Jimmy Grayson, shifting according to locality, were following their leader in single file.

Although the hood of the carriage was down, and the collar of Harley's heavy coat was turned up to his ears, the cold rain, lashed by the wind, struck him in the face now and then.

„You don't do anything by halves out here on these Western plains,“ he said.

„No,“ replied Jimmy Grayson, „we don't deal in disguises; when we're hot we're hot, and when we're cold we're cold. Now, after a perfect day, we're having the wildest kind of a night. It's our way.“

It was then ten o'clock, and they had expected to reach Speedwell at midnight, crossing the Platte River on the big wooden bridge; but the rain, the darkness, and the singularly sticky quality of the black Nebraska mud would certainly delay them until one o'clock in the morning, and possibly much later. It was not a cheerful prospect for tired and sleepy men.

„Mr. Grayson,“ said Harley, „without seeking to discredit you, I wish I had gone to the Boer war instead of coming out here with you. That would have been less wearing.“

The Candidate laughed.

„But you are seeing the West as few men from New York ever see it,“ he said.

The driver turned, and a little stream of water ran off his hat brim into Harley's face.

„It's the wind that holds us back, Mr. Grayson,“ he said; „if we leave the road and cut across the prairie on the hard ground it will save at least an hour.“

„By all means, turn out at once,“ said the Candidate, „and the others will follow.“

„Wise driver; considerate man!“ remarked Harley.

There was marked relief the moment the wheels of the carriage struck the brown grass. They rolled easily once more, and the off horse, lifting up his head, neighed cheerfully.

„It means midnight, and not later, Harley,“ said the Candidate, in a reassuring tone.

Harley leaned back in his seat, and trusted all now to the wise and considerate driver who had proposed such a plan. The night was just as black as a hat, and the wind and rain moaned over the bleak and lonesome plains. They were far out in Nebraska, and although they were near the Platte River, it was one of the most thinly inhabited sections in the State. They had not seen a light since leaving the last speaking-place at sundown. Harley wondered at the courage of the pioneers who crossed the great plains amid such a vast loneliness. He and the Candidate were tired, and soon ceased to talk. The driver confined his attention to his business. Harley fell into a doze, from which he was awakened after a while by the sudden stoppage of the carriage. The Candidate awoke at the same time. The rain had decreased, there was a partial moonlight, and the driver was turning upon them a shamefaced countenance.

„What's the matter?“ asked the Candidate.

„To tell you the truth, Mr. Grayson,“ replied the driver, in an apologetic tone, „I've gone wrong somehow or other, and I don't know just where we're at.“

„Lost!“ said Harley.

„If you wish to put it that way, I reckon you're right,“ said the driver, with a touch of offence.

„What has become of the other carriages?“ asked Harley, looking back for them.

„I reckon they didn't see us when we turned out, and they kept on along the road.“

There was no doubt about the plight into which they had got themselves. The plain seemed no less lonely than it was before the white man came.

„What’s that line of trees across yonder?“ asked the Candidate.

„I guess it marks where the Platte runs,“ replied the driver.

„Then drive to it; if we follow the trees we must reach the bridge, and then things will be simple.“

The driver became more cheerful, the rain ceased and the moonlight increased; but Harley lacked confidence. He had a deep distrust of the Platte River. It seemed to him the most ridiculous stream in the United States, making a presumptuous claim upon the map, and flowing often in a channel a mile wide with only a foot of water. But he feared the marshes and quicksands that bordered its shallow course.

They reached the line of gaunt trees, dripping with water and whipped by the wind, and Harley’s fears were justified. The river was there, but they could not approach it, lest they be swallowed up in the sand, and they turned back upon the prairie.

„We must find a house,“ said the Candidate; „if it comes to the pinch we can pass the night in the carriage, but I don’t like to sleep sitting.“

They bore away from the river, driving at random, and after an hour saw a faint light under the dusky horizon.

„The lone settler!“ exclaimed Harley, who began to cherish fond anticipations of a bed. „Go straight for it, driver!“

The driver was not loath, and even the horses, seeming to have renewed hope, changed their sluggish walk to a trot. They had no hesitation in seeking shelter at that hour, entire strangers though they were, such an act being in perfect accordance with the laws of Western hospitality.

As they approached, a bare wooden house, unprotected by trees, rose out of the plain. A wire fence enclosed a half-acre or so about it, and apparently there had been a few rather futile attempts to make a lawn.

„Looks cheerless,“ said Harley.

„But it holds beds,“ said the Candidate.

„You save your voice,“ said Harley; „I’ll call the farmer, and I hope it will be a man who can speak English, and not some new Russian or Bohemian citizen.“

He sprang out of the carriage, glad to relieve himself from his cramped and stiff position, and walked toward the little gate in the wire fence. There was a sudden rush of light feet, a stream of fierce barks and snarls, and Harley sprang back in alarm as two large bulldogs, red-mouthed, flung themselves against the fence.

„I said you had no cause to regret the Boer war,“ called the Candidate from the carriage.

The wires were strong, and they held the dogs; but the animals hung to the fence, as fierce as wolves; and Harley, lifting up his voice, added to the chorus with a „Hi! Hi! Mr. Farmer! Strangers want to stop with you!“

Illustration:

Mr. Farmer with a gun

The din was tremendous, and presently a window in the second story was shoved up, and a man, fully dressed, carrying a long-barrelled rifle in his hands, appeared at it. He called to the dogs, which ceased at once their barking and snarling, and then he gazed down at the intruders in no friendly manner.

Harley saw him clearly, a tall, gaunt old man, white-haired but muscular and strong. He held the rifle as if he were ready to use it—a most unusual thing in this part of the country, where householders seldom kept firearms.

„What do you want?“ he called, in a sharp, high voice.

„Beds,“ cried Harley. „We are lost, and if you don't take us in we'll have to sleep on the prairie, which is a trifle damp.“

„Wa'al I 'low it hez rained a right smart,“ said the old man, grimly.

Harley noticed at once the man's use of „right smart,“ an expression with which he had been familiar in another part of the country, and it encouraged him. He was sure now of hospitality.

„Who are you?“ the old man called.

„Mr. Grayson, the Democratic nominee for President of the United States, is in the carriage, and I am his friend, one of the newspaper correspondents travelling with him.“

„Wait a minute!“

The window was closed, and in a few moments the old man came out at the front door. He carried the rifle on his shoulder, but Harley attributed the fact to his haste at the mention of Jimmy Grayson's name.

„My name is Simpson—Daniel Simpson,“ he said, hospitably. „Tell the driver to put the horses in the barn.“

He waved his hand toward a low building in the rear of his residence, and then he invited the Candidate and the correspondent to enter. He looked curiously, but with reverence, at the Candidate.

„You are really Jimmy Grayson,“ he said. „I'd know you offhand by your picture, which I guess hez been printed in ev'ry newspaper in the United States. I 'low it's a powerful honor to me to hev you here.“

„And it's a tremendous accommodation to us for you to take us,“ said Jimmy Grayson, with his usual easy grace.

But Harley was looking at Simpson with a gaze no less intent than the old man had bent upon Grayson. The accent and inflection of their host were of a region far distant from Nebraska, but Harley, who was born near that wild country, knew the long, lean, narrow type of face, with the high cheek bones and the watchful black eyes. Moreover, there was something directly and personally familiar in the figure before him.

Under any circumstances, the manner of the old man would have drawn the attention of Harley, whose naturally keen observation had been sharpened by the training of his profession. The old man seemed abstracted. His fingers moved absently on the stock of his rifle, and Harley inferred at once that he had something of unusual weight on his mind.

„Me an' the ol' woman hev been settin' late,“ said Simpson. „When you git ol' you don't sleep much. But it'll be a long time, Mr. Grayson, before that fits you.“

He led the way into a room, better furnished than Harley had expected to see. A coal fire smouldered on the hearth, and the arrangement of the room showed some

evidences of lightness and taste. An old woman was bent over the fire, But she rose when the men entered, and turned upon them a face which Harley knew at once to be that of one who had been frightened by something. Her eyes were red as if she had been weeping. Harley looked from host to hostess with curious glance, but he was still silent.

„This is Marthy, my wife, gen'lemen,“ said Simpson. „Marthy, this is Mr. Grayson, the greatest man in this here United States, and the other is one of the newspaper fellers that travels with him.“

Jimmy Grayson bowed with great courtesy, and apologized so gracefully for the intrusion that an ordinary person would have been glad to be intruded upon in such a manner. The woman said nothing, but stared vacantly at her guests. The old man came to her relief.

„Marthy ain't used to visitors, least of all a man like you, Mr. Grayson, and it kind o' upsets her,“ he said. „You see, Marthy an' me lives here all by ourselves.“

The woman started and looked at him.

„All by ourselves,“ repeated the man, firmly: „but we'll do the best we kin.“

„Daniel,“ suddenly exclaimed the old woman in high, shrill tones, „why don't you put down your gun? Mr. Grayson'll think you're a-goin' to shoot him!“

The old man laughed, but the ever-watchful Harley saw that the laugh was not spontaneous.

„I 'clar' to gracious!“ he said; „I clean forgot I had old Deadeye. You see, Mr. Grayson, when I heerd the dogs barkin', sez I to myself *it's robbers, shore*; and before I h'ists the window upstairs, I reaches old Deadeye off the hooks, and then if it had a-been robbers, it wouldn't a-been healthy for 'em!“

„I'm sure of that, Mr. Simpson,“ said Jimmy Grayson; „you don't look like a man who would allow himself to be run over.“

„An' I wouldn't!“ said the old man, with sudden, fierce emphasis. But he put the rifle on the hooks over the fireplace. Such hooks as these were not usual in Nebraska; but Jimmy Grayson was too polite to say anything, and Harley was still watching every movement of the old man. The driver returned at this moment from the stable, and, reporting that he had fed the horses, took his place with the others at the fire.

„I 'low you-uns would like to eat a little,“ said the old man, laughing in the same unnatural way. „Marthy, tote in suthin' from the kitchen as quick as you kin.“

The old woman raised her startled, frightened eyes, and for a moment her glance met Harley's; it seemed to him to be full of entreaty; the whole atmosphere of the place was to him tense, strained, and tragic; why, he did not know, but he shook himself and decided that it was only the result of weariness, the long ride, and the night in the storm. Nevertheless, the feeling did not depart because he willed that it should go.

„No, we thank you.“ Jimmy Grayson was saying; „we are not hungry; but we should like very much to go to bed.“

„It's jest with you,“ said Simpson. „Marthy, I'll show the gen'lemen to their room, and you kin stay here till I come back.“

The old woman did not speak, but stood in a crouched attitude looking at Grayson and then at Harley and then at the driver; it seemed to the correspondent that she did not dare trust her voice, and he saw fear still lurking in her eyes.

„Come along, gentlemen,“ said Simpson, taking from the table a small lamp, that had been lighted at their entrance, and leading the way.

Harley looked back once at the door, and the woman's eyes met his in a look that was like one last despairing appeal. But there was nothing tangible, nothing that he could not say was the result of an overwrought fancy.

It was a small and bare room, with only a single bed, to which the old man took them. „It's the best I've got,“ he said, apologetically. „Mr. Grayson, you an' the newspaper man kin sleep in the bed, an' tother feller, I reckon, kin curl up on the floor.“

„It is good enough for anybody,“ said Jimmy Grayson, gallantly. As a matter of fact, both he and Harley had known what it was to fare worse.

„Good night,“ the man said, and left them rather hastily, Harley thought; but the others took no notice, and were soon in sound slumber, the Candidate, because he had the rare power of going to sleep whenever there was a chance, and the driver, because he was indifferent and tired.

But Harley lay awake. An hour ago his dream of heaven was a bed, and now, the bed attained, sleep would not come near. Out of the stillness, after a while, he heard the gentle moving of feet below, and he sat up on the bed, all his suspicions confirmed. Something unusual was going on in this lone house! And it had been going on even before he and the Candidate came!

He listened to the moving feet for a few moments. Then the noise ceased, but Harley knew that there was no further chance of sleep for him, with his nerves on edge, and likely to remain there. He lay back on the edge of the bed, trying to accustom his eyes to the darkness, and presently he heard a sound, the most chilling that a man can hear. It was the sound of a woman, alone and in the dark, between midnight and morning, crying gently, but crying deeply, uncontrollably, and from her chest.

Harley's resolve was taken at once. He slipped on his clothes and went to the door. His eyes were used now to the dark, and there was a window that shed a half-light.

He stopped with his hand on the bolt, because he heard the low, wailing note more plainly, and he was sure that it came from another room across the narrow hall. He turned the bolt, but the door refused to open. There was no key on the inside! They had been locked in, and for a purpose!

Harley was fully aroused—on edge with excitement, but able to restrain it, and to think clearly. There was an old grate in the room, apparently used but seldom, and leaning against the wall beside it an iron poker. Tiptoeing, he obtained the poker, and returned to the door. The lock was a flimsy affair, and, inserting the point of the poker under the catch, he easily pried it off, and put it gently on the floor.

Then he stepped out into the dusky hall and listened. The woman was yet crying, monotonously, but with such a note of woe that Harley was shaken. He had thought in his own room that it was the old woman who wept thus; but now in the hall he knew it to be a younger and fresher voice.

He saw farther down another door, and he knew that it led to the room from which came the sounds of grief. He approached it cautiously, still holding the poker in his hands, and noticed that there was no key in the lock. The woman,

whoever she might be, was locked in, as he and his comrades had been; but the empty keyhole gave him an idea. He blew through it, making a sort of whistling sound with his puckered lips. The crying ceased, all save an occasional low, half-smothered sob, as if the woman were making a supreme effort to control her feelings.

Then Harley put his lips to the keyhole again, and whispered: „What is the matter? It is a friend who asks.“ There was no reply, only a tense silence, even the occasional sobs ceasing. Then, after a few moments of waiting, Harley whispered, „Don't be alarmed: I am about to force the door.“

The door was of flimsy pine, and it gave quickly to the poker's leverage. Then, this useful weapon still in hand, Harley stepped into the room, where he heard a deep-drawn sigh that expressed mingled emotions.

There was a window at the end of the room, and the moonlight shone clearly through, clothing with its full radiance a tall slim girl, who had risen from a chair, and who stood trembling before Harley, fully dressed, although her long hair hung down her back and her eyes were red with weeping.

She was handsome, but not with the broad face of the West. Hers was another type, a type that Harley knew well. The cheek bones were a little high, the features delicate, the figure slender, and there was on her cheeks a rosy bloom that never grew under the cutting winds of the Great Plains.

Harley knew at once that she was the daughter of the old couple below stairs.

„Do not be afraid of me,“ he said, gently. „I know that you are in great trouble, but I will help you. I, too, am from Kentucky. I was born there, and I used to live there, though not in the mountains, as you did.“

The appeal and terror in her eyes changed to momentary surprise. „What do you know of me?“ she exclaimed.

„Very little of you, but more of your father. Years ago I was at his house in the Kentucky Mountains. He was the leader in the Simpson-Eversley feud. I knew him to-night, but I have said nothing. Now, tell me, what is the matter?“

His voice was soothing—that of a strong man who would protect, and the girl yielded to its influence. Brokenly she told the story. Many men had been killed in the feud, and the few Eversleys who were left had been scattered far in the mountains. Then old Daniel Simpson said that he would come out on the Great Plains, more than a thousand miles, and they had come.

„There was one of the Eversleys—Henry Eversley—he was young and handsome. People said he was not bad. He, too, came to Nebraska. He found out where we lived; he—has been here.“

„Ah!“ said Harley. He felt that they were coming to the gist of the matter.

The girl, with a sudden passionate cry, threw herself upon her knees. „He is here now! He is here now!“ she cried. „He is in the cellar, bound and gagged, and my father is going to kill him! But I love him! He came here to-night, and my father caught us together, and struck him down. But we meant nothing wrong. I declare before God that we did not! We were getting ready to run away together and to be married at Speedwell!“

Harley shuddered. The impending tragedy was more terrible than he had feared.

„You can do nothing!“ exclaimed the girl. „My father is armed. He will have no interference! He cares nothing for what may come after! He thinks—“

She could not say it all: but Harley knew well that what she would say was, „He thinks that he has been robbed of his honor by a mortal enemy.“

„Can you stay quietly in this room until morning?“ he asked. „I know it is hard to wait under such circumstances, but you must do it for the sake of Henry Eversley.“

„And will you save him?“

„He shall be saved.“

„I will wait,“ she said.

Harley slipped noiselessly out, and, closing the door behind him, went to his room, where he at once awakened the Candidate.

Jimmy Grayson listened with intense attention to Harley’s story. When the tale was over, he and Harley whispered together long and earnestly, and Jimmy Grayson frequently nodded his head in assent. Then they awoke the driver, a heavy man, but with a keen Western mind that at once became alert at the news of danger.

„Yes, I got my bearings now,“ he said in reply to a question of Harley’s. „I asked the old fellow about it when I came up from the stable, and Speedwell is straight north from here. I can take one of the horses and hit the town before daylight. I know everybody there.“

„But how about the dogs?“ asked Jimmy Grayson. „Can you get past them?“

„No trouble there at all. After we came, the old fellow locked ‘em up in a stall in the stable and left ‘em there. I guess he didn’t want to look to us as if he was too suspicious.“

„Then go, and God go with you!“ said Jimmy Grayson, with deep feeling.

„He will do his part,“ he said; „now for ours.“

He did not seek sleep again, and Harley could not think of it. The flush of dawn appeared in the East at last, and then they heard a faint step in the hall outside, and the gentle turning of a key in a lock. A half hour later there, was a loud knock on their door, and old Daniel Simpson bade them rise, and get ready for breakfast.

„It is chiefly in your hands now,“ said Harley, in a low tone to Jimmy Grayson.

They entered the dining-room where the breakfast smoked on the table, and Simpson and his wife were waiting.

„Whar’s your driver?“ asked Simpson.

„He has gone down to the stable to feed and care for his horses,“ replied the Candidate, easily.

„Then be seated,“ said the old man, hospitably. „We’ve got corn-bread and ham and eggs and coffee, an’ I guess you kin make out.“

Illustration:
Breakfast

The three sat at the table, while Mrs. Simpson served them. Jimmy Grayson did most of the talking, and it was addressed in a very confidential manner to old Daniel Simpson. He fairly radiated with the quality called personal magnetism, and soon the old man ate mechanically, while his attention was riveted on Jimmy Grayson.

The old man sank into his chair, but his look wandered to the door. It seemed to Harley that light sounds came from the other part of the house, and the old man, too, appeared for a moment to be listening; but Jimmy Grayson at once began a story, and Simpson's attention came back.

„This is a story of the mountains of eastern Kentucky,“ began the Candidate, „and it is a love story, a very pretty one, I think.“

Simpson moved in his chair, and a sudden wondering look appeared in his eyes at the words „eastern Kentucky.“ But Jimmy Grayson took no notice, and continued:

„This,“ he said, „is the love story of two people who were young then, but who are old now. The youth and the girl belonged to families that were at war with each other, and a marriage between them would have been considered by all their relations a mortal sin. They were compelled to meet in secret, but the girl was frightened for him, because she loved him. She told him that he must go away—that if her father and brothers heard of their meetings they would kill him. He listened to her gently and tenderly. He would not go away; he was not afraid.“

„No, I was not afraid,“ breathed the old man, softly. The old woman straightened herself up, until she stood erect. There was a delicate flush on her face, and her eyes were luminous.

„The youth did what I would have done, and what you would have done. Mr. Simpson,“ continued Jimmy Grayson. „He overbore all resistance on the part of the girl, who in her heart was willing to be overborne. One dark night he stole her from her father's house and carried her away on his horse.“

„How well I remember it!“ exclaimed the old man, with eyes a-gleam. „I had Marthy on the horse behind me, and my rifle on the pommel of the saddle before me.“

„Before morning they were married,“ continued Jimmy Grayson. „Then he took her to a house of his own that he had built, and he sent word that if any man came to do them harm he would meet a rifle-bullet. And that youth and that girl are still living, though both are old now; but neither has ever, for a moment, regretted that night.“

„You speak the truth!“ exclaimed the old man, striking his fist upon the table, while his eyes flashed with exultant fire. „We've never been sorry for a moment for what we did, hev we, Marthy?“

Harley had risen to his feet, and a signal look passed between him and the Candidate.

„And then,“ said Jimmy Grayson, „why do you deny to Henry Eversley the right to do what you did, and what you still glory in after all these years? Mr. Simpson, shake hands with your new son-in-law. He and his bride are waiting in the doorway.“

The old man sprang up. His daughter and a youth, a handsome couple, stood at the entrance. Behind them were three or four men, one the driver, and another in clerical garb, evidently a minister.

„They were married in your front parlor, while we sat at breakfast,“ said Jimmy Grayson. „Mr. Simpson, your son-in-law is still offering you his hand.“

The bewildered look left the old man's eyes, and he took the outstretched hand in a hearty grasp.

„Henry,“ he said, „you‘ve won.“

