

[From the Democratic Review.]

The Shot in the Eye.

A Story of Texas Border Life.

BY C. WILKINS EIML.

My word for it, reader, I should never have ventured to construct a protracted romance out of incidents so wild and strange as those of this narration. It is only with the hope that you will accept in good faith the assurance given in the same spirit, that these things really did occur while I was in the country, and most of them within my personal knowledge—that I venture to relate them at all. Remember, the scene is laid on a frontier county of Texas, and if you have even a remote conception of the history of that republic, and the general character of its social elements, you will be prepared for a good deal. But, though you might even have visited its cities and older settlements, you would still find it difficult to realize all that is true of frontier life, unless, by extended travel and experience, your faith should be fortified. When you can have to say, as I can, "what mine eyes have seen and ears heard,"—on that ground alone you will be "fit audience though few," to receive, as matters of course, relations, which would doubtless, for the moment, shock others as monstrous in improbability. The man of high cultivation will find great difficulty in understanding how such a deed as I am about to relate, requiring months to consummate, would have been carried through in the face of law and the local authorities—but the man who knows this frontier will tell him that the rifle and bowie-knife are all the law and local authorities recognized. Witness the answer of President Houston gave when application was first made to him for his interposition with the civil force to quell the bloody "Regulator Wars" which afterwards sprung up in this very same county—*"Fight it out among yourselves, and be damned to you."* A speech entirely characteristic with the man and the country, as it then was! It was in the earlier stages of the organization of this same "Regulator" association that our story commences.

Shelby county, lying in Western Texas, on the border of the "Red Lands," was rather thinly settled in the latter part of '39. What population it had was generally the very worst cast of border life. The bad and desperate men who had been driven out of the frontier formed a rallying-ground and headquarters here—seemingly with the determination to hold the country good against the intrusion of all honest persons, and as a sort of "Alastair" of the West, for the protection of outlaws and villains of every grade. And, indeed, to such an extent had this protection been carried, that it had become notoriously as much as a man's life or conscience was worth who set among them with any worthy purpose in view; for he must either fall to their confederacy—leave—or die! This was perfectly understood; and the objects of this confederacy may be readily appreciated, when it is known that every now and then a party of men would rally out from this settlement, armed and equipped like Comanches, with the view of carrying off the horses, plundering or murdering some marked men of a neighboring county—then returning with great speed, they would demand their plunder, resume their accustomed appearance, and defy pursuit or investigation. Not only did they do together for their operations in this way, but a single man would carry off a fine horse or commit a murder with a most open audacity, and if he only succeeded in escaping here, was publicly protected. I do not mean to understand that the whole population at this time were men of such camp avowedly.

There were some few whose wealth a degree protected them in the observances of a more seemly life—though they were compelled to at least wink at the doings of their ruffianly and more numerous neighbors; while there was another, but large class of sturdy straightforward emigrants, who attracted solely by the beauty of the country, and come into it, settled themselves down wherever they took a fancy—with characteristic recklessness neither caring nor inquiring who were their neighbors, but trusting in their own stout arms and hearts to keep a footing. Of course all such were very soon engaged in desperate feuds with the horse thieves and plunderers around them, as they were not yet strong enough to make head efficiently—were one af-

ter another finally ousted or shot. It was to exterminate this honest class that the more lawless and brutal of the other associated themselves and assumed the name of "Regulators." They numbered from eight to twelve—and under the organization of rangers, commanded by a beastly wretch named Hinch, they professed to undertake the task of purifying the county limits of all bad and suspicious characters; or in other words of all men who dared refuse to be as vile as they were,—or if they were, who chose to act independently of them and their schemes. This precious neighborhood soon became the scourge of all that region.—Whenever an individual was unfortunate enough to make himself obnoxious to them, whether by a successful villainy, the proceeds of which he refused to share with them, or by the hateful contrast of the propriety of his course—he was forthwith surrounded—threatened—had his stock driven off or killed wantonly—and if these annoyances and hints were not sufficient to drive him away, they would publicly warn him to leave the county in a certain number of days, under the penalty of being scorched or shot. The common pretext for this was the accusation of having committed some crime, which they themselves had perpetrated against him. Their hate was entirely ruthless and never stopped short of accomplishing its purposes; and in many a bloody fray and cruel outrage had the question of their supremacy been mooted, until at last there were few left to dispute with them, and they tyrannized at will.

Among these few was Jack Long, as he was called, who neither recognized nor denied their power, and indeed never troubled himself about them one way or the other. He kept himself to himself, hunted incessantly, and nobody knew much about him. Jack had come of a "wild-turkey breed," as the western term is for a roving family; and though still a young man, had pushed on ahead of the settlement of two territories, and had at last followed the game towards the south, and finding it abundant in Shelby county had stopped here, just as he would have stopped at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, had it been necessary to pursue it so far. He had never been in the habit of asking leave of any power where he should settle, and of course scarcely thought of the necessity of doing so, now; but quietly set to work—built himself a nice log cabin, as far off from every body as he could get. And the first thing that was known of him, he had his pretty young wife and two little ones snugly stowed away in it, and was slaying the deer and bear right and left.

The honest brotherhood had made several attempts to feel Jack's pulse and ascertain his availability; but he had always seemed so impassively good-natured, and put them off so pleasantly that they could find no ground for either disturbing or quarreling with him. What was more, he was physically rather an ugly looking "customer," with six feet four inches of brawn and bone; though the inclination just discoverable in his figure to corpulence, together with a broad, full, good-humored face, gave an air of sluggishness to his energies, and an expression of easy simplicity to his temper which offered neither invitation to gratuitous insult nor provocation to dislike. He was the very impersonation of inoffensive, loyal honesty, slumbering on its conscious strength; and these men, without exactly knowing why, felt some little disinclination to waking him. He had evidently never been aroused to a knowledge of himself, and others felt just as uncertain what that knowledge might bring forth as he did, and were not specially jealous of the honor of having it first tested upon their own persons. So that Jack Long might have been left for many a day in quiet, even in this formidable neighborhood, to cultivate his passion for marksmanship at the expense of the dumb, wild things around him but for an unfortunate display he was accidentally induced to make of it.

Happening to fall short of ammunition, he went one day to "the store" for a fresh supply. This cabin, together with the blacksmith's shop and one or two other huts, constituted the "country town," and as powder and liquor were only to be obtained there, it was the central resort of the regulators. Jack found them all collected for a shooting match, in preparation for which they were getting drunk as fast as possible, to steady their nerves. Hinch, the Regulator captain, had always been the hero of such occasions; for, in addition to being a first rate shot,

it was known that it would be a dangerous exertion of skill for any man to beat him—for he was a furious and vindictive bully, and would not fail to make a personal affair of it with any one who should mortify his vanity by carrying off the prize from him. In addition, the band of scoundrels he commanded was entirely at his service in any extreme, so that they made fearful odds for a single man to contend with.

Every body else in the county was aware of this state of things but Jack Long, and he either didn't know or didn't care. After they had fired several rounds he went lounging listlessly into the crowd which had gathered around the target, exclaiming in admiration over the last brilliant shot of Hinch, which was triumphantly the best. The bully was as usual blustering vehemently, taunting every one around him, and when he saw Jack looking very coolly at the famous shot, with no grain of that deferential admiration in his expression which was demanded, he snatched up the board, and thrusting it insultingly close to his face, roared out—

"Here! You Jack Long-Shanks—look at that!—Take a good look!—Can you beat it?" Jack drew back with a quiet laugh, and said good-humoredly—

"Psha! You don't brag on such shootin' as that, do you?"

"Brag on it! I'd like to see such a moon-eyed chap as you beat it!"

"I don't know as I'd be very proud to beat such bunglin' work as that."

"You don't, don't you?" yelled the fellow, now fairly in a rage at Jack's coolness. "You'll try it won't you? You shall try it by G—d! We'll see what sort of a swell you are!"

"Oh, well!" said Jack, interrupting him as he was proceeding to rave for quantity; "just set up your board, if you want to see me put a ball through every hole you can make!"

Perfectly astonished at this rash bearing of the lion—for it was difficult to tell whether contempt or simplicity dictated Jack's manner—the men set up the board while he walked back to the stand, and carelessly swinging his heavy rifle from his shoulder, fired seemingly as quick as thought. "It's a trick of mine," said he, moving towards the mark, as he lowered his gun; "I caught it from shootin' varmints in the eyes;—always takes 'em there.—It's a notion I've got—it's my fun."

"They all ran eagerly to the target, and sure enough his ball, which was larger than Hinch's, had passed through the same hole, widening it!"

"He's a humbug? It's all by accident! He can't do that again!" shouted the ruffian, turning pale, till his lips looked blue, as the board was held up. "I'll bet the ears of a buffalo calf against his, that he can't do it again!"

"I mean by that, to bet your own ears against mine, I'll take you up!" said Jack, laughing, while the men could not resist joining him.—Hinch glared around him with a fierce chafed look, before which those who knew him best quailed, and with compressed lips silently loaded his gun.—A new target was put up, at which, after long and careful aim, he fired.—The shot was a fine one. The edge of the ball just broke the centre.—Jack, after looking at it, quietly remarked—

"Plumbing out the centre is my fashion; I'll show you a kink or two, Captain Hinch, about the clear thing in shootin'. Give us another board there, boys!"

Another was set up, and after throwing out his gun on the level, in the same rapid careless style as before, he fired; and when the eager crowd around the target announced that he had driven the centre cross clear out, he turned upon his heel, and with a pleasant nod to Hinch, started to walk off. The ruffian shouted hoarsely after him:—

"I thought you were a d—d coward! You've made two good shots by accident, and now you sneak off to brag that you've beat me. Come back, sir! You can't shoot before a muzzle half as true!"

Jack walked on without noticing this mortal insult and challenge, while Hinch laughed tauntingly long and loud—jeering him with exulting bitterness as long as he could make himself heard, as "a flash in the pan,"—"a dunghill cock who had spread his white feather," while the men who had been surprised into a profound respect for Long, and were now still more astonished at what they considered his backing out, joined clamorously in hooting his retreat.

The fools! They made a fatal mistake, in supposing he left the insult unresented for any fear for himself. Jack Long had a young and pretty wife at home, and his love for her was stronger than his resentment for his own indignity. His passions were slow, and had never been fully roused—none of them at least but his love, and that presented her instantly, forlorn and deserted, with her little ones, in this wild country, should he throw away his life with such desperate odds; and seeing the turn the affair was likely to take, he had prudently determined to get away before it had gone too far. But had any of those men seen the spasm of agony which shivered across his massive features, as these gibing voices rang upon his ears in insult which no proud free hunter might endure, they would have the hint, to beware of chafing the silently foaming boar any longer.

This was an ill-starred day for Jack, though; from this time troubles began to thicken about him. The even tenor of his simple, happy life was destroyed, and indignity and outrage followed each other fast. Hinch never forgave the unlucky skill which had robbed him of his proudest boast that of being the best marksman on the frontier; and he swore in base vindictive hate, to dog him to death, or make him leave the country. Soon after this a valuable horse belonging to a rich and powerful planter, disappeared. He was one of those men who had compromised with the Regulators, paying so much blackmail for exemption from their depredations, and protection against others of the same stamp; and he now applied to Hinch for the recovery of his horse, and the punishment of the thief. This Hinch, under their contract, was bound to do and promised to accomplish forthwith. He and some of his men went off on the trail of the missing horse, and returning next day, announced that they had followed it with their skill through a great many windings, evidently intended to throw off pursuit, and at last traced it to Jack Long's picket fence, and there could be no doubt but he was the thief! The planter knew nothing of Jack, but that he was a new comer, and demanded that he should be forced to give up the horse, and punished to the extremity of the frontier code. But this was not Hinch's policy yet awhile. He knew the proofs were not strong enough to make the charge plausible, even before the Lynch Court, of which he himself was both the prosecutor, judge and executioner. His object was first to get up a hue and cry against Long, and under cover of a general excitement, accomplish his devilish purposes without question or mock trial even. So that, after a great deal of manœuvring, for eight or ten days, during which time the charge against Long was industriously circulated by his myrmidons, so as to attract general attention and expectation, as to the result of his investigations—he proclaimed far and wide, that he had found the horse at last, hid in a timber bottom near Long's! This, of course, seemed strong confirmation of his guilt, and though the mob were most of them horse thieves, to all intents, yet it was an unpardonable crime for any one to practice professionally among themselves; so that Long was loudly denounced, and threatened on every side, and ordered to leave the county forthwith.

These proceedings Jack by no means comprehended, or felt disposed to be moved by; but gave them one and all to understand, that he meant to remain where he was, until it entirely suited his convenience to go; and that if his time and theirs did not happen to agree, they might make the most of it. And Jack was such an uncompromising snuggish looking somebody, and his reputation which had now spread everywhere—of possessing such consummate skill with the rifle, that he thought it a condescension to shoot game any where else but in the eyes—was so formidable, that no individual felt disposed to push the matter to a personal collision. He might still, therefore, have been left in quiet, but Hinch had unfortunately taken up the impression, from Jack's conduct in the shooting-match affair, that he must be a coward, and if this were true, then all his skill amounted to but little; and like any other bloody wolfish brute, he followed him up the more eagerly for this very reason, which would have disarmed a generous foe.—Besides, Jack had given fresh and weightier matter of offence, in that he had refused to obey, and defied his authority as Regulator. The very being of that authority seemed to require now that a wholesome example should be made of him, for the awing

of all refractory persons hereafter.—The wretch, who was cunning and ferocious, and had sworn in his inmost heart to ruin and disgrace Long, from the moment of that triumph, now availed himself remorselessly of all his influence, and knowledge of the society around him, to accomplish it. Several horses now disappeared, and robberies of other kinds, perpetrated with singular dexterity, followed in quick succession. All these things he managed, through the clamors of his scoundrelly troops, to have laid, directly or indirectly, to Jack's door.

But in the popular estimation they counted as nothing, in fixing the charge of dangerous malice upon poor Long, in comparison with one other incident.

About this time not only Hinch himself, but every other person who had made himself conspicuous, by insisting upon Jack's guilt, and the necessity of punishing him summarily, began to lose, every day or two, valuable stock, which was wantonly shot down sometimes in sight of their houses; and it soon began to be remarked that every animal lost in this way, had been shot in the eye! This was instantly associated, of course, with Jack's well known and curious predilection for that mark in hunting, and a perfect storm of indignation followed. A meeting was at once convened at "the store," of which the planter was chairman; and at it, by a unanimous vote, a resolution was passed condemning Jack Long to be whipped and driven out of the county—and Hinch with his regulators appointed to carry it into effect! He could hardly contain himself for joy; for now, whatever extreme his pitiless malignity might choose to indulge itself in, he had no fear of afterclaps or questioning. The meeting had been a mere form at any rate. But these "formalities" are all-powerful everywhere, and unsettled and elementary as was the condition of society here, this ruffian leader of ruffians felt the necessity of acting under their sanction, though he himself had dictated it. He would and could have consummated his purposes without; but the faint life of conscience within him—by a species of logic peculiar to itself—felt relieved of the grievous responsibility of such a crime, in the sense of participating with so many others. Many a man has gone to the devil in a crowd who would have been horrified at undertaking the journey alone.

It was the third day after this meeting. Jack, during all these persecutions, had deported himself with the most stolid indifference. Avoiding all intercourse with the settlers, he had continued to hunt with even more assiduity than usual, and was in a great measure ignorant of the unenviable notoriety he was enjoying. He had heard something of the charge with which his character had been assailed, but attributed them all to the jealous enmity he had incurred at the shooting match. He could understand perfectly how one man could hate another who had beat him in shooting, and thought it natural enough; but he could not understand how that hatred might be meanly and desperately vindictive, and therefore gave himself no uneasiness about it. He was only anxious that his wife should not hear and be annoyed by any of these things, and preserved his usual cheerfulness of demeanor.

He had just returned from hunting, and laying aside his accoutrements, partook of the simple meal her neat housewifery had prepared for him; then stretching himself upon the buffalo robe on the floor romped with his two rosy cheeked boys, who rolled over his great body, and gambolled and screamed in riotous joy around him; but mother wanted some water from the branch, and the frolic must be given over while Jack would go and bring it. So jumping up, he left the little folk pouting wiffully as they looked after him from the door and started. The stream was only about a hundred yards from the house, and the path leading to it was through a dense high thicket.—It was against Jack's religion ever to leave his house without his gun; but the wife whom he loved above all the universe of sentiment and every-bing else, was in a hurry for the water, and the distance was so short,—so he sprang gaily out with the vessel in his hand, leaving the rifle behind. The water had been dipped up, and he was returning along the narrow path closely bordered by brush, when he felt a light tap on each shoulder, and his career strangely impeded. He had just time to perceive that a lasso had been thrown over him, which would confine his arms, when he saw himself suddenly surrounded, and was rushed upon by a

number of men. He instantly recognized the voice of Hinch, shouting, "Down with him! Drag him down!" as the men who had hold of the lasso about his body jerked at it violently in the efforts to throw him. All his tremendous strength was put forth in one convulsive effort, which would have freed him, but that the infernal noose had fallen true, and bound his arms.—As it was he dragged the six stout men who held it after his frantic bounds nearly to his own door, before he was prostrated, and then it was by a heavy blow dealt him over the head with the butt of a gun. The last objects which met his eye as he sank down, were the horrified faces of his two children and wife looking out upon him!

The blow deprived him of his senses for some time, and when he recovered he found himself half stripped, and lashed to a tree a short distance from his house.—Hinch in front of him, with a knotted rope in his hand, his wife on the ground, wailing and clinging with piteous entreaty round the monster's knees, his children weeping by her, and outside this group a circle of men with guns in their hands. That fearful awakening was a new birth to Jack Long! His eye took in every thing at one glance. A shudder, like that of an oak rifling to its core, sprang along his nerves, and seemed to pass out at his feet and through his fingers, leaving him as rigid as marble; and when the blows of the hideous mocking devil before him fell upon his white flesh, making it welt in purple ridges, or spout dull black currents, he felt them no more than the dead tinsel of his door would have done; and the agony of that poor wife thrilling a frantic echo to every harsh slashing sound seemed to have no more effect upon his ear than it had upon the tree above them which shook its green leaves to the self same cadence they had held yesterday in the breeze. His wide-open eyes were glancing calmly and scrutinizingly into the faces of the men who stood around—those features are never to be forgotten! For while Hinch lays on the stripes with all his furious strength, blaspheming as they fall, that glance dwells on each face with a cold, keen, searching intensity, as if it marked them to be remembered in hell!—The man's air was awful—so concentrated—so still—so enduring! He never spoke, or groaned, or writhed—but those intense eyes of his—the wretches couldn't stand them, and began to shuffle and get behind each other. But it was too late; he had them all—ten men!—*They were registered.*

We will drop the curtain over this horrible scene. Suffice it to say, that after lashing him until he fainted, the regulators left him; telling his wife, that if they were not out of the country in ten days he should be shot. He did go within the specified time; and as it was said, returned with his family to Arkansas, where his wife's father lived. The incident was soon forgotten in Shelby county amidst the constant recurrence of similar scenes.

About four months after this affair, in company with an adventurous friend, I was traversing Western Texas, our objects were to see the country, and amuse ourselves in hunting for a time over any district we found well adapted for a particular sport—as for bear-hunting, deer-hunting, buffalo-hunting, &c. Either of these animals is to be found in greater abundance, and of course pursued to greater advantage in peculiar regions;—and as we were anxious to make ourselves familiar with all the modes of the modes of life in the country, we made it a point to stop wherever the promise of any thing especially interesting offered itself. Prairies, timber and water were better distributed in Shelby than any county we had passed through—the timber predominating over the prairie, though interlaid by it in every direction. This diversity of surface attracted a greater variety and quantity of game, as well as afforded more perfect facilities to the sportsman. Indeed it struck us as a perfect Hunter's Paradise; and my friend happened to remember a man of some wealth who had removed from his native country, and settled, as he understood in Shelby, we inquired for him, and very readily found him.

Whatever else may be said or thought of the Texans, they are unquestionably most generous and hospitable. We were frankly and kindly received, and horses, servants, guns, dogs, and what ever else was necessary to ensure our enjoyment of the sports of the country, as well as the time of our host himself, were forthwith at our disposal, and we were soon, to our hearts' content, engaged in every kind of exciting chase.

[CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.]