

A Short Story by Joseph A. Altsheler

The Lone Huntsman

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The Lone Huntsman

“You might git over the mountain, an’ agin you might n’t,” said Gentry, the keeper of the unclean little tavern. “There’s a lot of wild and rough country atween here an’ the Wood Creek Valley, an’ some mighty smart men have been known to git tangled up in it. Still, there ain’t no law agin tryin’.”

When I left the train at Clay City, I had come by cart as far as the rough mountain roads would allow. But at last it became obvious that a wagon could go no farther, so I came on foot. The mountaineers might be in ambush for each other, but they would surely not disturb me if I did not meddle with their own pet feuds. It would be a pleasant adventure, a journey of exploration.

“Well, I’m going to make the trip,” I said to Gentry. “Can you tell me how the road runs?”

“Foller the road to the creek, stranger,” said the

landlord. “It’s easy ’nuff to cross about three miles beyant this place. It’s shallow there and you kin step from rock to rock. After that there ain’t no road, and you kin foller your own ch’ice.”

The loungers in front of the tavern gazed lazily after me as I trudged up the dusty road, and the last I saw of them they were whittling as industriously as ever. The thin, crisp mountain air expanded my lungs, and soon my muscles and nerves became firm and strong—I believed myself equal to any adventure. Though it was midsummer and the sun was hot, the road was too stony to be dusty. The dense thickets and stubby woods that bordered the path made good shade, and I proceeded with brisk and elastic step until I reached the creek. Here I knelt and drank, and when I had crossed the stream sat down on the bank to rest before attempting the slopes that lay beyond.

As the tavern-keeper had said, there was no road beyond the creek. Apparently everybody that came this way either went up the creek or down it. I was at liberty to imagine myself an explorer if I chose—and I chose.

Selecting a stout stick as a kind of alpenstock, I pressed my way through the bushes and began to ascend the slope. The thickets did not extend far, but the ground was much broken by boulders. A mile's hard travelling brought me to the crest of the ridge, and I found that I was somewhat short of wind. If all the miles of my journey were to be like that last one, it was well that I had brought Gentry's entire supply of cheese and crackers.

The Alleghanies are not high, but no mountains impress one more with the sense of wildness, the absence of human kind. It is not the wildness of the Rockies, where trees and grass grow not, but here it is a living, breathing wilderness of vegetation, without man, the vital spark of all.

I lay down under a tree to rest a while before pressing farther into the wilderness, and while I lay I let my thoughts run back to the time when the bold adventurers from the old Eastern colonies came over these mountains into the Dark and Bloody Ground and founded the first State across the Alleghanies. To me the founding of my State has always seemed most romantic. It is past

my ken how any one can fail to admire the courage of the men who shouldered their long rifles and left the fields and woods that they knew for this mighty forest-clad wilderness.

Descending the mountain was less tiring than the ascent, but it had its difficulties, and they were not a few. I found that the dwarf trees had hid from view many boulders and little steps which opposed themselves to my passage. I could afford to neglect no precaution, lest I should fall and sprain an ankle or suffer worse. When I reached the bottom of the mountain, the sun, reaching the zenith, had begun his crawl down the other side, so I sought the densest shade I could find and lay down. Tired to the bone with hard walking, I soon fell asleep.

I was aroused by a sharp report, and sprang up in alarm, for it was my first thought that some of the wild mountaineers, engaged in the prosecution of one of their feuds, had taken a pot shot at me. But when my eyes grew a little clearer, I saw that the skies were in blackest cloud, and a second violent crash of thunder quite as loud as that which had awakened me, followed

by a bright flash of lightning, would have made it evident to the least weatherwise that a storm was coming. The lightning was so brilliant that it made me quiver. The thunder was terrifying. Soon I could see the streaks of rain across the distant sky. It behooved me to seek shelter. A large oak tree with many boughs grew near, and I found a comfortable position under it where I could sit on a stone and lean against the trunk.

A heavy wind that kept the bushes and trees bowing, preceded the arrival of the rain. Many boughs snapped before it; the edge of the wind became sharp and chill. Presently the rain came, humming in its speed and dashed about by the wind.

Cold whiffs of it were dashed under the boughs of the tree and into my face, sending the chill to my bones and making me wish that I was back at Gentry's. A feeling of loneliness and awe grew upon me.

I set my will to work to think out a plan for the night. With the earth soaking and the rain still falling, I could not sleep under a tree unless I expected to wake up shaking with a chill or

burning with fever, either of which might mean death. Across one of the little valleys the mountain was precipitous and stony. I might find there a cave, or at least a hollow in the rock which would afford me shelter.

I seized my stick and ran along the mountain-side as fast as I dared. The rain had eased up a little, but the lightning seemed to know no rest. As I turned around a large rock, a tremendous blaze shot across the sky. My eyes were dazzled and then blinded. I felt a stunning sensation, as if I had been struck by a rifle ball, and fell to the ground senseless.

I do not suppose that I lay unconscious long, for when my senses returned and I struggled to my feet there was still a strong smell of sulphur in the air. But the rain and the fireworks which accompanied it alike had ceased.

My clothing was scorched. I felt strange and dizzy, and everything looked unreal. There was a roaring in my ears, but I was devoutly thankful that the bolt had done no worse.

I was in a sorry enough plight, however, for,

though there were now no thunder and lightning, it began to rain again, and the need of shelter pressed upon me with increased force. I saw nothing for it but to attempt my original plan of seeking a night's lodging in some mountain cave or under some overhanging cliff, so I started again along the mountain-side, though I trembled with a chill.

The clouded sun was behind the mountains and the night was coming on fast. The loneliness oppressed me so heavily that I shouted aloud, endeavoring to cheer myself. My head was still dizzy from the lightning's stroke—the mountain-tops seemed to dance the Virginia reel with each other.

At length I reached the ravine in which I thought I might find shelter. It was a deep gash in the mountain-side, and darkness lay very heavy in it. I shrank from entering the chasm, but a sharper dab of rain than usual spurred me on and I dived in. Here I found that I had improved my condition only a little. It was darker, and but little dryer than on the open slope, and in the centre of the ravine flowed a stream of water a foot deep. I

stumbled into it, slipping over some stones, and fell on my knees. But the water did not increase my discomfort, for already I was as wet as I could be. I dragged myself out and for a moment thought of leaving the ravine, but concluded that I had better follow it. It led along the mountain-side like a huge plough furrow, and, keeping clear of the flowing water, and using the bank as much as I could as a shelter from the rain, I pressed along, stumbling frequently, as it was now quite dark—so dark, in fact, that I could not see objects twenty feet before me. The ravine curved upward, and in a short time I reached the summit of the low slope. I felt very weak, and my head swam around. When I had managed to gather my senses together a little I made my way as best I could over the crest of the hill. Looking down the slope, I saw a point of light, and I staggered toward it, going as straight as I could; but the way was broken by huge rocks and trees, and though I tramped about from this place to that and always kept the light in view, I seemed to get no nearer to it.

For a moment I was in despair, a despair that

was increased by my growing weakness and dizziness. Then I decided to shout, which perhaps would have been the better plan in the first place. I should have remembered the mountain feuds. Whoever was responsible for the light, if I proceeded noiselessly, might take me for an enemy and shoot me.

I shouted, “Help! Help!” and again, “Help! Help!” Instantly the point of light vanished. I was startled, but continued to shout. There came no answer to my cries, however, and I stopped, persuading myself that what I had seen was the phantasm of a deranged imagination.

I stood in silence for a minute or two, trying to think what next to do, and then I felt a breath over my shoulder. I shuddered convulsively and almost shrieked aloud. Some one was standing behind me, I knew, but for the life of me I could not turn to see who or what it was. All the blood seemed to gather in the top of my head and to freeze there.

“Well, stranger,” said a deep voice, almost in my ear, “who are you, and why have you been yelling here in such rash fashion?”

I turned and saw a very tall and large man standing over me. The light was too scant for me to see his face or any further detail of his appearance.

“I was shouting for help,” I said. “I am lost and sick. Can you give me shelter?”

“I won’t refuse to help a white man,” he said. “Come along with me, stranger, and make just as little noise as you can. You never can tell when enemies are about.”

These injunctions confirmed me in the conjecture that I had met one who bore a part in some mountain feud, but I could not conceive how anybody could be fierce enough for blood to hunt it on such a night.

He turned among some trees and rocks, taking a course which, as well as I could remember, led directly away from the vanished light. He walked slowly, but held his rifle before him as if he would be ready for the immediate use of it.

Again and again he changed his course. Sometimes I could make out the outlines of steep cliffs beside me, and again we were in thick

woods. I had lost long since any idea of the direction in which we were going. Nor did I care. There was not room for many things then in my dazed brain. After a half-hour of such travelling my strength gave way again.

“I’m afraid I’m played out,” I said to the man. “I’ve been knocked about so much by the storm that all my strength is gone. Then, too, a flash of lightning grazed me as it passed, and it set things inside my head to going round.”

“It’s not much further to my hut,” said the man, “and I’ll help you.”

The word “hut” had a most welcome sound, for it meant shelter, and I grew stronger when I heard it. The man put his arm under one of mine, and helped me along as if I had been a little child.

“I saw a light before I began to shout. That was why I shouted,” I said.

“Yes,” he replied soberly, “it came from my hut, and I put it out as soon as I heard your voice. Here’s the place. Come in.”

We were at the door of the cabin before I saw it. The skies had brightened a little, and there was

sufficient light to show a small but strong cabin, built of unhewn logs, against the perpendicular side of a hill.

“In with you,” said the man.

He pushed me in and, coming in after me, quickly closed the door behind us. I heard him shoving a heavy bar in place. But I was too thankful for being out of the rain to wonder why he should be so cautious.

“Stand there a moment, stranger,” he said, “and then you’ll be able to see.”

I heard him striking hard substances together and a feeble flame lifted up. With flint and steel he had lighted a piece of cotton wick in a pan of tallow. Next, he stirred up some ashes on a rude stone hearth and revealed a bed of glowing coals whose warmth was as grateful to me as manna to the hungry. This task finished, the man faced about and gazed at me with as much curiosity as I gazed at him.

It was a good as well as a strong face. His eyes had the look of one who is perpetually watching. His costume was antique and strange. He wore a

long garment resembling a tunic made of tanned hide, probably deer-skin. It was fringed, and the fringe fell to his knees. A fur cap was on his head, and leggings and moccasins completed his attire. In the pictures of the old pioneers, I had seen men thus clothed, but I had never expected to meet one in the flesh.

There were furs and skins of many kinds on the floor and walls of the cabin. On hooks on the walls were two rifles. They were like that which the man carried in his hand, very long and slender in the barrel, evidently of an ancient pattern. The cabin was dry and snug. The wet night was shut out. A square of board covered a small window.

“You appear to wonder at me, stranger,” said the man, “but not as much, I guess, as I wonder at you.”

His comprehensive glance took in every detail of my face and dress.

“You have no arms, stranger,” he said.

“No,” I replied; “I’m a man of peace. I never carry them.”

“You ’re wrong there,” he said. “A man should

never be without them.”

He looked at me a moment as if he thought I needed a keeper. But his expression quickly changed to one of sympathy.

“You do look weak and sick,” he said, “and I guess the first thing for me to do is to get you something to eat. While I’m cooking it, you can dry.”

He put a wooden stool in front of the coals. I sat on the stool and, taking off my coat, hung it on my knees, where it could dry more rapidly. From some recess the man brought forth several strips of meat and hung them over the fire, where they soon began to broil, the savory odor tickling my nostrils and stirring up an almost painful hunger.

“That venison came off one of the fattest bucks I ever saw,” said the man. “I shot him on the mountain not a mile from here.”

“I have heard that the deer are getting scarce in these mountains,” I said.

“I’d like to know who told you that,” he said, with an inquiring look. “I reckon that few white

men besides me were ever here.”

He took down a wooden platter and handed me the venison on it. I ate with a great appetite. My evident appreciation of the venison pleased him, for he smiled.

“Deer meat’s not bad,” he said, “when it’s fat and it’s cooked well. But sometimes I like a buffalo steak too.”

“Buffalo steaks are scarcer than diamonds now,” I said. “I guess you have to keep on wanting.”

“Hardly that,” he replied. “It’s a long tramp, it’s true, but all I ’ve got to do is to go down out of the hills and shoot one.”

I stared at him, but he looked solemn and sane.

“Deer and buffalo are not the only game you shoot?” I said.

“No,” he replied; “I kill wolves, bears, panthers, and catamounts, and the Lord knows what. The woods are full of big game.”

I had supposed that the mountains had been swept clean of big game years and years ago.

Still, this man ought to know. The fat steak that I was eating and the skins and furs piled about were proof that he did.

He went to the square of board on the wall and adjusted it a little.

“I can’t afford to let the light shine through a crack there again, stranger,” he said. “It was careless of me to do it before, but it may have saved your life. But them that I don’t want to see might see it next time.”

Evidently this was a man who bore an active part in the feuds. But he did not look bloodthirsty, nor did he resemble the shrivelled, hangdog, and back-bent race of mountaineers whom I knew. His face was fresh, and the seams in it were made by the weather, not by years.

My hunger was now satisfied and my clothes were quite dry. I felt strong, though the machinery inside my head was still behaving badly, jumping and jerking in the queerest fashion.

“Stranger,” said the man, “you look better now, and I think I ’ll go outside and see if everything is

quiet. There was a party sneaking through this country not long ago, and some of 'em may be hanging about yet. Bar the door behind me, but when you hear three knocks on it you may know it's me coming back and you can let me in. If you are attacked before I come, there are two loaded rifles on the wall."

I was about to tell him that I had no share in the mountain feuds and that surely they would not attempt to drag me into them; but before I could get the words out, he was gone. Obeying his command, I lifted the heavy bar into place and fastened the door.

Alone in the cabin, the sense of bewilderment grew upon me. I seemed to have known something of such men as this, but I could not remember where I had seen any like him.

I began to examine the cabin again. Barring the great profusion of skins and furs, it was much like an ordinary mountain cabin in the wildest parts of Kentucky. I took down one of the rifles from the wall and found that it was a flint-lock, of a style a hundred years old. By each weapon hung a great horn of powder.

Near the door and facing the path up which we had come I saw several stout pegs projecting at equal distances. I put my hand upon one of them and pulled. It came away and revealed a round hole through the wall, large enough to admit a rifle barrel.

I returned again to the stool and sat down by the fire. There was no blaze, merely the glowing coals. The wisp of smoke that arose passed up a little mud chimney and was probably lost before it reached the open air. I did not feel sleepy. Ordinarily I would have been unable to keep my eyes open under such circumstances. But now I was wide awake.

I heard three knocks on the door and promptly admitted my host.

“All’s quiet, stranger,” he said.

He seemed to be pleased with his reconnoissance, and leaned his rifle against the wall, letting it go out of his hands for the first time. I noticed that the rifle was like the others, a flint-lock.

“Do you like that kind of rifle?” I asked. “Isn’t

it a little bit old-fashioned?”

“It’s as good as they make,” he replied quickly. “I never heard of any better. If anybody’s got one that he thinks he can shoot further and straighter with than I can with this, let him try me.”

This, then, was a genuine mountaineer who had let the world slide by him!

“I suppose you are still voting for Andrew Jackson up here?” I said, meaning to be jocular.

“Andrew Jackson? Andrew Jackson?” he said wonderingly. “I never heard of him. I once knew a man named Tom Jackson, in the Virginia settlements.”

I thought at first that he in his turn was trying to have a little sport with me. But his face was grave. There was no indication of guile there. He found another stool in the corner and sat down beside me in front of the coals.

“From the North?” he asked presently.

“No,” I replied.

“Thought maybe you came down from Canada,” he said.

“It’s a long journey from Canada,” I replied.

“So it is,” he said, “but it’s been taken often enough. So you’re not British, stranger?”

“No,” I replied, wondering why he should take me for a Briton.

“I’m glad of it,” he said. “They ’re a bad lot. They use the Indians to fight against us, and we ’ll never have any peace until we drive ’em all back across the ocean.”

I knew that the ancient prejudice against the English still lingered in many places, but I had got pretty well rid of it myself, though it would flare up now and then when I read the histories. But I had no mind to encourage such feelings in others, seeing how idle they were at this late day.

“I have no fault to find with the British, or Canadians either,” I replied. “They ’re like other people, some good and some bad.”

“You ’re not a Tory, are you?” he asked. His face expressed aversion.

“Oh, no,” I said, smiling at his ignorance. “We don’t have Tories in this country any more. I’m a Democrat.”

“Umph!” he said in a tone that expressed doubt. He continued to look at me as if he failed to understand. He was silent for a while, and so was I. The burning wick in the tallow gave but little light, and the form of the big man sitting on the other side of the hearth grew shadowy.

After a while he rose, removed the board, and looked through the little window. Then he came back and resumed his seat on the stool.

“The rain’s stopped,” he said, “but there’s no moon. I’m glad it’s a black night. It makes it harder for anybody to find my house.”

“You ’re not fond of visitors, then?” I said.

“Yours is the first white face I ’ve seen in two years,” he replied.

I wondered why he should say “white face.” I knew there were no negroes in these mountains. I wondered also why he should be so careful in watching for enemies if he had not seen any in two years. For one who loves a feud two years is a long time between shots.

He began to look me up and down again, as if he would see from my face whether or not he

could trust me. When he had finished, he leaned over and asked me in a low tone, as if he were afraid some one would overhear him:

“Stranger, have you heard any news from General Washington?”

Astonished, I stared at the man. But there was not the slightest evidence of insanity about him. His clear eyes expressed the deepest interest.

“Well,” I said, speaking truthfully, “I cannot say that I have had any very late news from General Washington, but I am confident he is doing well.”

“I’m mighty glad to hear it,” he said in a tone of relief. “For a while I did n’t like to ask you that question, for I was n’t sure that you were n’t one of the other side. The last white man that I saw two years ago told me the General and his men were hard pressed. Sometimes I think I ought to go back and help, but I like the wilderness best. I was made for it,”

He was silent again for a little while, and I never thought to question him about the strange things that he said.

“That was a great fight at Bunker Hill,” he said presently, his face lighting up. “A fur trader from the Virginia settlements told me about it. I wonder what King George thought when he heard how his regulars were cut up.”

I said I had no doubt that King George took it very hard.

“But it will be a long fight,” he said musingly. “Our people are not organized and they have n’t the arms. Nobody can tell how it will go.”

I could have told the result very well, but I did not.

“Maybe you have seen something of the war?” he said to me interrogatively.

I shook my head.

“Well, you don’t look like a soldier, that’s true,” he said, “and it’s a long distance from here to where they’re fighting. You ’re a trader, maybe?”

I said that I had something to do with mercantile ventures. He nodded and looked satisfied.

“There’s money in the fur trade for them that care for it,” he said, “but it has its risks too. I take some skins and furs myself, but just enough to buy me powder and lead for three or four years, till the next time I go to the settlements.”

What curiosity the man may have had at first concerning me seemed to have passed away. Nor did I ask him any questions about himself. I have often wondered since why I did not, but I suppose it was because my head was so queer and jerky that night.

“If you want to sleep,” he said, “you’ll find a pile of skins in the corner, and they’ll make a soft bed. As for myself, I’m going to do some work.”

I was not sleepy then, but I thanked him for his courtesy. I moved my stool near the wall and, leaning against the logs, felt quite comfortable.

The man set about his task. From a recess he brought an armful of small bars of lead, and placed them on the hearth. He stirred up the coals again until they glowed and threw out a strong heat. In an iron ladle which he placed on the fire he melted the bars of lead one after another and

then began to cast bullets in a pair of small moulds.

He was as intent upon his work as an artist upon a picture. Sometimes the shining leaden pellets would drop from the moulds and roll to my feet. I would shove them back to him with my toe and he would gather up each carefully and put it in his pouch.

“I can’t afford to waste my lead,” he said, “for I don’t know where I’d get any other nearer than the Virginia settlements. They say the British are sending guns and powder and lead to the Indians beyond the Ohio. It’s a crime that they’ll never get forgiveness for. White men are the only people that ought to have guns.”

In order to help him, I took the pouch from him and held it. Then he would tip the molten lead into the mould, and the next moment throw the bullet out into the pouch. He worked rapidly, and the pouch grew heavy with its leaden load.

“It’s a pity,” he said after a while, “that some of our boys back in the colonies did n’t have these to use against King George’s men. I guess

they need 'em bad enough. Stranger, if I had been at Bunker Hill with these and that rifle there I'd have made my mark."

He put two more bars of lead in the ladle and watched them as they slowly melted.

"Do you ever go far from here?" I asked.

"All the way to the Ohio and across it," he said; "and I 've seen some of the finest country that God's sun ever shone on. If the war was to stop and the people across the Alleghanies was to find how good the land is over here, how they'd pour across the mountains! But maybe I ought n't to tell you, stranger. I don't want to see the hunting grounds turned into farms—not when I 've come across the mountains to get away from the sound of the axe."

He looked at me with suspicion. I told him that he need fear nothing from me. This seemed to reassure him, and he turned his attention again to the bullets.

"That's ten more," he said, "twelve now, fifteen, eighteen, twenty-five. That's all, and the pouch is full. I 'll take it now, stranger."

He took the pouch and put it away in the recess.

“Stranger,” he said when he came back and sat on the other stool, “when you make bullets, what do you make ’em of?”

“The same as you do,” I replied. “Lead.”

“I mostly make ’em of lead,” he said, “but I ’ve got one here that’s not of lead.”

He reached his hand into the bosom of his deerskin tunic, and, producing something, placed it in my hand.

“That,” said he, “is a bullet, but it’s not of lead. What is it?”

The bullet shone like those that were fresh from the mould, but it had a different tint.

“It’s silver, I guess,” I said.

He nodded.

“It’s for luck,” he said. “I ’ve carried that silver bullet three years. Everybody ought to carry one. There are some things, stranger, that a lead bullet won’t touch. They are such things as are helped by the devil, but they ’ve got no power against a

silver bullet. I'm going to use this to-night."

He spoke in a significant tone, as if he were impressed with the weight and importance of what he was going to do.

"How?" I asked in surprise.

"Well," he replied, "I'm going to shoot it at something that goes on four legs; what it is I don't know, but it's more like a bear than anything else, I guess. I've shot four bullets of lead at it and never touched a hair. It never happened to me before to miss the same thing four times, and once at not more than twenty yards. Stranger, that thing was helped by the devil, and I'm going to use against it this silver bullet that the devil's got no power over."

He looked at me earnestly. Curiosity laid hold of me.

"Will you tell me about it," I asked, "and let me help you?"

"I'll tell you," he said, "but you can't help me, 'less you've got another silver bullet. 'T would be a waste of good lead. But you can go along. I've got traps set by the beaver dam in the creek a

couple miles from here, but something comes every night and takes the beavers out. I 've watched four nights and shot at it, but always missed. It's past midnight now, stranger, and it will be coming. We must get ready."

He took his favorite rifle and drew the charge. Then he reloaded carefully with the silver bullet and an extra allowance of powder.

"It's not worth while for you to take anything," he said. "Only this will reach the mark."

He slapped his rifle barrel with an air of great confidence, for which I knew the silver bullet was responsible.

It was very dark outside, too dark for me to see which way I was going or along what sort of a path. But the lone huntsman trod with firm and rapid step, and I followed close behind.

For an hour or more we wound in and out among rocks, trees, and thickets, and then I heard the trickling and bubbling of water.

"This is the creek," said the hunter, "and down there in that hollow are the traps. We 'll sit on this rock in the shadow of the trees and wait.

Don't lean over too far, for you might fall, and it's ten feet to the bottom behind you."

He rested his gun across his knees, drew his great shoulders up a bit, and sank into an easy position, keeping his eyes on the little hollow where the beaver trap lay. I sat by his side. Though the rain had ceased long since, the forest was still wet, and we could hear an occasional drop of water slipping from one leaf and falling on another below. Looking up at the heavens, I noticed that the clouds were passing away, and it grew lighter, though the light was a somber gray.

We waited more than an hour, neither speaking nor making the slightest movement. For the first time that night I began to feel sleepy. My head nodded. My eyelids came down. I shook myself and resolved that I would not yield. The silence of the forest, broken only by the soft drip of the water from one leaf to another, encouraged sleep. Inclination became too strong for will, and, sitting erect, I slept.



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