

**JUMP OF THE CAT GAVE MOUNTAIN BOY A CHANCE**

**Old Story of How Youth Was Attacked in Lonely Post Office by Robbers and Fought Them Off. Bandit Hanged But Never Told Who He Was.**

Who was Dudley Johnson? Ask C. E. Sumner of Asheville, in an article in the state papers. Somewhere in the United States he had a mother and a sister, living in another town where he was living by another name. When the Fates conspired and gunned away his life on the jump of a store cat from a shelf to the top of a lard can, he closed his lips and carried the secret of his life to his grave.

Twenty-five years have rolled by since North Carolina was startled by a daring post office robbery that finally reached the ears of President McKinley and brought special honors to a Buncombe county boy of 18, but the veil of mystery that cloaked the identity of the cultured bandit leader has never lifted.

Today, when murder, mysterious and puzzling enigmas are discussed in the mountains, the conversation always turns to the Emma burglary, the close-lipped, educated yegg chief, and the strange pranks that fate played to bring justice to the conspirators and recognition to the hero of the pistol battle fought in the semi-darkness of a country post office.

**Stage Is Set.**  
The stage of the biggest drama ever witnessed in the mountain country was a little country store operated by D. J. McClellan at Emma. On the night of February 8, 1901, Samuel Alexander, a boy of 18, was sleeping in a lean-to at one side of the store when he was awakened by someone calling from the roadway.

Little suspecting the stirring events that were to follow, Alexander answered and heard a request that he open the door in order to supply a new family in the neighborhood with some groceries.

When he lifted the heavy bar the door flew wide and two masked men entered. They covered him with revolvers, closed and barred the door and demanded that he open the safe which stood near the rear of the store. Unable to resist the young man knelt in front of the little safe and twisted the knob. When the door swung open the masked leader, who later gave his name as Johnson, laid a small pistol he had taken from Alexander on top of the safe and stooped down to remove the money. The young man was still covered by the unwavering muzzle of a big revolver in the hands of the second bandit, a negro, Ben Foster.

It was at this point, that the interruption came from a wholly unexpected source. "Mack," a big gray store cat was after a mouse on a shelf near the front of the store. The cat jumped from the shelf, landing on a lard can in such a manner that the noise was startling. Foster, who was guarding Alexander, turned his head and peered into the darkness near the front of the store. In a flash Alexander seized the pistol which the reckless leader had placed on top of the safe within a few feet of where he was standing and as the masked negro turned he received a shot through the lungs just under the heart.

**Failed To Fire.**  
Then the boy turned the weapon upon the kneeling bandit and pulled the trigger. Here again the capricious Fates took a hand. The hammer of the revolver fell harmlessly failing

**Notice of Sale of Real Estate.**  
North Carolina, Surry county. By virtue of authority invested in me in a certain deed of trust executed the 31st day of December, 1923 by W. F. Ward and wife Ila Ward to Fred Folger, Trustee for Folger, Jackson and Folger to secure an indebtedness of \$50.00, said deed of trust having been assigned to E. F. Ward, and said deed of trust being duly recorded in the office of the Register of Deeds of Surry county in book 88, at page 13, default having been made in the payment of the notice thereon secured and at the request of the holder E. F. Ward, I will sell for cash to the highest bidder at public auction in front of the Bank of Mount Airy at Mount Airy, North Carolina, on Saturday, the 19th day of Mar., 1927, at two o'clock P. M.,

the following described real estate, lying and being in Mount Airy township, Surry county, North Carolina. Adjoining the lands of J. N. Slaughter, I. W. Nugent, J. Gilmer, corner John Stevens and others: First tract: Fully described in deed from E. C. Shelton and wife to W. T. Ward recorded in the office of the Register of Deeds of Surry county, North Carolina, in deed book No. 46, page 309. Containing 69 acres more or less. Second tract: Adjoining the first tract conveyed to W. T. Ward by S. E. Polton recorded in the office of the Register of Deeds for Surry county, North Carolina, in deed book No. 45, page 367. Containing 5 acres more or less. The above deed of trust conveying all the right, title and interest to W. F. Ward in and to the above lands described. This the 12th day of Feb., 1927. Fred Folger, Trustee.

to fire the cartridge in the chamber, and probably saving the bandit leader's life.

Johnson realizing his danger arose to his feet and grappled with Alexander in an effort to wrench the pistol out of the boy's hand before he could fire again. In the meanwhile Foster, although dangerously wounded, kept his feet and was attempting to shoot Alexander without hitting his companion. He at length grew desperate and fired, striking Johnson in the shoulder, the ball ranging upward, passing through his neck and lodging just under the jawbone on the opposite side. Firing again, he shot Alexander through the lower abdomen as the bandit leader broke away in agony.

Both of the masked intruders were so dangerously wounded that they were unable to fight longer. Alexander, his strength ebbing fast from his own wound, managed to unbar the back door and drag the burglars to the outside. At this point two other actors appeared on the scene. Harry Mills and Russ Gates, the latter a white man and the former a negro, who had been posted outside to guard the doors while the robbery was being committed. They went to the rescue of their confederates whom they had been powerless to help up to that time.

**Escape in Darkness.**  
As he stood in the doorway at the rear of the store, they assisted the wounded Johnson and Foster off down the railroad track, starting in the direction of Asheville.

Although the bandits had been able to break away from the store and vanish into the darkness, they were in desperate plight as the leader immediately foresaw.

The iron-nerved Johnson urged the two men who were uninjured, Gates and Mills, to leave them and make a getaway, but the latter pair refused and assisted their companions in their agonizing progress down the railroad tracks.

Behind them could be heard shouts and cries of alarm as the news of the shooting and robbery spread in the community. Desperate, they pushed on foot toward the city, finally reaching the vicinity of Murphy Junction or "Red Egypt." Foster's condition had become so bad at this time that he had to be carried. Taking a long shot the bandits knocked at the door of a dwelling and were allowed to enter.

Johnson realized that they could not long remain there and he ordered Gates and Mills to get a hack, automobiles being unknown then. Leaving their wounded companions in the house of the stranger in "Red Egypt," Mills and Gates made their way to the depot section and attempted to hire a hack for the purpose of getting their companions to safety.

**Hard Pressed.**  
The hack drivers were not impressed by their appearance, apparently, so they hung back until finally in desperation the bandits forced one driver to accompany them at the point of a gun. Returning to Murphy Junction at a breakneck speed, the hack was halted and the wounded men assisted into the rear seat. Once more they started toward Asheville, Foster in an almost unconscious condition and Johnson almost mad with the pain of his wound through the shoulder, neck and jaw.

Heading for the "Cripple Creek" section on Southside avenue the fugitives separated and sought refuge in the community that harbored most all petty lawbreakers at that time. The hack driver was dismissed a short distance away, paid well and told to keep his mouth shut.

In the meanwhile, Alexander, all but unconscious from the loss of blood after his brave fight against two armed men, had signalled for help and Mr. McClellan and other neighbors came to his aid giving the alarm to the officers a few minutes later.

Frank M. Johnson, deputy insurance commissioner, who was at that time captain of the police, received the call from Jim Ware, assistant postmaster. Captain Jordan then started a series of moves that landed all four bandits in the city jail less than three and a half hours after the robbery had taken place.

**Mob Forms.**  
Taking the two unhurt bandits first, Captain Jordan and his men made their way quickly through the muttering throng and placed them in the county jail a block or so away. When they returned they carried the wounded men through the mass of humanity on stretchers. The sight of the helpless bandits seemed to quiet the crowd. Foster had protested to some extent at the idea of being moved but the iron nerve of Johnson never flinched. He smiled grimly and told the officers to move along, he was not afraid.

In Johnson's pockets was found some change a "due bill" identified as having been taken from the cash register. Confronted with the evidence and the belief that he had only a few hours to live, Foster made a full

confession implicating all four of the bandits.

In the meanwhile Samuel Alexander was making a brave fight for his life. As he ligatured the news leaked out that he was to have been married the Tuesday following the date of the robbery, and the whole state waited anxiously for news of his condition. When she was informed of his desperate condition, his fiancée went to him. They were married as he lay flat on his back, and she assisted in nursing him back to health again.

News of the brave stand of the young man who took his life in his hands in an effort to guard the United States post office in the store, when he seized the revolver at the jump of the cat and fired, had reached official Washington. A full investigation was ordered.

When the facts were learned President McKinley became interested in the mountain boy and as soon as Alexander was able to travel he went to Washington. There a position was offered him in the Post Office Department but he was unable to handle the work because of a lack of education. The President again took a hand and Alexander was given the position with a leave of absence so that he could draw his salary and go to school. This he did, finally preparing himself sufficiently to hold down the position in the department.

**Mack Honored.**  
"Mack," the cat, was honored, but not officially. Persons who went to the store to view the scene of the gun

battle and to see the holes made by the bullets as they ploughed through the walls, were introduced to "Mack." They fed him richly and he grew fat and easy, enjoying his position as the most famous and most popular cat in all North Carolina if not in the entire country.

Justice in the case of the two men who had entered the store was swift. They were hanged in the old city jail a few months after the most sensational trial in the history of the mountains. The death sentences of Mills and Gates, who remained outside were commuted to life imprisonment in the penitentiary. Before the former left the city he confessed to being the "Black Blagger" who had been terrorizing the city for many months with his "sandbagging" of late travelers.

Time passed and Mills fell ill in the penitentiary and died. Gates became badly crippled with rheumatism and was pardoned. He returned to his old home in Newport, Tenn., and at the last report was still living there.

Highly educated and keenly intelligent, Johnson, the leader of the band, never revealed the circumstances of his early life. He still retained the stamp of the pride of an old aristocratic family, sparing his loved ones the pain of knowing the manner of his passing, and to this day his history is shrouded in mystery. He played the game to end and lost, and carried the secret of his life to the grave with him.

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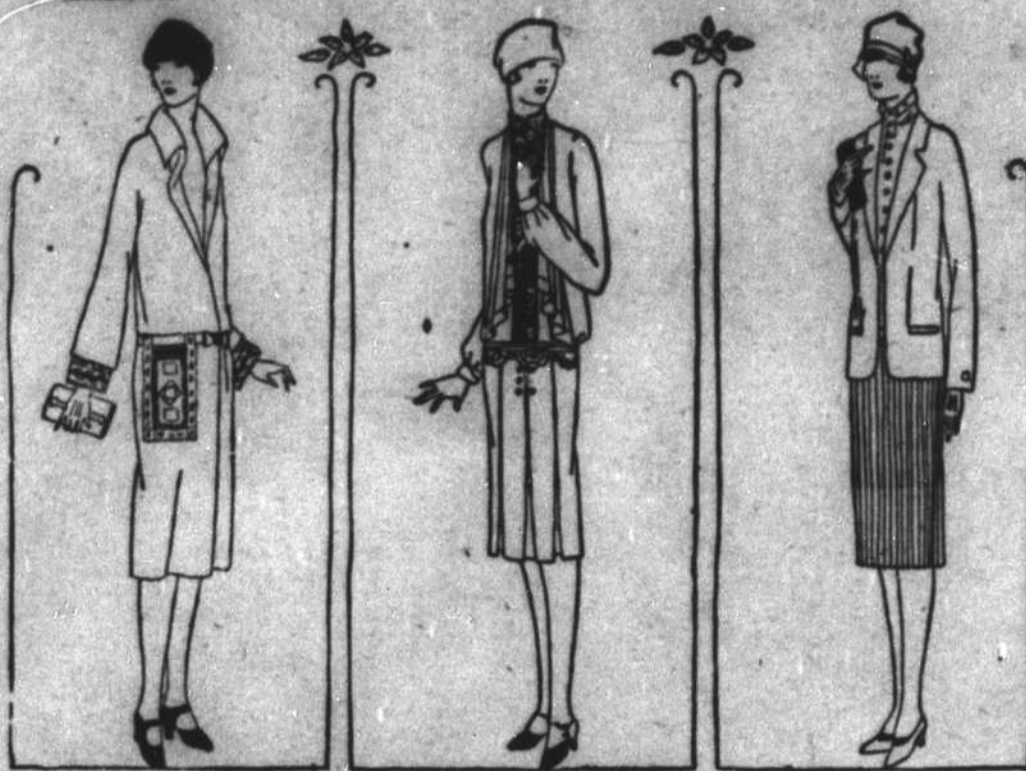
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