

## Clear Thinking at Hill's Saloon

Lars Larsen entered The Daily Astorian the way he entered anything. That is to say, he stormed in.

"I have news!" he bellowed to the editor, D.C. Ireland. "I'm offering a reward for information leading to the polecats who robbed me."

"You mean you are offering a reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the polecats who robbed you."

"No, just leading to. I'll take it from there. I'll hold those polecats by their tails and thump them."

"What if the robbers turn out to be a skunks?"

Larsen stared. D.C. Ireland had the driest wit in town. As such, he was widely viewed as humorless.

Ireland continued. "We sympathize, but The Daily Astorian does not ally itself with extra-judicial justice. Tell me what happened, and maybe a story will turn up leads."

"Swell," Larsen said. "Your paper needs a lively paragraph. It's been tame lately."

The editor winced like a man pricked by the truth. He was pleased though that Mr. Larsen read the paper.

"Here's how it happened," Larsen said, "I was in George Hill's saloon last night. It was payday and tugging on fish nets is thirsty work.

"It's a rough place, but I'm a tough fellow. The crowd was sociable enough. A few fistfights, but no knives or guns. I admit though, I foolishly flashed my bankroll. I was careful at first. But by the fifth or sixth round I was careless. Hill's liquor does that. It's like turpentine, best not taken internally.

"As I was walking home, I saw two dark figures — a runt and a fellow who was big as me. The large one bumped into me and was spiteful to boot. 'Watch where you're going, you dumb Swede,' he said.

“I hate incivility! I clenched my fists and was about to give him the old cheese when the stars dropped from the sky and danced on my nose. The night got blacker, and the next thing I knew a couple drunken castaways from Hill’s saloon were standing over me. Lying there, I reached into my pocket and my bankroll was gone. Flat on my back, I solved the crime. The big fellow distracted me and the little one clubbed me from behind. I figured out the what, when, where and how. Now I need the who.”

The next morning’s paper reported:.

*Swedish fisherman Lars Larsen of Astoria was brutally attacked by unknown assailants outside George Hill’s saloon night before last and while unconscious was relieved of a week’s wages — minus what he spent on refreshments.*

*The stout Scandinavian was the victim of a vicious ploy. A large man rudely bumped into him and a smaller accomplice clubbed the preoccupied son of Sweden from behind. Larsen is offering a reward for tips leading to the identification of the robbers.*

A week passed, and Larsen blew into The Daily Astorian again.

“More news!” he boomed. “I found the robbers. Here’s the scoop, Mr. Ireland.”

Larsen proceeded to tell the tale. He went to George Hill’s saloon on payday, as he had the week before. He sat by a window, watching for the two villains to return to the scene of the crime.

Late in the evening, he confided to the Finn Jarvinen that he was looking for the two men who robbed him. He described the crime in every detail. To which, the taciturn Finn said, “Ghosts.”

“Ghosts?”

“You were robbed by ghosts,” Jarvinen said.

“I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“And what does your belief have to do with it?” Jarvinen asked.

“What makes you think they were ghosts?” Larsen asked.

A disquisition followed on phantoms — their habits, motives and modus operandi. “Mischievous wraiths work in pairs,” Jarvinen said. Larsen was skeptical. But Finns don’t blather. Larsen was half convinced. “If they’re ghosts, I can’t catch them,” he moaned.

“You can catch them,” Jarvinen said. “You lure them and trap them in a glass container, like the empty bottle in front of you.”

“What do I use for bait?”

“Same thing as last time — your bankroll.”

Larsen barely believed a word, but went outside, hid an empty bottle behind his back and waved his bankroll. “Come and get this, you dirty rotten ghosts!” he whispered.

Two figures crept forward in the dark. “Between the liquor and the Finn’s bunkum, I’m seeing ghosts,” Larsen thought.

The two silhouettes — a big one and a little one — came near. The Swede lunged and swung the bottle at the head of the larger figure. The bottle struck nothing solid. He kicked at the smaller figure and missed. The two figures ran away, and the Swede pocketed his bankroll and ran after them.

The dark figures ran to the river and meant to escape in a dinghy. By the time, they untied the boat, the menacing Swede was aboard and close enough to see their faces in the moonlight. “White as ghosts,” Larsen thought.

It was a calm night, but the dinghy’s sail filled. The boat moved rapidly and silently across the river, and there was truce. Nobody wanted to brawl in a small boat crossing a big river. “These ghosts,” Larsen recalled, “didn’t say ‘boo.’ ”

The dinghy was nearly across when the big figure jumped out and waded ashore. The little figure groaned and went over the side as Larsen tried to grab him. The Swede was empty-handed as ever. The small figure splashed ashore and ran. Larsen chased, but quickly lost ground. The Swede was about to stop when he saw the big figure ahead lumbering ever more slowly.

The shuffling specter's huffing and puffing was ghastly. The Swede was panting hard himself, but was soon only a step behind. They were in the open, and the moon was lighting the path. Larsen was about to pounce when his target turned and flung something. Larsen didn't break stride, but for one moment his eyes focused on a soft, light object hitting his nose. He readjusted and looked ahead and the figure was gone.

Larsen saw shadows on the ground, but nothing moving. The Swede was a little spooked. He walked back and found the object. It was a wallet stuffed with bills. He counted the money — a week's wages, minus an evening at Hill's saloon.

The Swede rowed back across the river. Ghosts must have other ways of traveling, he thought, and the next day went to see Ireland, who updated readers.

*Lars Larsen of this town had an adventure of interest to spiritualists. It was the strong opinion of a confidant that he was waylaid by ghosts last week. Night before last, a watchful Larsen pursued two shadowy figures and recovered money that equaled what had been taken from him.*

*He was unable to fathom whether the figures were corporeal or ethereal. We take no position on the matter, nor do we have an opinion on why otherworldly residents would need cash. They say you can't take it with you. Nevertheless, you may need it once you get there.*



