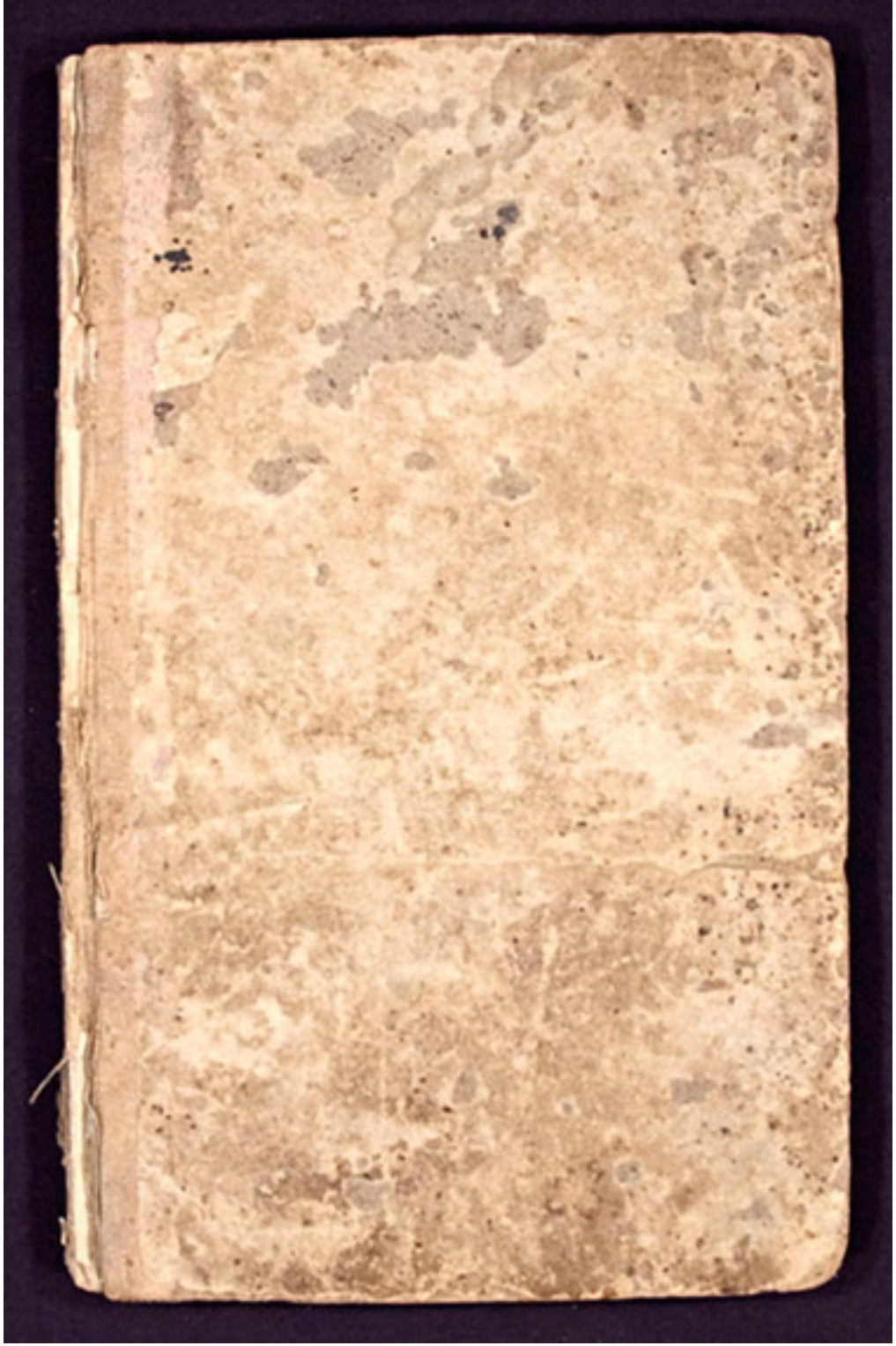

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THE

LIFE AND ADVENTURES

OF

JOHN DAHMEN,

THE MURDERER OF

Frederick Nolte and John Jenzer;

CHIEFLY CONSISTING OF HIS

ORAL CONFESSIONS AND DECLARATIONS, TAKEN DOWN IN PRISON.

Also,

A BRIEF STATEMENT

OF HIS

TRIAL AND EXECUTION.

By REUBEN KIDDER,
Counsellor at law.

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1821.

LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF JOHN DAHMEN.

JOHN DAHMEN having been committed to the public jail in the town of New-Albany, county of Floyd and state of Indiana, on the bank of the Ohio river, in the month of June, 1820, for the murder of Frederick Nolte and John Jenzer, both Germans, remained there menacled with iron and chained down to the floor of the prison till the 21st of August, when he made his escape into Upper Canada. After Dahmen's recommitment, on his return from Canada, the writer of this memoir being engaged as his counsel and finding from conversation that he was disposed to be communicative; that he possessed, from nature, a lively fancy, tenacious memory and a strong, distinguishing mind, and related with great promptitude, clearness and appearance of truth, a story of himself, embracing a variety of interesting and uncommon incidents, which displayed the vilest depravity of heart united with the most extraordinary, unprincipalled ingenuity, could not resist the inclination of committing to writing Dahmen's account of himself, and of publishing it to the world.

His mother tongue was German—the French he could speak also correctly, having learned the latter language, from being long attached, as a soldier, to Bonaparte's armies, both before and during the whole of the Russian campaign. The English he had been familiar with only three years—he however understood the language well, and although he could articulate it but indistinctly, his speech was intelligible.

The prison being, by the permission of the sheriff, visited as often as the avocations of business would permit, Dahmen was never at a loss to resume the thread of his narration and continue it in the exact order of time as the events, he stated, had transpired. Commencing with the time and place of his birth, the following is his story: "I was born at Cologne, on the Rhine, 24th Sept. 1791. My father, named Harman Dahmen, was a wine merchant and a distiller till 1812, when he was appointed a public commissary, under the king of Prussia. The name of my mother, before marriage, was Mary Hennis. My parents were Roman Catholics, in which religious creed they instructed me, from childhood. My education was such as a common school affords in my native country. The dread of severe corporal punishment, though often and severely administered, by my father, I always hoped, at the time I did a mischievous act, to avoid by some cunning management. And I succeeded so well that not one in ten of my misdemeanors was discovered.

At length, tired of the repeated discipline of the whip, I resolved within myself, that if I was punished again, I would immediately abandon my father's house forever, and place myself beyond his knowledge and control. It was not long before I was detected in committing a petty theft. For this offence I was most unmercifully flogged, by my father. I had now just entered on my thirteenth year, and supposed my experience and knowledge of the world would enable me to shift for myself. In a late hour of the ensuing night, I selected the best of my apparel, packed what I did not wear, into a little knapsack, and away I went to Bonn, fifteen miles distant. On my arrival, I formed an acquaintance with one of Marshal Murat's life guards—he was a favorite, who used to stand near his person. With this soldier I ingratiated myself and so much interested him in my favor, that he promised me his endeavors to procure me some agreeable employment. He presently succeeded in recommending me to Marshal Murat, since a brother-in-law, by marriage, to Bonaparte and King of Naples. The Marshal seemed to take a liking to me, and appointed me one of his waiters, to attend constantly near his person, and to run on his small errands. I used to ride in the same carriage, when the Marshal took that mode of conveyance; and when on horse back, I rode after him. In this manner I accompanied him first to Paris and from thence to Austerlitz, in the year 1805. I was there during the great battle fought by the French against the Russians and Austrians. From thence, I returned with him to Cologne, after an absence of two years, from my father's house. Having been at Cologne four days without visiting my father, I met on the parade with an old school-fellow, who recognized and reported me to my father; from whom I had endeavored to keep myself concealed, as I feared he would take me out of the service of the marshal, in which I greatly delighted. My father coming to the Marshal's rendezvous enquired of me, "Where John Dahmen was?" My father took me by the hand and said "John, you must go home with me." "Not," said I, "father, till I have obtained the consent of my general."—Instantly, away I ran and obtained his per-

mission, which, I well remember he accompanied with a jocular, ironical remark. "John," said he, "you little rascal, why did you not inform me before, that your parents lived in this town, that I might have sent you to visit them." "General," replied I, "because I was affraid, if I went home, that they would withhold me from your service, which I dreaded most of all things to quit." On entering my father's house I found my poor mother, who had been exceedingly fond of me, in a declining state of health.

Although I resolved, before I went with my father from the General, to immediately return to his service, when I got home, I was so beset with the entreaties of my uncle, a Catholic priest, my brothers, sisters, and parents, especially the tender caresses of my feeble, affectionate mother, that I at length, though with great reluctance, yielded to their wishes. After receiving the gratulations of my friends and indulging their curiosity with an account of the most extraordinary occurrences, that I had witnessed in my travels, I repaired to the rendezvous of the General, who had always been kind and partial to me, and acquaintad him with the reasons of my determination to abandon his service, by his consent, which he granted, after expressing much regret at parting with me.

I had now just reached the fifteenth year of my age. Inclined, from early youth, to adventure my fortune in the commission of daring crimes, a few weeks after my return to my father, I entered into an association with a company of twenty-nine desperate fellows, who had conspired to rob and plunder the country. Our chief station, for resort and concealment, was situated

in an obscure, remote part of the city, at the house of a woman, named Elizabeth Hort, who always paid us the money promptly, for all the goods we plundered and brought home. Each of our gang was furnished with a key, by which he could gain admittance, at all hours, into the back part of the house, to conceal his stolen property.

The first act, of our depredations, was the tearing off and cartying away the lead, which lined the gutters, on the roofs of houses. But, this mode of theft was soon abandoned, it being found too laborious and unprofitable, our minds being inclined to obtain objects of more value, that would require less fatigue. John Walter, on account of his superior adroitness in mischief and plunder, by general consent, was made the chieftain of our banditti.

A plan was soon projected of robbing a Catholic church. To effect this purpose, ten of our associates, including myself, under pretence of hearing evening prayers, placed ourselves in the church and took a hiding retreat in the confession boxes, armed with pistols and furnished with augers and other instruments, for the purpose of breaking open a way out of the church, after the audience had retired; while, in the mean time, others of our associates lay concealed outside, around the building, awaiting the signal from within. The church, which was richly decorated with ornaments and vases of silver and gold, to the amount in value of 25,000 dollars, was stripped bare; all which valuable property we, to avoid discovery, exchanged for the small sum of three thousand dollars in ready money; having fortunately

made our escape and bore off our booty from the church, without molestation. Three days after this event, I, with some of my companions, attended divine service in the church, that we might amuse ourselves with the denunciations and anathemas of the preacher, against the sacriligious robbers. 'Those impious wretches,' said the priest, 'who have done these damnable acts of iniquity, ought to come forward and confess their guilt—and such confession, if made voluntarily shall be kept an inviolable secret.' While the priest was dwelling on this profane robbery (which awfully offended all good, pious people) with a menacing brow and an indignant solemnity of voice and manner; said I to myself, 'old fellow, we will try you next.'

Eight days after the disastrous occurrance at the church, I, with nine of my confederates in crime, proceeded, with a determined purpose, to commit a depredation on the old priest. His house and garden were inclosed by a high, strong wall; to ascend which, we carried with us a scaling ladder singularly constructed—it was made of leathern thongs, with grappling hooks of iron, fixed to one end, so that by hoisting it up on a pole, on the top of the wall the ladder would hang there and be suspended down near the bottom. By the aid of the ladder, we succeeded according to our most sanguine expectations. Under cover of the night, we moved along without noise, before the mansion of the priest, and presently after our arrival, we all clambered over the high wall, without harm or discovery. Along the walls of the house, divers grape vines were artificially ex-

tended, and loaded with clusters of delicious ripe grapes. Our appetites seemed as much quickened from a prospect of enjoying the grapes, as stimulated by avarice from the expectation of immediately gaining the old man's treasure. It was concluded amongst us, that we would feast upon the grapes before we committed other outrages.

Being young and spry, I made the first attempt, by climbing up the outside of the house, on some bits of wood attached to the wall; but after having ascended a considerable height, my foot lost its hold and I fell to the ground, without receiving any material injury. Finding it difficult to plunder the grapes without being too much diverted from our main pursuit, we resolved to immediately enter the house, by breaking open a window. The noise and tumult, created by battering down the window, aroused the kitchen maid, who instantly appeared at the back door, crying out, who is there? Without returning a reply to her inquiry, which was uttered in a feeble, faultering voice, we seized her, as she opened the door, and tumbled her down head long, into a loathsome pit hard by (where the butchers emptied their blood, filth and offals) communicating with the Rhine; from which pitiful condition she was not extricated, till the next morning.

My father belonged to the church and was a friend and adherent to the old priest, whom I mortally hated. He had solicited my father to send me to his house to receive his instructions and be catechised. Thinks I to myself, this scheme will afford a good opportunity to spy out the old man's plate and money. My

father hitherto had been unsuspicious of my improper conduct or designs. He sent me to the catechetical school of the priest, where I attended eight days successively, one hour each day, from eleven to twelve o'clock. But the religious instructions of the priest was like water thrown upon a rock, where there was no soil to be moistened. Without a desire to gain treasures in heaven, I was thinking all the while, of the earthly treasures deposited in the old man's house. Constantly revolving this project in my mind, I created, at length, a most impatient desire to put it into execution. As I rambled through the house of my teacher, on my frequent attendance for his instruction, like a fox, exploring a hen house for chickens, my eyes were wandering, in every direction, as I strolled through several rooms, in passing to what the priest called his study in a remote part of the house, where he administered religious instructions to a number of young lads, nearly of my own age. I espied one day, in a bed-room, under a bed, going by the door, which was open, a large trunk, elegantly decorated and bound round with strong brass clasps, highly polished. Thinks I to myself, here I have you! that is the strong box containing the treasures I am after. And, from that moment, I entertained not a doubt, that I and my comrades should soon enjoy the pleasures of dividing the trunk and its contents, as a booty between us. All at once, young as I was, my mental energies were roused into action, and my powers of invention put upon the rack to devise ways and means for seizing upon the trunk and bearing it off in triumph. Walter, who was always the

main contriver of our most mischievous and hazardous exploits, revised and altered my plan of approach and attack considerably.—By his arrangement, I was to lead the way, Walter to follow and give directions, as circumstances occasionally required.

At the hour of one, in the night, which was dark and gloomy, our chosen band were called from our slumbers, in a room where we had all agreed to sleep on that occasion. And after drinking, each a good portion of old, strong brandy, out of a bottle, which Walter produced, and arming ourselves with pistols and daggers, we marched in silence two and two in a compact column, Walter and myself in the van.—Arriving at the house, we made a halt, where said Walter addressing us; "Courage my boys! be firm, cool, and obey orders. Behave like men, and I will insure you a rich booty." I walked before to the mouth of a drain, which we easily opened; it formed a communication with the cellar of the house—In silence and darkness we passed through the drain, crawling on our hands and knees into the cellar—and, from thence up stairs into the bed room of the old priest—Our steps were so soft and our pace so slow, that we awoke no one of the family, who were all reposing in sound sleep. One man and myself were stationed, near the bed, our pistols aimed and cocked, with orders to shoot the preist, the instant he awoke.

The trunk was now taken from under the bed and carried off out of the house by two men.—Six of our crew, in the mean time, plundered all the silver plate belonging to the house,

which was kept in the kitchen. During all these proceedings myself and one more were continuing our watch with cocked pistols, over the sleeping priest, until the whole booty was carried out of the house. Fortunately, we made a safe retreat, without disturbing the repose or alarming the fears of any one soul in the family. As I retired from the bed-room, I slipped under my arm the pantaloons of the old man, which hung upon a chair, near the head of his bed, for the sake of the silver buttons on them. All our plunder was conveyed to the house of Elizabeth Horit our usual depository of stolen goods—The trunk contained a large sum of silver and gold. After being employed in depredations about twelve months, I with three of my comrades met, at a jewellers shop and taking notice, that a considerable quantity of jewelry was suspended by the door for show, we seized and carried it off, unperceived. As we approached the house of Elizabeth to conceal it, she appeared at the door, and called pretty loudly to us, "Come on boys! plunder all you can and put your booty in my care for safe keeping!" Her speech being distinctly heard, by some of her neighbors, out of her sight, who by complaining to a magistrate caused six of us with the woman to be immediately arrested. On trial, three, including myself, were found guilty and sentenced to imprisonment and hard labor for six months—the others were all acquitted. By the influence of my father with the government, on the representation of some peculiar circumstances, that were favorable, I was soon liberated from prison.

After my discharge from confinement, my father desirous of closely inspecting my morals and as he said, reclaiming me from bad habits and of giving a new direction to my tho'ts and pursuits, prevailed on me to come home and reside with him. His paternal kindness accompanied with occasional admonitions and advice, though perhaps better treatment than I had a right to expect, was not congenial with my roving fancy which was ever prompting me to stroll abroad and inclining me to participate with others, lawless and unprincipalled as myself, in hazardous scenes of outrage and plunder. I however remained under my father's roof for several months, feeling all the while in this still, gloomy, domestic condition, that I was undergoing a kind of imprisonment which I had voluntarily imposed on myself and from which I could be relieved at pleasure. By night in dreams I was conveyed amidst the old association of my confederates contriving and executing the most ingenious devices of robbery and depredation---- by day my mind was constantly considering the best expedients of putting in execution the dreams of the night. My mind, thus agitated by the prevailing impulse of my ruling passion, was restless as the troubled ocean after a storm.

While revolving the various objects and courses which the bent of my inclination seemingly compelled me to pursue, my uncle coming to me *one day*, with a quick step and a menacing deportment, accosted me in language of reproach and severe rebuke for my conduct in the affair of the jewelry. From that moment I resolved to obey the natural impulse of my mind, against which I had been conflicting for months, and of returning to my old habits. Says I within

myself, the first act in my new career of crime and outrage, old man, shall be, in taking vengeance on you. My uncle was rich and imperious in his manners; either of which circumstances was a sufficient motive with me to make the first experiment on him for obtaining booty.

Having worked my mind up to a state of desperate resolution, the next following evening about eleven of the clock, at night, I set out alone on the adventure, and proceeded to my uncle's house, for the purpose of plunder. Finding all silent and dark and the family in sound sleep, I entered a back door, which remained unfastened, and stepping softly to a closet where I knew he kept his money, I tried six keys before one would fit, by turning which the bolt moved and the door opening, I extended my arm to the back of a shelf, where I reached a little trunk which I soon found, by the weight, was the desired object, containing about 800 dollars. In taking down the trunk I felt a small box, into which, thrusting my hand, I found it full of silver shoebuckles. I presently bore off my prizes with as much expedition and with as little noise as possible. This property I carried home and hid in a secure place. The next morning, the anxiety of my mother prompted her to be inquisitive where I had spent the evening; I removed her suspicions by replying, among the neighbors.

I have now brought the history of my adventures down to the year 1807; about which time a spirit of gambling had taken strong possession of my mind, and in a very short time, I gambled away all the treasure I plundered from the house of my old uncle. On the day following the loss of his property, the old man came with a pitiful

story to my father and mother, concerning his late misfortune. This disastrous occurrence was hardly recited, when in came my aunt, (her head hanging down) with a slow step and a most doleful countenance; scarcely had she entered the door of my father's house, when, in a lamentable tone of voice, she exclaimed, "Oh! My God! we were robbed last night!" looking all the while most significantly at me, as much as to say, by looks rather than by words, "I strongly suspect you John." The old woman's countenance appeared so expressive of grief, avarice and reproach, that I could not avoid saying to her "That I should suppose, that she did not think much on God, who called on him for relief only when he was robbed."

In two or three days after, my uncle came again to my father's house. Being suspicious that I had stolen his money and buckles, he interrogated me, if I had any knowledge of them. I affected great surprise and indignation at his insinuation. I reproached him for indirectly charging me with the base and wicked act of robbing his house in the night time. My uncle perceiving he had overstepped the bounds of propriety, in imputing to me so disgraceful a crime, without other evidence than suspicion, attempted to soften my resentment by a jocular observation. Said he "John, the thief was a clumsy workman, at any rate, in his trade, for he might have stolen from the same place an excellent gold watch, beside other valuable jewelry." Very well, thinks I to myself, Old Man, I will visit you again for those articles.— Accordingly, when eight days had elapsed, I paid another friendly visit at the house of my good uncle, thinking that a man might be as well