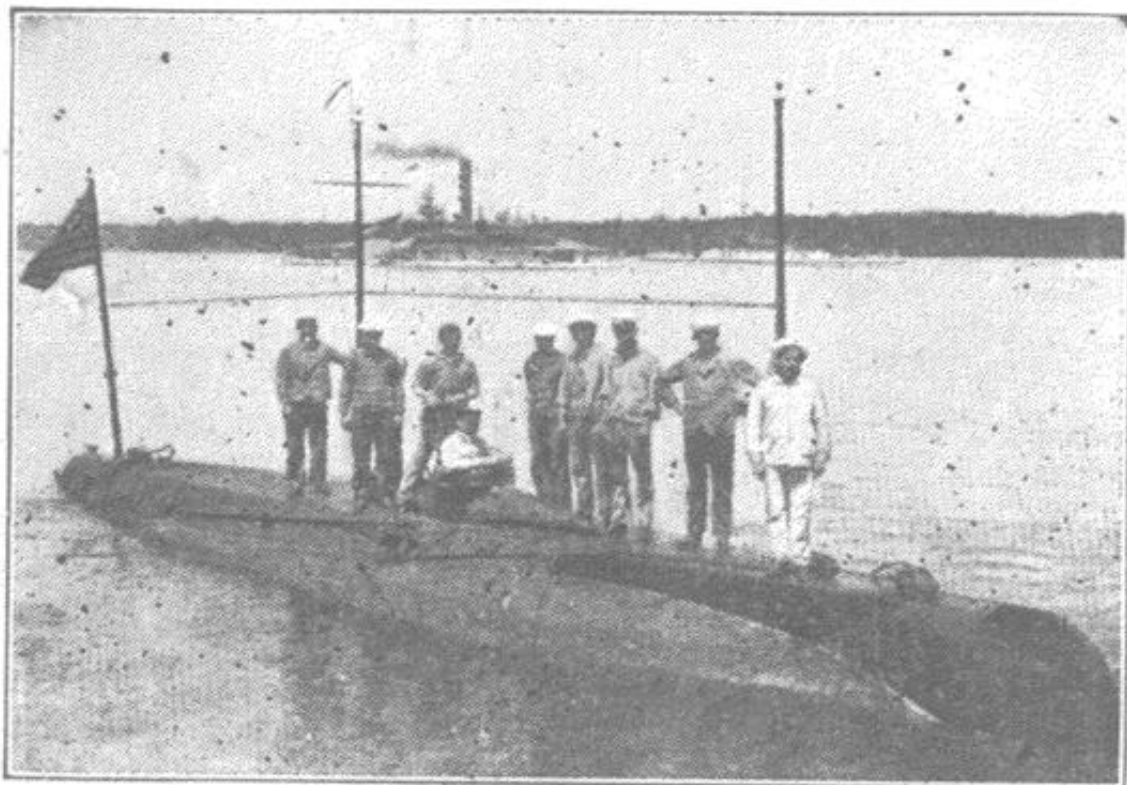


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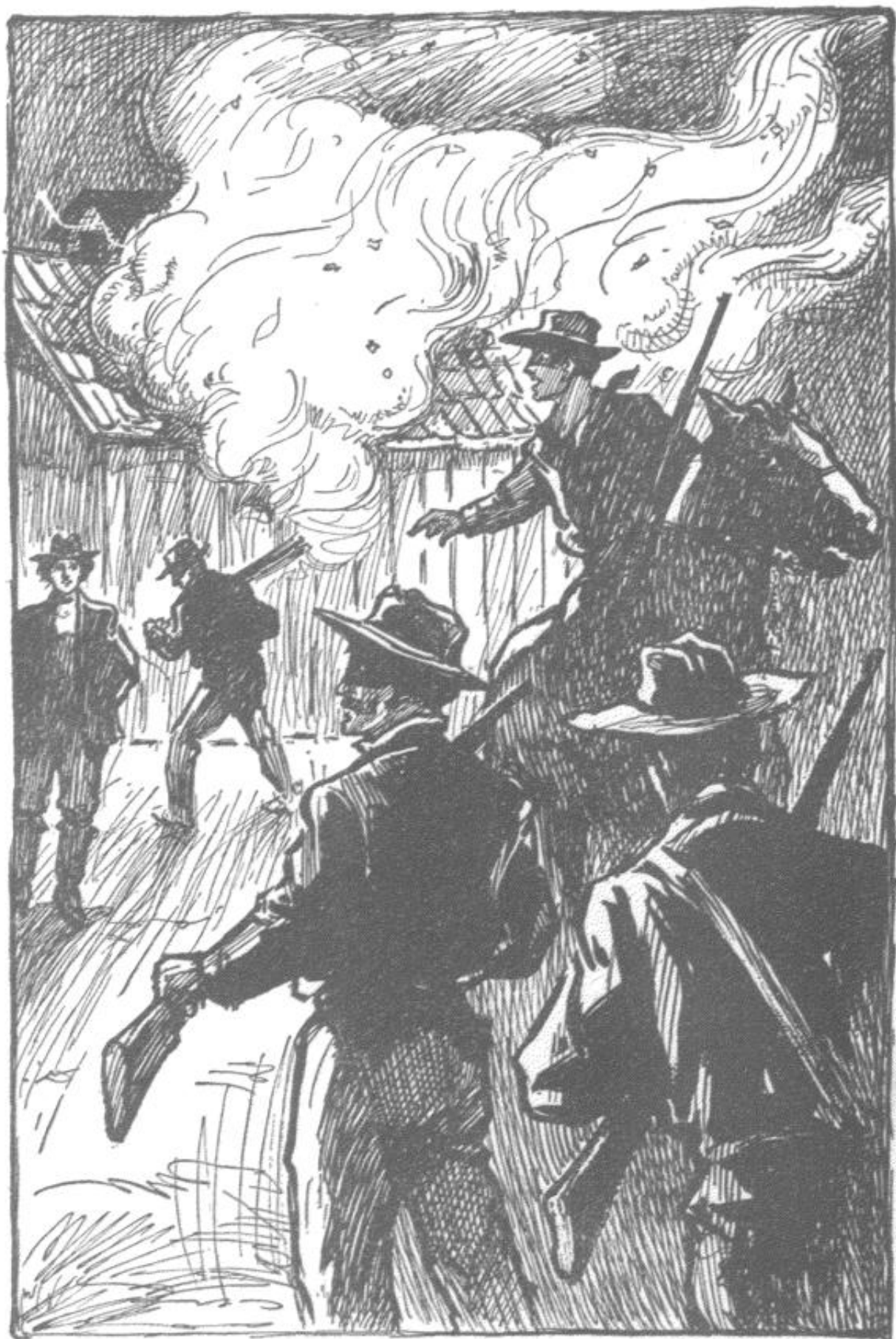
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a nest of snakes."*



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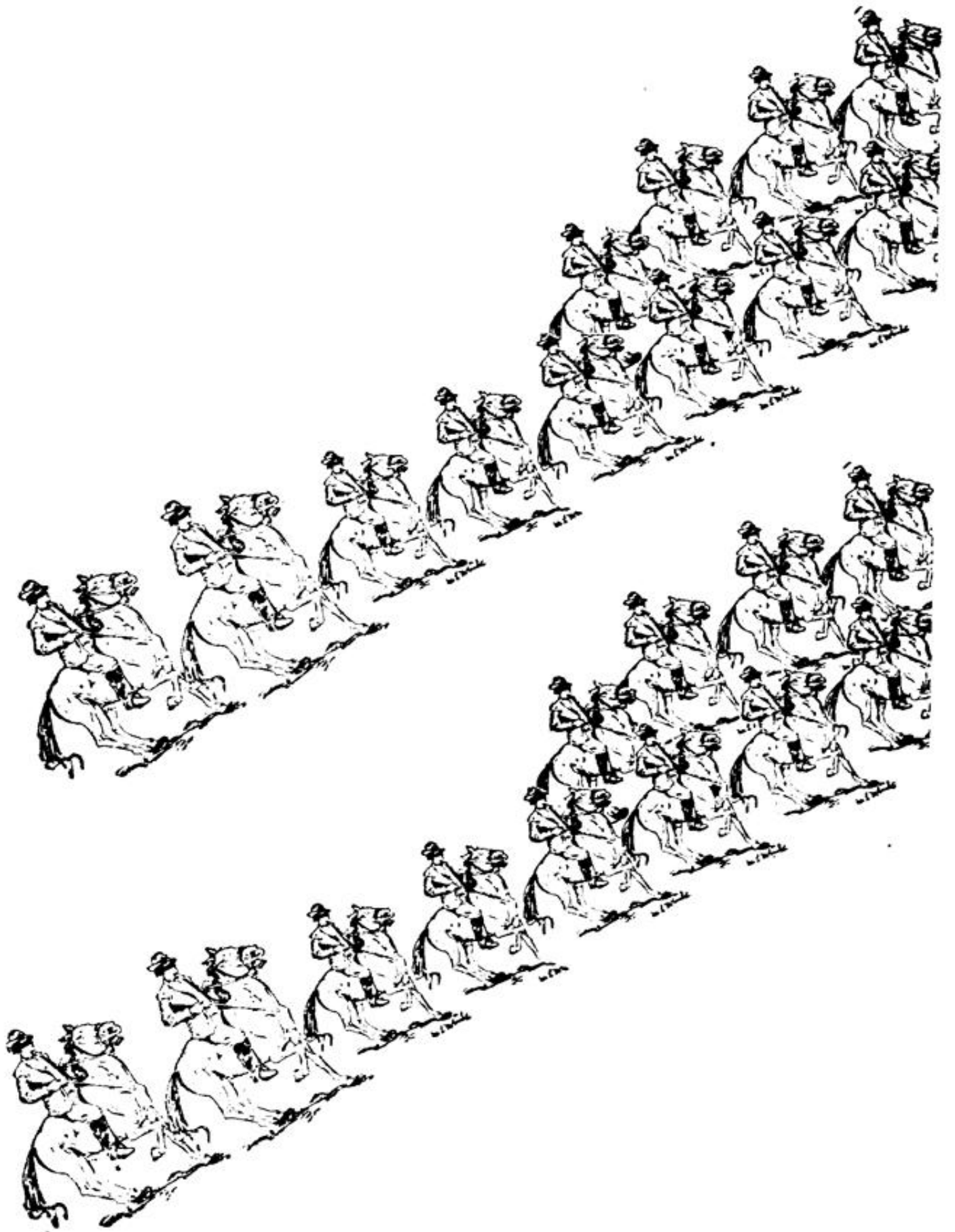
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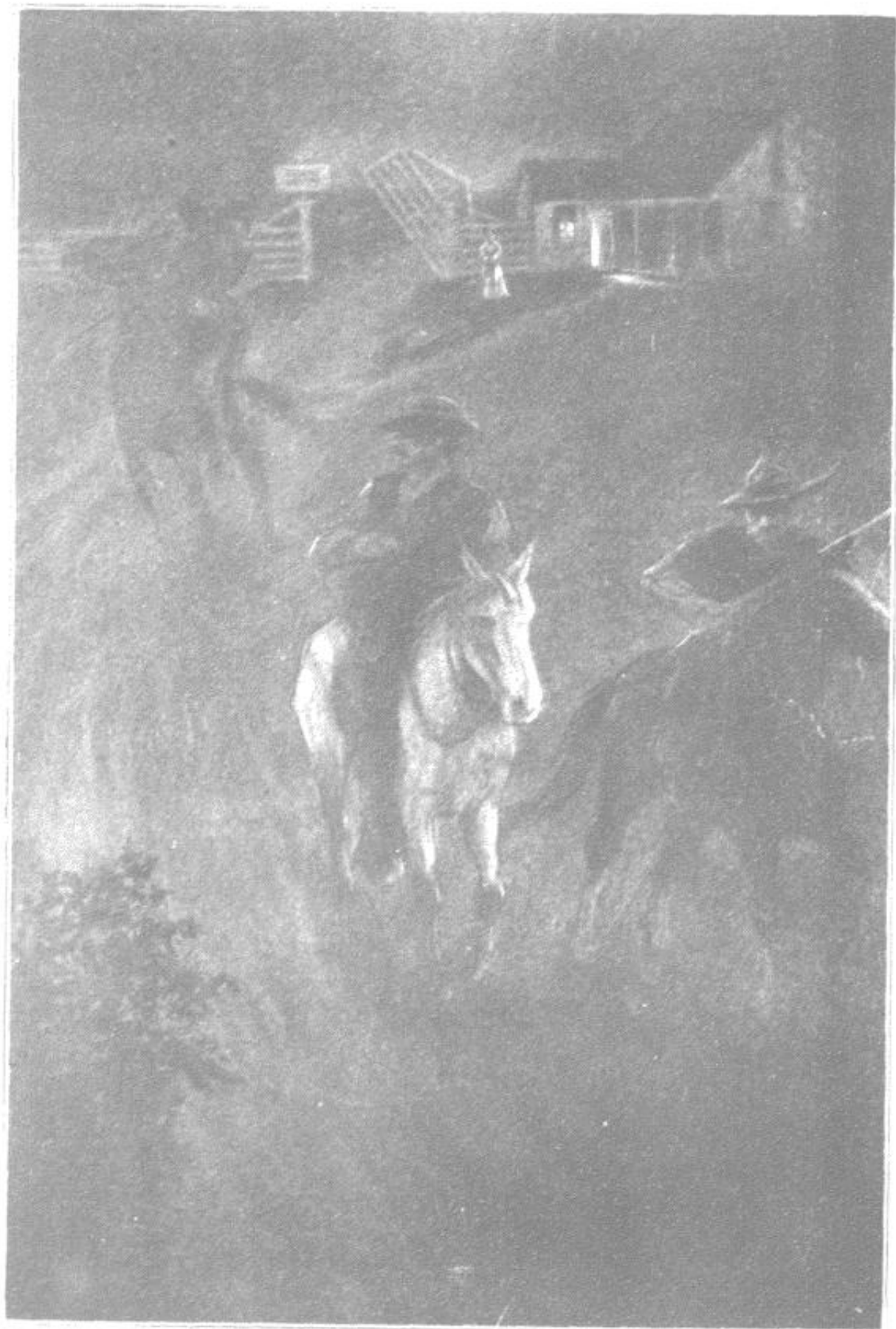
Preface

The author has cleverly interwoven a tale of absorbing heart interest with a graphically depicted view of the present Tobacco Troubles in Kentucky and the exciting times when the people formed into bands known as THE NIGHT RIDERS, to protest against what they considered the unjust tax of the Toll Gate System. These protests were of a strenuous nature, not unlike those of the tobacco-growing section today, and as the characters in the story are real, live beings, who did things, the reader's interest never flags.

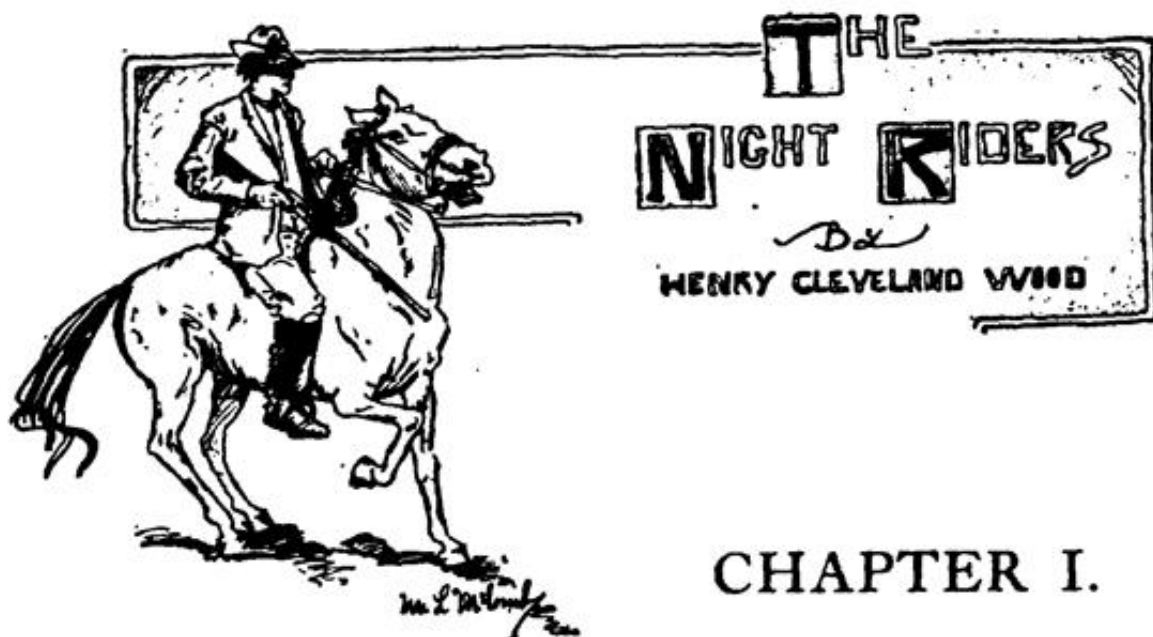
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**BRACING HIMSELF IN HIS STIRRUPS, MILT CRIED HURRIEDLY
TO JUDSON: "LEAP UP BEHIND ME!"—Page 130.**



CHAPTER I.

The early morning sunlight entered boldly through the small panes of glass into the kitchen of the toll-house and fell in a checkered band across the breakfast table set against the sill of the one long, low window.

The meal was a simple one, plainly served, but a touch of gold and purple—royal colors of the season—was given it by a bunch of autumn flowers, golden-rod and wild aster, stuck in a glass jar set on the window sill.

A glance at the two seated at each end of the narrow table would have enabled one to decide quickly to whom was due this desire for ornamentation, for the mother was a sharp-featured, rather untidy-looking woman, on whom the burden of hard work and poverty had laid

certain harsh lines not easily eradicated, while the daughter's youth and comeliness had overcome them as a fine jewel may assert its beauty despite a cheap setting.

The sun's lambent rays, falling across the girl's shapely head and shoulders, touched to deeper richness the auburn hair, gathered in a large, loose coil, that rested low upon her neck, and also accentuated the clear, delicately-tinted complexion like a semi-transparency that is given rare old china when the light illumines it.

The meal was eaten almost in silence, but toward the end of the breakfast Mrs. Brown looked up suddenly, her cup of coffee raised partly to her lips, and said, in her querulous treble:

"Sally, Foster Crain says aigs air fetchin' fo'hteen an' a half cents in town. Count what's stored away in the big gourd, when you git through eatin', an' take 'em in this mornin'."

"How am I to go?" asked her daughter, looking up from her plate. "Joe's limping from that nail he picked up yesterday."

"Likely somebody'll be passin' the gate

that'll give you a seat. The Squire may be along soon." A certain inflection crept into the speaker's voice.

"I'll walk," announced Sally, with sudden determination. "It's cool and pleasant, and I'd as soon walk as ride."

The mother looked across furtively to where her daughter sat.

"I don't see what makes you so set ag'in the Squire," she said, plaintively, a few moments later, as if she had divined her daughter's unuttered thoughts.

"He's an old fool!" declared Sally, promptly.

"An' it strikes me that you're somethin' of a young one!" retorted her mother sharply.

The girl made no answer, save a perceptible shrug of her pretty shoulders, and soon afterward got up and began to clear away the breakfast dishes. Mrs. Brown sighed deeply.

"Most girls would be powerful vain to have the Squire even notice 'em," the mother continued, in a more persuasive tone, as a sort of balm offering to the girl's wounded feelings. She placed her cup and saucer in her plate and put back a small piece of unused butter on the side

of the butter dish, then slowly arose from the table.

"It's seldom a po' gyurl has such a good chance to better her condition, if she was only willin' to do so," she continued argumentatively, for the subject was a favorite theme with her, and she had rung its changes for the listener's benefit on more than one occasion. She gave her daughter a sidelong glance—partly of inquiry, partly of reproach—and turned to her work.

Sally, with something like an impatient jerk, lifted from the stove the steaming kettle and poured a part of the hot contents into the dishpan on the table, but she made no answer, though soon the clatter of tins and dishes—perhaps they rattled a little louder than usual—mingled as a sort of accompaniment to the reminiscent monologue that Mrs. Brown carried on at intervals during her work.

"It's all owin' to the Squire's kindness an' interest in us that we're fixed this comfortable, for, dear knows I'd never got the tollgate in the first place if it hadn't been for his influence, an' now, if you'd only give him any encouragement at all, you might be a grand sight better off.

Such chances don't grow as thick as blackberries in summer, I can tell you."

The dishes and tins rattled angrily, but Sally said not a word.

"About the only good showin' a poor gyurl has in this world is to marry as well as she can, an' when she neglects to do this, she's got nobody to blame but herself—not a soul."

Sally had the dishes all washed and laid in a row on the table to drain, and now she caught them up, one by one, and began to polish away vigorously, as if the effort afforded a certain relief to her feelings, since she had chosen to take refuge in silence.

"S'posin' he is old an' ugly," soliloquized Mrs. Brown, abruptly breaking into speech again, and seemingly addressing her remarks to the skillet she was then cleaning, and which she held up before her and gazed into intently, as a lady of fashion might do a hand glass at her toilet. "What o' that? Beauty's only skin deep, an' old age is likely to come to us all sooner or later. It's all the better if he is along in years," she added, with a sudden chuckle and a second furtive glance over the top of the skillet toward the girl, to see if she was listen-

ing. "Then he ain't so likely to live forever, an' a trim young widow, with property of her own an' money in bank, can mighty soon find a chance to marry ag'in, if she's a mind to."

A cloud of anger swept over the listener's face, which the mother failed to see, as the skillet again intervened.

"There ain't nothin' like havin' a home of your own, an' knowin' you've got a shelter for your old age—no, indeed, they ain't! The Squire's mighty well fixed; he's got a real good farm, an' turnpike stock, an' cash, an' a nice, comfortable house besides."

"Comfortable!" exclaimed Sally, with a toss of her head, and breaking her resolve to keep silent. "It looks like a ha'nted barn stuck back amongst them cedar trees down in the hollow. No wonder his first wife went crazy an' hung herself up in the attic, poor thing! They say he treated her shameful mean."

Sally had looked upon this house many times and with conflicting thoughts as she passed it now and then. An air of neglect and loneliness hung about the spot. The house, hopelessly ugly and angular, was set far back from the road in the midst of a large yard given over to

weeds and untrimmed shrubbery, while a clump of gloomy-looking cedars defied even the brightness of sun and sky.

"You can't put credit into everything you hear," admonished Mrs. Brown, breaking ruthlessly into her daughter's musings. "Besides, a spry young girl can pretty much have her own way when she marries a man so much older than herself.

"There's Serena Lowe, that use' to be," she continued, reminiscently. "She an' her fam'ly was about as poor as Job's turkey when we went to school together, an' many's the time I've divided my dinner with her because she didn't seem to have any too much of her own.

"But she had a downright pretty face—all white an' pink, like a doll's—an' it helped her to ketch old Bartholomew Rice, an' now she rides around in her own kerridge an' pair, mind you, an' no prouder woman ever lived this minute. You'd think from the airs she gives herself that she was born in the best front room on a Sunday.

"The Squire's as good as hinted to me that if he could marry the one he wants, he wouldn't in the least mind goin' to the expense of

paintin' an' fixin' up the place till you wouldn't know it," insinuated Mrs. Brown, dropping her voice to a more confidential tone.

"He'd have to paint an' fix hisself up, too, till you wouldn't know *him*, either, before I'd even so much as look at him," tartly asserted Sally.

"A tidy young wife could change his looks an' the looks of the house in a mighty little while, if she only had a mind to do so," suggested Mrs. Brown, in subtly persuasive tones. "It must be dreadful lonesome livin' as he does, with nobody to look after things."

"He might have kept his nephew for company," insisted Sally, with a sudden ring of resentment in her voice. "He drove him away."

"Which likely he wouldn't have done if Milt hadn't been so headstrong an' wild. You know the Squire's goin' to have his own way about things."

"About *some* things," corrected Sally.

"Mebbe about all, sooner or later," said Mrs. Brown, in hopeful prediction. "He ain't a man to give up easy when he sets his mind in a certain direction."

"Perhaps his nephew isn't, either," sug-

gested her daughter, with a little tinge of color deepening in each cheek.

“No, an’ that’s just the cause an’ upshot of the whole trouble!” cried the mother, in a sudden flash of vehemence, dropping the persuasive tones she had heretofore employed for resentful chiding. “His nephew’s at the bottom of it all, an’ you seem ready an’ willin’ to throw away a good chance of a nice, comfortable home an’ deprive me of a shelter in my old age just for the sake of that no-account Milt Derr, who happens to have smooth ways an’ a nimble tongue. It looks like he’s fairly bewitched you.”

CHAPTER II.

A little later in the morning Sally tied on her sunbonnet, whose pale blue lining made a charming framing for her fresh complexion and pretty face, concealing it just sufficiently to make one keenly inquisitive to take a second longer glance beneath the ruffled rim.

With the basket of eggs swung coquettishly on her plump arm, and a stray wisp or two of wavy hair escaping from its confines down her shapely, curving neck and throat, in protest at imprisonment, the girl set out walking toward the town, a mile away.

Mrs. Brown had ingeniously delayed her daughter's going by finding several little duties for her to perform, hoping the while that before the girl should be ready to start the Squire would make his appearance and leave her no alternative but to accept a ride with him.

The morning grew apace, however, and finally Sally set out alone, quite grateful for the

Squire's tardiness, and partly amused, partly vexed, by her mother's thinly-veiled excuses for delay.

As the girl walked along the road with the springing, elastic step of youth and perfect health, and the freedom of the far-stretching fields as a heritage, the fresh morning air caressing her cheeks brought forth a bloom as soft and delicate as the rose of a summer dawn, while her spirits, which had become somewhat dampened under her mother's recent bickerings, gradually grew soothed and calmed under the tranquil charm of the new-born day.

Now and then a bird, startled at her approach, flew from hedge to hedge across the road, piping loudly in affected alarm as it went, while in a softer strain came the gentle lowing of cattle from a pasture near at hand, and in the tall grass and dusty weeds along the way the autumnal chorus of insects had begun, conducted by the shrill-toned cricket.

At the top of the first hill that arose between the gate and town Sally paused a moment—not that she was tired, or even spent of breath—and looked back. The picture that she saw was one of serene beauty, with wide stretches of fal-

low fields, bathed in the golden tranquility of a perfect October day, and dumb with the spell of restfulness and mystic brooding that this season brings.

In the far distance a long, ragged line of hills melted into the soft blue sky-line, and over these shadowy sentinels, standing a-row, the purplish haze of autumn hung like a diaphanous curtain stretching between the lowlands and the hill country.

From her elevated vantage ground the girl could see the tollhouse very distinctly, though she herself was partly hidden by a small clump of young locusts under which she had paused. As she looked toward her home the Squire's old buggy came in sight around a curve of the road and stopped at the gate. Her mother came out and presently pointed in the direction of town, while the Squire gave his horse a cut of the whip and started up the road at a much brisker pace, it seemed to Sally, than before the gate was reached.

"Mother's told him that he might overtake me," she muttered, grimly smiling at the thought. "I'll see that he don't," she added, resolutely.

She stood for a few moments debating the situation, then looked toward the town. The distance was but half traveled, and the Squire must certainly overtake her before her destination was reached. There was a smaller hill beyond, and toward this she now set out briskly, fully determined to cover as much of the way as possible, so that, if finally overtaken, the ride would prove but a short one at best.

When she reached the brow of the second hill the Squire was lost to sight behind the first one, and just then a plan of escape happily suggested itself as she reached a low stone wall running for some distance along one side of the road. She lightly climbed the moss-covered stones and crouched down behind them in a clump of golden-rod, waiting in covert until the Squire should pass.

Soon she heard an approaching vehicle, which she knew to be the Squire's from the familiar joggle of loose bolts, and close upon its coming another sound fell on her alert ear, as if a horseman were riding from the direction of the town. The person on horseback and Squire Bixler met and came to a halt in the middle of the road, almost in front of that por-

tion of the stone wall behind which the girl had taken refuge.

After the exchange of a brief greeting, the Squire said, abruptly:

"Well, what progress have you made? Any?"

"Well, Squire, I think he's goin' to jine," answered the horseman, in the peculiar drawling tones suggestive of the hill country, whose boundary lay purple and hazy along the distant horizon.

"You *think* he is?" cried the Squire impatiently, with a ripping oath. "What do you *know* about it?"

"That when I see him again he is to tell me if he's made up his mind to come to the next meetin' place. If he does, of course, he'll jine the band."

"And what does the band propose doing?" asked the Squire.

"To git free roads."

"How?"

"Not by waitin' on the courts; the people have tried that long enough. They're goin' to take things into their own hands a bit. They mean business."

"Yes, and damn 'em, they'll find that others mean business, too!" retorted the Squire, impetuously. "However, keep your eyes and ears open, and you'll soon hear the jingle of money in your pockets."

"I'll try to keep you posted, but it's risky business for me."

"You're all safe," insisted the Squire, "and you're sure of good pay. I'd like to get the young rascal in the clutches of the law," added the speaker, with sudden vindictiveness, "and if ever I do, I'll promise to make it hot for him."

"You can trap him before a great while, I think, or at least get him in so tight a place that it will be safer for him to leave this part of the country."

"Well, if I can't run him to ground, I'd at least like to run him away," admitted the Squire, frankly.

"It's your best chance for winnin' the gal," said the horseman, with a meaning laugh.

"You keep an eye on his movements, and I'll attend to winning the girl," answered the other with a touch of resentment manifest in

his tone. "Did you meet anybody between here and town?"

"No. Was you expectin' to overtake some one?" questioned the horseman.

"Well, nobody in particular," answered the Squire, evasively. "I was just thinking that there wasn't much travel over the road this morning."

"Not as much as there will be when there's no toll to pay," said the other, with a meaning laugh, as he rode away.

The girl, crouching amid the tall weeds, waited until the rattling vehicle was well over the intervening hill before she ventured from her hiding place. When she gained the road once more her face wore a grave and thoughtful look.

It was evident that mischief was brewing in this quarter for somebody. Who was it the Squire was so eager to get into the clutches of the law, and what band was this person about to join? It seemed to be some secret and illegal organization. No names had been called, yet a sudden subtle intuition warned Sally that she was, in point of fact, one of the interested parties to the conversation just overheard, and

that the other person who had gained the Squire's avowed enmity, and for whose speedy undoing he was even now planning, was none other than his own nephew and her sweetheart —Milton Derr.

CHAPTER III.

When the pretty toll-taker reached town she disposed of her basket of eggs at even a higher price than Foster Crain, the poultry vendor, had quoted—she was a famous hand at bargaining and a shrewd trader—then set about making some purchases.

She saw the Squire's horse and buggy standing at a hitching post near the courthouse, and determined that she would wait until the vehicle had disappeared before she started back home. Therefore she dallied over her shopping in a truly feminine way, and dropped in to have a friendly chat with an acquaintance or two; then, noting the horse and buggy had gone, she finally started homeward.

The day was now hastening toward noon, the sun had grown oppressive, and, with several bundles to carry, Sally felt that the return would not be so pleasant as the coming had been. She looked about her, hoping to

find some one—that is, some one besides the Squire—who might be going in the direction of the new pike gate, and with a seat to offer, but no one seemed to be in town from her neighborhood on this morning, and so she set out alone.

Just as Sally reached the edge of the town, where two streets intersected, who should drive up the other street but the Squire? The meeting was wholly an accidental one, but after her persistent efforts to avoid him all the morning, the encounter seemed like the especial workings of a perverse fate. The Squire was close upon her before she even saw him. There was no chance for escape or subterfuge.

“Ah, Miss Sally! Good morning to you!” he cried, with one of his amatory ogles that always sent a cold chill over her and strongly aroused within her bosom a spirit of determined opposition. “I have been looking for you all the morning. Where have you been hiding yourself?” he asked, as he drove up to where she had reluctantly stopped on hearing her name called.

“Behind the stone wall,” Sally was half tempted to answer, wishing, at the moment,

that she could have availed herself of its protection in the present instance; but she only nodded gravely and said that she had been making a few purchases for her mother.

"I tried to overtake you early this morning," continued the Squire, glibly. "Your mother said you had been gone but a little while when I passed the gate. You must have walked pretty fast."

"I did," acknowledged Sally, with a covert smile. "It was cool and pleasant walking."

"Well, come! Put your bundles down in front and jump in," said her companion. "Riding's better than walking any day, and good company's better than either," he added, with a tender leer at her, which Sally pretended not to see.

There was nothing for it but to accept the proffered seat. She did not dare openly to offend the Squire by a refusal to ride with him, though she would willingly have chosen the long, warm walk, even with the additional burden of her bundles, in preference to his company. As her mother had said only that morning, it was through his influence that she had been appointed keeper of the New Pike Gate,

and it was due to him she now kept it, so Sally civilly thanked him and got into the buggy.

“If I had counted on such good company, I would have had this old rattletrap cleaned up a bit,” said the Squire, apologetically, as they drove off. “But, never mind!” he added, jocosely. “When we start out on our wedding trip, I’ll buy a brand-new, shiny rig, out an’ out.”

“*We?*” echoed Sally, with a certain sharpness of tone.

“You don’t suppose I’d care to go on a bridal trip alone, do you?” inquired the Squire, laconically, and with a wink of one watery eye.

“I’m afraid you will, if you depend on me to go along with you,” answered Sally, dryly.

“Now, my dear, you surely wouldn’t be that cruel?” said the Squire, edging a little closer to Sally, who as promptly moved away. “Haven’t I been depending on your going all the while, and haven’t I said that I wouldn’t have any other girl but you, though there’s plenty would be only too glad to go for the asking?”

“An’ there’s one that wouldn’t,” announced Sally, coolly.



**“WHEN WE START ON OUR WEDDING TRIP I’LL BUY A
BRAND NEW, SHINY RIG.”**

"Then I can show her where she stands mightily in her own light," said the Squire, suddenly dropping into a more serious tone.

"How so?"

"By giving her some very good reasons why she should act differently."

"What reasons?" asked Sally, arousing to some slight show of interest.

"Well, now, we'll suppose, for instance, the girl to be you," began the Squire, argumentatively. "You and your mother are depending on the toll-gate for a living, and it makes you a comfortable one, at any rate. Did you know the toll-gate raiders were at work?" asked the Squire, abruptly.

The girl caught her breath with a quick start.

"No," she answered, quickly. "Where?"

"Right here in this very county. They burned a toll-house just on the boundary line only the other night, and cut down the pole of one gate in the edge of this county last night, so I was told today," said the Squire, impressively.

"I'm afraid we're going to have a deal of trouble over the matter before it's ended," he

continued, thoughtfully, shrewdly following the impression he had evidently made on the mind of his hearer. "The spirit of lawlessness seems to be widely spreading."

"Do you think there's any danger of the raiders payin' a visit to the New Pike Gate?" questioned Sally, anxiously.

"I shouldn't be the least surprised," answered her companion, with a dubious shake of the head. "The night-riders seem determined to make way with all the toll-gates in this part of the country if they can."

"I can't think they would harm us," insisted Sally, "two poor, helpless women."

"Likely not, but if the raiders have made up their minds to have free roads, as they appear to have done, they would not hesitate to burn the toll-house over your heads, which would leave you and your mother without a shelter, don't you see?"

The Squire paused, and the girl sat buried in deep thought for some moments.

"In that case, what could you do or where could you go?" asked the Squire, at last breaking the silence that had fallen between them.

"Heaven only knows!" cried the girl, earnestly.

"Now, affairs stand just in this way," continued the Squire, craftily. "If the raiders should burn the toll-house—and it is a most probable thing, I fear—it would leave you two women in rather a bad plight. But if you'll only agree to marry me, why, there's a nice home waiting for you, and your mother will also have a comfortable shelter in her old age, and neither of you will have cause to worry about the future."

The Squire paused, but Sally made no answer. She knew full well that his words were quite true concerning the dependence of her mother and herself on the toll-gate for a living. She also knew that as long as the Squire entertained the faintest hope of ultimately winning her the gate was secured to her mother, and therefore she had not felt troubled on this score; but now that a new and unlooked-for danger threatened in the unusual and unexpected presence of the raiders, she tremulously asked herself, "What, indeed, if the toll-houses were destroyed, would become of her and her mother?"

The girl felt no fears for herself regarding the future—she was energetic and had been familiar with work all her life; it held no terrors for her; she could hire out—wash, cook, sew—perhaps some day marry the man of her choice when he should be in a position to take unto himself a wife; but, with her mother's welfare also to be considered, the matter grew far more complex.

“Don't you see just how matters stand?” asked the Squire, persuasively, almost tenderly, breaking the long silence.

Sally gravely nodded her head.

“I see,” she answered, in a low tone.

CHAPTER IV.

It was close upon 10 o'clock at night—a late hour for a lonely traveler in this remote locality amid the hills—and Milton Derr was homeward bound. As he neared the vicinity of Alder Creek meeting-house, up in the hill country, another horseman came out of a lane into the public road just as he was passing.

Hailing a fellow voyager, as was the custom of the neighborhood, Derr recognized an acquaintance and promptly checked his horse until the other came alongside.

“Hello, Steve! Isn't it a little late for an honest man to be abroad?” Milton asked, after friendly greeting from his companion.

“Well, yes, and it seems I'm not the only one in that plight,” retorted the other, with the quick repartee belonging to these people.

His companion laughed good-naturedly at the thrust, and the two rode on together for some little distance, when Milton Derr, suddenly changing the drift of the talk said:

"Well, I've been thinking over that matter we were speaking about the other day."

"To what purpose?" asked the other.

"I'm in half a notion to become a member of the band."

"The other half's needed before you can get in, you know," answered Steve, laconically.

"Well, I'm nearing that point now," admitted Derr, after a thoughtful pause. "I think I should like to have some voice in this question of free roads myself, as it promises to be an important one."

"In that case I can easily arrange it for you. There'll be but few men around here who won't belong to the band before toll-gate raiding is over," said the other, impressively. "Folks have been bled by fat corporations long enough."

"When could I join?" asked Derr, after some moments of meditative silence.

"When?" echoed his companion. "Tonight, if your mind's made up."

"Well, then, it is," said Derr, decisively. "How am I to go about it?"

"Just follow me. If you really mean busi-

ness, I can take you straight to where the band is holding a meeting this very night."

"All right," answered the prospective candidate. "Lead the way!"

The two turned into a dirt lane beyond the meeting-house, Derr keeping close by the side of his guide, while the hoofbeats of the two horses suddenly grew muffled by the softer bed of the lane in exchange for the macadamized pike.

There was no moon to light the way, and the faint starlight that had made easily traceable the white, dust-covered surface of the highway was now absorbed and lost in the dull clay of the lane. Where the trees and bushes overhung the path a dense obscurity prevailed. Both man and beast were familiar with night riding along country byways, however, so the two travelers rode rapidly on, unmindful of the darkness or the twisting road.

A mile farther on they quitted the lane, passing through a gate into a fallow field adjoining, which they crossed, and finally came to the outer fringe of a dense thicket.

Here they halted, while Steve, placing his fingers to his lips in a certain manner, blew a

low, peculiar whistle, like the call of some sombre night bird, which was answered later from somewhere amid the bushes. Close upon the answering call a dark form emerged from the shadowy copse near at hand, and a voice asked gruffly:

“Who goes there?”

“Friends.”

“What are you seeking?”

“Free roads.”

“Dismount!”

Steve dropped from his horse and went forward to where the dark form stood, while Derr, with his ears alert and lively interest aroused, heard him announce that he had brought one who craved membership with the band.

After learning the name of the candidate for initiation, the figure seemed to melt into darkness again, while Steve came back to his horse and companion to await the return of the messenger.

“It’s all right; come along!” said Steve at another signal from amidst the bushes. The two men quickly hitched their horses to some saplings growing near, and found a narrow

path leading down between the underbrush. Steve led the way, Milton following close upon his footsteps, while the mysterious messenger, who wore a half-mask over the upper part of his face, brought up the rear. There was a tinge of romantic adventure about the whole affair that strongly appealed to the new candidate.

The path led down to a secluded hollow in the midst of the thicket—a remote and lonely spot, far removed from human habitation, it seemed, and little liable to intrusion—a spot well chosen for a secret midnight rendezvous.

In the midst of the copse lay a small clearing, and in its center the three men came suddenly upon a group gathered around a smouldering fire, built of brushwood piled against a log.

The uncertain blaze but dimly lighted the scene, but it was sufficient to bring into clearer view the dark forms of a body of men vaguely outlined against the darker bushes surrounding them, while the faces of the members of this secret band were partly concealed under soft slouch hats, and strips of black cloth, such as the guide wore, tied over the upper part of

the face, with holes cut in the cloth for the eyes.

This partial concealment of the features gave an air of weird mystery to the secret conclave—a touch of the uncanny mingling with the strange and romantic.

A swift thought darted into Milton Derr's brain as he suddenly recalled his sweetheart's words of warning given him at meeting the Sunday before, that perhaps he had been led into a trap, of whose setting his uncle was cognizant, and that the members of this secret organization meant to do him bodily harm.

If such should be their will and purpose, he was entirely at their mercy. No friendly aid could reach him in this remote and dismal spot, where even a cry for help would die unheeded upon the still night air. Yet, as these disturbing thoughts darted through his excited brain, he stood erect and motionless, and his calm face gave no sign of inward fear. If he was called upon to yield his life it should be rendered as became a brave man, but he would endeavor to sell it as dearly as possible.

Standing in that sombre spot, the spirit of distrust bearing heavily upon him, he gave a

swift, sweeping glance of inquiry around, noting the shadowy forms of the men that seemed to merge into the impenetrable darkness, while the uncertain, flickering blaze of the fire but dimly lighted the gloomy depths of foliage beyond, rising like a mysterious barrier to shut out freedom and the outer world. The grim silence of the group surrounding him still further served to deeply impress the new candidate for initiation, and to make manifest the fact that whatever of good or evil might be in store for him, it was now too late to retract the words that had helped to bring him thither.

The young man found himself vaguely hoping, as he glanced keenly from one to another of the silent brotherhood, that among these masked faces, whose fantastically concealed features were turned darkly in his direction, there might be at least some friendly and familiar ones if uncovered to the light.

At the conclusion of the initiation, made yet more impressive to the candidate because of his lively imagination, aided and fed by the remoteness of the spot and the gloom of the night, after Derr had taken the solemn oath of the order to obey its captain and preserve

all secrets, the raiders began to bare their faces to the new member.

As the half-masks were raised, one by one, Milton Derr saw that several members of the band were acquaintances of his, one or two were more intimate friends, while others he knew only by sight and some were strangers.

The captain was the last to remove his mask, and as he did so the new raider recognized in him the one man, of all others dwelling amid these hills, he least desired or expected to serve under—Jade Beddow.

CHAPTER V.

“Now, boys, to business!” cried the captain, briskly, as some of Milt’s acquaintances gathered around him to give him a welcoming hand. “We have a little work before us to-night.”

Soon the sound of a small cavalcade, riding rapidly along the country roads, broke into the quiet of the night, perchance arousing some light sleeper as it passed, who, after listening drowsily to the retreating hoof-beats as they died away in the distance, would turn and mutter, “The Night Riders,” then drift into slumber again.

“Where are we going?” asked Milt, who rode by the side of Steve.

“To make one less toll-gate.”

“Which one?” asked Milt, with an interest he did not care to betray.

“It’s the Cross-Roads Gate, I think. You can look for a lot o’ fun tonight if it’s that one,

an' we get Maggie O'Flynn stirred up. She's a regular circus in herself." Steve chuckled audibly at the prospective entertainment.

"It will be something like stirring up a den of wild-cats, not counting in Pat at all," Milt admitted.

"Pat don't count; he's a coward, through and through. The fun will all be furnished by Maggie."

"And we fellows had better look sharp," cautioned Milt. "Maggie's a pretty good shot, I've heard."

"We've seen to it that she won't have a chance to draw a bead on any of us," admitted Steve. "She keeps a rifle at the gate, but one of the neighbors borrowed it this very mornin' to shoot a hawk, an' somehow forgot to carry it back. He won't think of it till in the mornin'. Maggie's tongue is all that's left to guard the gate."

"And under ordinary circumstances that's sufficient," admitted Milt.

The raiders soon came out upon a turnpike, and after a ride of a mile or two they reached a spot where the pike was intersected by another, crossed at right angles. At the juncture of

the two roads stood the toll-house which had been chosen for the night's raid.

A raider was stationed about a hundred yards from the gate to guard the approach from that direction, while the rest rode forward to where the double poles were now raised at this mid-hour of the night. Three of the horsemen passed through and took positions on the farther side of the toll-house, at about equal distances from it along the two roads.

In the meantime the captain selected a man from among the members of the band, who was least known to the locality, to act as spokesman, and while the remaining raiders grouped themselves about the gate, a resounding knock was given at the toll-house door.

"All roight! I'm afther comin'. Ye needn't break the dure down," answered a sleepy man's voice, deeply tinged with Celtic brogue. "What the divil do ye want, anyway? The poles are raised!" the voice demanded immediately after.

"We want these poles cut down," announced the spokesman of the band.

"Begorra! an' it's the raiders!" Pat said in a husky voice to his awakened spouse.

"The phwat?" asked Maggie, in a shrill tone, evidently raising up in bed.

"Whist, honey! The raiders!" repeated Pat, in more cautious tones.

"An' phwat do they want?" asked Maggie, in a still higher key.

"They want the poles cut down," faltered Pat.

"Indade! An' phwat do they mane wakin' up honest people this dead o' the night, axin' the loike o' that?" demanded his wife, shrilly. "Get the gun, Pat, an' shoot the dirty thaves!"

Pat, shaking with excitement or fear, in a low, tremulous voice, inaudible to those without, reminded his spouse that the gun had been loaned out and was no longer there.

"An' bad luck to the man that borrowed it!" cried the undaunted Maggie. "It's betther used to shoot raiders with thin hawks."

"Get us an axe!" commanded the spokesman of the band, rapping sharply on the door.

"It's out at the wood pile beyant the house," answered Pat, meekly.

"Hush, you fool!" cried his wife, shrilly.

“Phwat did ye tell ’em for? I’d ’a’ seen the last wan o’ thim to the divil first, where they’ll go quick enough.”

Two of the raiders went in search of the axe, and soon its dull blows were heard on the hard, seasoned wood of one of the poles, while the sound of the cutting seemed to infuriate Maggie as nothing else had done.

She sprang out of bed like a wildcat in nimbleness, and it took all the strength and persuasion that Pat could muster to keep her from opening the door and coming out into the midst of the raiders.

“Whist, darlint! Be aisy, for the love of hiven!” implored her frightened spouse. “Ye’ll bring down the wrath o’ the whole gang on us wid sich wild cacklin’. Be quiet!”

“Be quiet, indade! An’ let thim prowlin’ thaves cut down the poles an’ take away our livin’? Not much!” cried Maggie, fiercely. “If I only had a gun, I’d loike to shoot the last wan o’ thim—the dirty blackguards!”

“Hush, me jewel, an’ mebbe they’ll only cut down the poles an’ l’ave us in peace!” pleaded Pat.

“I *won’t* hush!” screeched Maggie, growing

angrier each moment. "If ye're skeert, ye c'n crawl under the bed an' hide, ye cowardly cur! I'll go out an' run the last murdherin' wan o' thim away."

"Ye'll git the both of us kilt intoirely if ye don't dhry up wid yer clatter!" entreated Pat.

"I know ivery dhirty mother's son av ye!" screamed Maggie, putting her mouth close to the keyhole of the door, from which Pat had taken the key, and hidden it. "I know ye all, an' I'll have ye in the pinitinty by termor-rer night, ye bloodthirsty divils—ye—"

The rest of the sentence was suddenly muffled, as if Pat's hand had interposed, while a scuffling sound was heard inside the room that suggested he was trying to drag Maggie away from the door. The raiders crowded around the platform of the toll-house, listening in an ecstasy of delight.

Presently a resounding whack was heard, followed by a howl of pain from Pat, whom Maggie had struck, and speedily she was back at the keyhole again.

"Cut down the poles av ye want to, ye night-prowlin' rascals!" she bawled lustily. "I'll have 'em both up ag'in by daylight, an' I'd

loike to see any sneakin' dog av ye git by an' not pay toll, ye thavin' robbers!"

"She'll do it, too," muttered Steve, who was standing near the captain. "She'll have bran'-new poles up almost before we can get home."

"The only way to get rid of this gate is to burn it, I think," said the captain, with an oath. "As she wants to come out so much, suppose we give her a chance. Get an armful of straw from the stable an' bring it here! We'll smoke her out."

While Steve hurried off to obey the order, two of the others gathered up some of the dry chips and splinters of wood from the cut poles, and when Steve returned with the straw a fire was kindled on the platform in a sheltered corner, farthest from the door.

As the flames quickly leaped up the walls of the toll-house, igniting the dry timbers, the flash of light, the smoke, the crackle of burning wood, all speedily revealed to the two within the building what was taking place without.

"I tould ye to shut up, ye screechin' varmint!" cried Pat, in a terror-stricken voice. "They're burnin' us up aloive. The howly saints protect us!"

Maggie gave a loud whoop, this time rather of fear than of rage, though the two were strongly blended.

“Help! Murdher!” she shrieked.

“I thought she’d change her tune, the wild-cat!” muttered the captain, grimly.

A few minutes later the back door of the toll-house was thrown quickly open, but as the two terror-stricken inmates of the burning building appeared in the doorway, ready to flee into the night, they were confronted by a couple of raiders with masks and drawn pistols.

“Go back!” the men sternly commanded.

“For the love o’ hiven, don’t shoot!” pleaded Pat.

“Go back!” the men repeated, leveling their weapons threateningly.

In silent terror the two obeyed and shiveringly drew back into the burning house. Dark spirals of smoke were by this time curling from the roof in several places, and soon little jets of flame thickly dotted it, shooting up from between the smoking shingles; then finally one broad sheet of flame overspread the top—a canopy of fire.

Milt looked on in a sort of spell-bound fascination. What did the raiders mean to do? Surely not to burn these two helpless people within the toll-house. That were a crime far too serious for even this spirit of outlawry.

He stood silent, watching with a growing fear the smoke escaping from the roof, then the little spurting jets of flame, and when they united in a broad, livid sheet, he felt no longer able to restrain his pity, but started to where the captain sat on his horse, calmly watching the proceedings, intending to petition him for mercy toward the two hapless ones within the doomed toll-house.

Before he reached the leader of the band, however, the captain blew a sharp call on his whistle, and while the three outlying guards beyond the gate dashed up in answer to the summons, two of the raiders, at a sign from their leader, had broken in the front door, then, mounting their horses, the band rode swiftly down the road, after a shrill cry of "Free roads! Down with the toll-gates!"

When Milt looked back he felt a wave of regret surge over him, as he saw, by the glare of the light, which was illuminating the land-

scape around, Maggie's lank figure looming up, tall and straight, in the middle of the pike, her long arms stretched out menacingly toward the retreating raiders, at whom she was doubtless hurling bitter, Celtic-tinged invectives, while Pat was rushing wildly in and out of the burning building, striving to save some of the few household effects—then a curve in the turnpike shut off a further view.

CHAPTER VI.

Squire Bixler, president of the New Pike Road, sat before his wood fire, nodding under the genial warmth the flickering flames threw out across the broad hearth. The weekly town paper, over which he dozed and wakened by turns, now lay on the floor by his chair, having dropped from his relaxed fingers during his latest nap, while his spectacles, gradually slipping forward as his head dropped lower on his tobacco-stained shirt, now finally rested on the tip of his red nose, and threatened to fall each moment.

Short puffs, as if he were still smoking, came at regular intervals from between his thick, partly-opened lips, although his cob pipe had followed his paper to the floor, and the spectacles seemed on the point of speedily joining them.

To the most careless observer it was all too evident that no wifely care was present in the

house of Bixler. A motley disorder, revealing many unsightly things, occupied the chimney corners, and encroached upon the hearth. From some nails upon the wall hung a saddle and harness, opposite stretched a line filled with long green tobacco like clothes swung out to dry. The tall mantelshelf was given over to old bottles, cob pipes, and a conglomerate mass of odds and ends of things—the accumulation of many moons, while dust and cobwebs gathered freely over all—a fitting tribute to the absence of womanhood.

It was past the Squire's bedtime. In evidence he had removed his shoes, but seemed to have dropped asleep while looking over his paper, unless he had intentionally delayed his usual hour for retiring.

Suddenly the sharp striking of several small pebbles thrown lightly against the window shutters partly aroused him from his nap, but not until the sound was repeated did he awake sufficiently to give heed to the signal.

Lifting his head with a start, as one who has dropped asleep unwittingly, he adroitly caught his spectacles, with the skill of frequent practice, as they dropped from his nose, then glanc-

ing at the clock he got up hastily and went to the window whence the sound seemed to come.

Cautiously raising the sash, that the servants might not be awakened in the ell of the house, the Squire opened one of the shutters carefully and looked furtively out. An interrogation followed, and an answer came from the darkness.

"All right! I'll let you in." The Squire closed shutter and sash, caught up the candle, which was burning low in the socket, and went into the front hall.

When he had unlocked and unbarred the door, a sudden gust of wind blew out the candle's flame as the visitor was admitted, but the fire-light served as a beacon, and while the host was fastening the door the belated visitor passed through the hall into the Squire's sitting room, and walked over to where the fire threw out a grateful warmth over his chilled frame.

"It's keen and frosty out tonight," said the visitor, spreading his hands wide to the blaze.

"I am more interested in other news you may bring," answered the host, setting down the candle, from whose black wick a tiny spiral

of smoke arose and floated away into the dim shadows that hovered about the room. The Squire clung to early customs, and would not use a lamp. "An invention of man and the devil," he insisted.

"Well, I've got some news for you this time—some good news," the visitor said, slowly cracking the joints of his fingers as he stood before the fire.

"Let's have it!" insisted the Squire briefly.

"Somethin' you'll be right glad to hear," continued the other, dallying with the subject, as if loth to part with so choice a morsel.

"Well, I'm waiting to hear it," yawning, to call attention to the late hour.

"I'm chilled through an' through," muttered the visitor, apparently unmindful of the Squire's impatience, and giving a shiver, partly genuine, partly affected, as he glanced up at the motley collection of bottles on the chimney shelf. "Don't you keep anything warmin'?" he added, turning to the host.

"Do you want a dram?"

The guest chuckled audibly at the Squire's powers of divination, and with eager eyes followed the portly figure to a small press in the

side of the chimney. The host brought forth a bottle and glass, which he placed on the candle stand, and, without further invitation, the guest quickly caught up the bottle and poured the amber liquor into the glass, filling it to the brim. He emptied it at a gulp, then slowly refilled the glass and reluctantly handed back the bottle to the Squire, who reached out impatiently for it.

"That warms me up powerful," said the visitor, draining the glass with evident enjoyment, eyeing the bottle longingly as he spoke, though the Squire did not again offer it. "I felt like an ice house just now."

"Let's do business," he host suggested.

"Well, he's j'ined the night riders."

"When?"

"The night they burned the Cross Roads gate."

"So he had a hand in that deviltry?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad to hear it; what else?"

"The raiders air a-goin' to make another raid."

"When?"

"Tomorrow night, I think. I'll find out for

certain tomorrow, an' post you. It's court day, you know, an' the word will be passed around among the men when they come to town."

"Where shall I see you?" asked the Squire.

"We mustn't be seen talkin' together," said the visitor thoughtfully. "It might help to fasten suspicion on an innocent man, you see," he added, with a leer of cunning. "I'll tell you what would be a better plan. I'll start back home just at five, by the town clock. I've got a good ways to go, an' likely's not many will be on the road at that hour of the day. You can leave a little earlier than five, an' I'll overtake you about the top of the first hill, under the big elm."

"Very well," agreed the Squire.

"I think I've about earned one hundred of that money already, Squire," suggested the visitor, looking keenly at his companion.

"Won't tomorrow do? This may be a false alarm," objected the Squire.

"No, it isn't; an' besides, I've told you some other things you wanted to know."

"But you're in no particular hurry," the old man insisted, the ruling passion of avarice strong upon him.

"Yes, I'm a-needin' it bad. I've got to have some money early tomorrow, an' I couldn't very well be seen followin' you around on court day. You promised to pay when I brought the word."

"Here, then," said the Squire reluctantly unlocking a small drawer in the base of the tall clock and bringing forth a roll of bills wrapped in a piece of newspaper. "Here's a hundred dollars in small bills. Count them over."

"It's two hundred dollars for givin' information that will lead to the arrest of any of the raiders," said the visitor meditatively, after he had carefully counted the money. "Two hundred's the reward."

"Yes, one hundred tonight, which you have now received, and the other when the raiders have been caught. An extra hundred comes out of my own pocket, you understand, when a certain kinsman of mine is safe behind the jail bars. This is good money, easily made."

"Well, I d'no' as it's so easy when you risk your neck to git it, as I've done."

"What gate do you think they will raid next?" asked the Squire.

"I don't know yet, but I'll be posted by to-

morrow evenin'. There's another thing, too, I wanted to say to you," added the visitor impressively. "It's concernin' the safety of a particular friend of mine who belongs to the raiders. I must have your promise not to trap him along with the others."

"How can that be done if he's with the band?"

"Mighty easy. I'll see that he's sent on a little ahead of the others to guard the road in front, and you must give strict orders that no firing is to be done until this one is safely through the gate. When he hears the first shot he can then look out for hisself, an' let the ones behind do the best they can."

"So *you* want to come out with a whole skin?" said the Squire, with a keen glance at his visitor.

"I didn't say anything about myself; I said a friend."

"All right! I understand. The man in front is to get away, but the rest are to be bagged. You'll give me the full particulars of the proposed raid tomorrow evening, then?" said the Squire, rising from his chair, to signify that the interview was at an end.

“Yes; an’ when I come again, you’ll have the rest of the money ready for me?”

The Squire nodded.

“Have it in small bills,” the visitor suggested. “I can pass ’em easier.”

A few minutes later the front door was closed upon the mysterious visitor, and the Squire came back into the room softly rubbing his hands with apparent satisfaction. Indeed, his next words signified as much.

“Ah! my dear nephew!” he cried, gleefully; “before many more nights have passed I think I will have you in a ticklish position where your love affairs will not run as smoothly as you might wish. Then comes *my* opportunity.”

CHAPTER VII.

Court day brought ever a large and motley crowd to town.

It is the farmer's levee, his monthly holiday—a proper time for friendly intercourse and barter. Usually busied in the field or about the farm, he sees little of the social or business world except through the medium of county court day.

On such occasions most of the tillers of the soil quit work and come in from the surrounding country and the neighboring hills—even from further outlying villages and adjacent counties. Some come on business, some on pleasure bent, but whether for recreation or profit, a goodly crowd convenes, the day in itself an all-sufficient excuse for the act.

A Kentucky court day possesses a marked social feature peculiarly its own. The men meet friends and neighbors in a social mood; renew acquaintances of long standing, and en-

joy making new ones; they exchange political opinions, disseminate local news, trade, swap, buy or sell; the women come to town, exchange country produce for shopping bargains, and learn something of the prevailing mode from their more stylish sisters who are in closer touch with the outer world.

Occasionally it comes to pass that personal grievances and feuds of long standing, or even family differences, are settled by a court day encounter, wherein the all-too-ready knife or pistol helps to play the tragic part; but oftener a spirit of good-fellowship prevails, and the social glass binds friendly neighbors into boon companions.

There is yet a more God-fearing element—the bone and sinew of pioneer strength and hardy manhood, men of simple faith, who walk sedately in the paths of sobriety and peace, whose lives are as quiet and gentle as the folk who once “dwelt in the basin of Minas.” And in all, it is a strangely mixed gathering of good and evil—a Kentucky court day.

A larger crowd than usual was in town on this particular October morning. Most of the crops had been laid by, and even the more care-

ful husbandmen felt as if they might safely indulge in a holiday without disquieting thoughts of work done and duties neglected; but there were other reasons yet to account for the large attendance on this day.

An undercurrent of suppressed excitement was manifest throughout the community, for the recent toll-gate raids, and the rumored threats against gates still standing in the county, made the question of free roads an all-absorbing topic.

The greater number of farmers were in favor of no toll, as was naturally the case, though some suggested a new and lower scale of rates, while the more conservative looked with apprehension on the spirit of lawlessness that seemed suddenly to flame into a passion that might grow alarmingly akin to anarchy, if the destructive tendency were left unchecked.

These more prudent, law-abiding men counseled patience and forbearance until the voice of the people should decide the question of free roads at the next election, and the slow-moving machinery of legislation give by purchase the right of travel without the payment

of toll, which many cried out against as an unjust and excessive tariff.

A discordant note had for a long time prevailed among these dwellers of the hills in opposition to the turnpike corporations, and this antagonistic spirit had intensified and spread, slowly leavening the disquiet, until it had become dangerously like a hot-bed of communism, only waiting for a daring hand to stir it into flame and action, and now this had finally come to pass.

The recent bold work of the raiders was guardedly discussed in public, for one did not always know but that a partisan to the cause might be the listener. A few non-partisans who had been overbold in their denunciation of the raiders' methods of acquiring free roads, had received anonymous letters warning them to silence, while a crude drawing of hangman's noose, or skull and crossbones lent significant weight to the message.

Since the burning of the Cross Roads gate, the county court had offered a reward of two hundred dollars for information that would lead to the apprehension and capture of any of the raiders, while numerous rumors were

afoat concerning them. It was hinted that Maggie O'Flynn had recognized two or three members of the band the night of the attack on the gate, and that several arrests would soon follow.

Men from adjacent counties brought the news of toll-gates raided near their homes. The infection was rapidly spreading, and it seemed that the fiat had gone forth dooming the collecting of tolls, and forecasting the speedy downfall of all the gates.

Several times through the day Squire Bixler saw the man with whom he had held converse the previous night, but on meeting him now, in the broad light of day, an indifferent nod on the one hand, and a friendly, "Howdy, Squire!" on the other, was all that passed between the two men.

Milton Derr was also in town, but no recognition whatever took place between him and his uncle when they met by chance some two or three times, face to face, on the crowded street.

The Squire shrewdly kept his eyes open and tried to bear in mind the different persons his confidential informant held converse with dur-

ing the day; but this one was here and there, with a nod, a hand-shake or a friendly greeting, having, it seemed, no especial business with any one.

Along toward five o'clock (for the dusk came on early these brief October days) the Squire got his horse and started homeward. He had chosen to ride a horse on this occasion, for he did not wish to be importuned to give any one a seat in his buggy on the way back, and there was no prospect of having the pretty toll-gate keeper for company, for she was helping her mother collect toll, as it was court day. Moreover, for special reasons of his own, the Squire desired to be alone.

He jogged along at a moderate pace until he reached the top of the first hill; then he let his horse drop into a slow walk, for, on looking back, he saw in the waning light a horseman approaching from the town, and judging that it was the person he wanted to see, he came to a halt in the road when the overhanging elm was reached.

"What news?" asked he, as the other rode up.

"The night riders will be out again tonight, sure an' certain."

“About what time will they make a raid?”

“Along towards midnight—perhaps a little later.”

“And what gate will they attack?”

“This one,” answered his companion, nodding down the road.

“What! the New Pike gate?” exclaimed the Squire.

“Yes, it was decided at the last moment by the captain.”

“Humph! I shouldn’t think Milt would want to take a hand in that,” muttered the Squire, reflectively.

“He don’t know yet that it’s to be this one, I think; but even if he did, he wouldn’t dare to refuse to go along. He’s taken the oath to obey the orders that are given him, an’ now he’ll have to do it, whether it pleases him or not. You’ll have that other hundred all right when I come to see you tomorrow night or the next?”

“That’s what I agreed to do, isn’t it?” demanded the Squire, testily.

“Yes, of course, Squire, of course, only I wanted to remind you so you wouldn’t forget to have it on hand, an’ in small bills, too. A

man don't feel like riskin' his neck at this business, you know, unless he's sure of gettin' well paid for it."

"You've already received more than yours is worth, I'm thinking," growled the Squire. "If things turn out all right, though, and the young man is safely jailed, I shan't mind giving you the extra hundred out of my own pocket," added he, melting into good humor again, as he rode off homeward.

CHAPTER VIII.

Early on the morning of this October court day, Sophronia Saunders, a friend and former schoolmate of the pretty toll-taker, went over to a neighbor's to see the housewife about weaving a rag carpet, the materials for which were already cut and sewed and rolled into balls ready for the loom.

Sophronia had taken an early start, for she wished to know just how much carpet chain would be needed, so that her father could bring it from town with him when he returned.

The air was full of crisp freshness, which brought a wholesome glow to the girl's plump cheeks as she walked briskly along down the dirt lane. Fallow fields stretched out on either hand, unrolling rich, varying shades of yellow and brown, reaching away in undulating waves to where the frost-painted hills stood in brave array, like gay canvases belonging to some gorgeous theatrical scene.

Far to the southward they extended—a long, irregular chain, whose rugged heights were gradually softened and subdued by distance and the October mists until they finally seemed but jagged banks of amethystine clouds piled high against the horizon.

Presently the girl reached a small wood that lay between her and her destination, and after a moment's pause, and a glance of maidenly precaution around, she agilely climbed the rail fence that enclosed its boundary, and started in a diagonal line across the wooded space to shorten her walk.

Within the wood the pensive presence of Autumn dwelt. The low, gentle rustling of falling leaves in a plaintive murmuring, as if regretful at approaching dissolution, greeted the sensitive ear at every turn. The drowsy air seemed haunted by vague faint-spirited voices whispering tenderly of the past summer's joys, while in sharp contrast, now and then, the sound of a dropping hickory nut from high up amid the branches where some frisky squirrels were at play, broke as a discordant note into the softer leaf-music of the trees.

The ground beneath her feet was soft-car-

peted with fallen leaves, drifting into rich mosaics, changing with each passing wind to new kaleidoscopic patterns of beauty and color.

At the further edge the woodland terminated abruptly in a deep ravine, which the girl must cross before her destination was reached. It was a lonely, picturesque spot, skirted by underbrush and cedar bushes, and lined with gray, lichen-clad boulders, jutting out boldly in fantastic shapes on either hand. Overarching trees and vines shut out the brighter daylight, and made a subdued twilight that kept the spot cool and shadowy even on the warmest of summer days—a hidden sylvan retreat fit for woodland nymph or dryad.

When the girl reached this ravine she skirted its edge until she should come to a place where an easier descent could be made into its shadowy depths, and had gone but a little way along its rim when, on glancing through an opening between the bushes, she caught sight of her neighbor, Steve Judson, coming up the dry, rocky bed of the stream, which in the rainy season was changed into a brawling torrent. He had neither seen her nor heard her ap-

proach, and was quite unaware that anyone was near.

Sophronia was just on the point of calling out and asking him to give her a helping hand in crossing the ravine, when something in his manner—a certain cautiousness of movement and an alertness of bearing—caught her attention and aroused her curiosity; so, keeping silent, she drew back amid the bushes and peered through a small space between the branches.

Steve clambered up the rocky defile until he reached a spot almost opposite to where Sophronia stood concealed. After a cautious glance around, he drew from under his coat an object that looked, from her point of observation, like an ordinary fruit jar.

He held the jar up in front of him a few moments, looking into it with close attention, turning it slowly around as he did so, then crossed over to the opposite side of the ravine, where, after placing his burden carefully at the foot of a cedar tree, he began to dig a hole in the ground near by.

The earth was light and yielding—the rich deposit of leaf mold of many years accumulation—and in a short time a hole was dug suffi-

ciently deep for its purpose, the jar was placed in it and covered with dirt. Some fallen leaves and loose pebbles were next scattered over the recently disturbed spot, and finally a large, flat rock laid just above the place where the jar had been buried.

After another cautious look of inquiry about him, when Steve had arisen to his feet, he turned and went down the ravine in the direction of his house.

Sophronia, wondering vainly what it was that her neighbor had hidden so carefully, and with such an air of secrecy, waited until he had been lost to sight amid the foliage, then slowly followed the course he had taken.

Soon she reached her destination. The Judson home was but a humble one, a dilapidated log cabin perched on the top of a rocky hill that gradually descended to the ravine which its owner had but lately quitted.

An air of neglect and shiftlessness hung heavily about the spot, for Steve was a person who would willingly sit for hours on a rail fence industriously whittling and talking politics, which was a favorite theme, but when it came to the driving of a needed nail in a loose

plank, or repairing a break in a fence, he seldom had the time or inclination to engage in so prosaic an occupation. Selling off the stock was preferable to mending the fence, and when a shed tumbled down the broad canopy of heaven must thenceforth of necessity be a shelter.

Judson was making ready to go to town when the visitor arrived. He had not missed a court day since early boyhood, and no farm work was ever sufficiently important to keep him at home on such occasion.

When the girl explained her errand, he readily agreed to deliver any message she might wish to send her father, and to see to the bringing out of the needed carpet chain, while Mrs. Judson said, persuasively:

“’Phrony, I do wish you’d stay an’ show me about cuttin’ out a sack pattern. I’m as lost as if I was in the Roosian sea when it comes to cuttin’ out things.”

“An’ it won’t be puttin’ you to too much trouble to see about the chain?” the girl asked of the man.

“It’s just as easy as rollin’ off a log,” answered the complaisant host, who was of a

most obliging disposition, and ever ready to attend to anybody's and everybody's business save his own.

"Now, Steve Judson, don't you forgit that carpet chain!" his wife called out admonishingly, in a shrill treble, as her husband rode off. "Men air sech forgitful critters 'bout rememberin'," she added complainingly to her visitor.

It was close upon noon when Sophronia started home, and she once more shortened the distance, choosing the ravine, and the way through the woods.

"I do wonder what he was buryin' so carefully up there?" she asked herself as she stopped in the ravine and looked up its shadowy depths.

The spot at which she had seen her neighbor digging was only a short distance away; in fact, she could almost see the exact location from where she now stood. She hesitated and gazed longingly up the ravine. A daughter of Eve, the impulse of investigation was strong upon her. If she only dared to venture farther up the shaded recesses to the spot where Steve had been digging! And why should she not

dare? She would be quite free from interruption, for her neighbor was safe in town by now, and this remote place was rarely frequented.

She dallied with the temptation, casting yearning glances toward the charmed locality, and finally, almost before she realized the fact, she was standing beneath the very tree at whose foot the mysterious interment had taken place but a few hours ago.

With a glance of caution about her, such as he, too, had given, she suddenly stooped down and with some little difficulty moved the large flat rock that had been placed to mark the spot. Near by she found a sharp-pointed stick, the same that he had used, and with it began to scrape away the loose earth which hid the object of her search.

It proved to be a glass fruit jar, a plain jar having a metal top screwed down on a ring of rubber, and within was a roll of something wrapped in a scrap of newspaper. What in the world could it be?

Sophonra tried the lid, but it was firmly screwed on. As she had gone this far, however, she did not mean to be thwarted at such an early stage of her investigation, so grasping

the jar tightly between her knees, she made a more effective effort at loosening the lid, and soon had the top off and the contents of the jar in her lap.

She gave a low exclamation of astonishment as she unrolled to view a number of bank notes, mostly new, and of small denominations—ones, twos and fives. As Sophronia carefully fingered the bills, noting their value and the number the roll contained, her eyes opened wide with surprise at the sight of so much money.

No wonder her neighbor had exercised such caution in concealing his treasure. Here was a larger amount of money than she had ever imagined he would possess. How had he ever come into the ownership of such a sum? Could he have stolen it, and from whom?

The girl hastily counted the bills. "*Goodness!*" she exclaimed. It was ninety-five dollars in all—a small fortune indeed for a person in Judson's situation. How came he with such booty, for booty it must be, since he had never been known to save a dollar in his life, yet here was quite a snug little fortune that had been acquired by some unknown means.



SOPHRONIA SOON HAD THE LID OFF, AND THE CONTENTS
OF THE JAR IN HER LAP.

As Sophronia puzzled over the matter, her eyes chanced to fall on the scrap of paper in which the money had been wrapped, and smoothing out the paper, she slowly read the reward offered by the President of the Turnpike Corporation, for any information that would lead to the arrest and conviction of the raiders, whose recent deeds of violence were a menace to the community.

So this, then, was a solution to the problem vexing her brain! Steve Judson must have betrayed the raiders, and this money was the larger part of the spoils he had received. He certainly could not have accumulated such an amount otherwise, for his ill-kept, sterile patch of ground scarcely yielded a poor living.

As Sophronia sat looking first at the money then at the printed reward, the fear of detection suddenly came over her. Whether it was ill-gotten gain, or not, the money certainly was not hers, and she had no right to thus unearth it from its secret hiding place. Suppose some one should discover her in the act!

Alarmed at the mere thought, she hastily wrapped the scrap of paper around the money, and dropping the roll in the jar, screwed on

the lid and reburied the treasure, taking care to leave the place looking quite as she had found it. Then she hastily quitted the spot.

CHAPTER IX.

Night.

The dark forms of a group of men were brought out in sharp contrast against the fitful light of a small brushwood fire built in a sheltered spot among the hills.

A few faint stars dotted the moonless sky, and the night air was raw with the frosty breath of late October.

Some of the men were sitting about on scattered blocks of rejected stone, left in the abandoned quarry years before when the abutment of a bridge had been built over a small, swift stream near by, but the great number of raiders stood in careless attitudes around the fire, talking or smoking.

"Captain's late," one of the men in the foreground said.

"I heard the ring of Black Devil's hoofs comin' up the hill just a moment ago," a raider answered.

As he spoke, he thrust a fresh supply of brush into the fire, and briskly stirred the bed of embers until it glowed with sudden fervor, while a shower of sparks arose and fluttered into the night like a swarm of fireflies rudely disturbed.

"Be saving of the brush," cautioned one of the raiders. "There may be officers of the law abroad tonight."

"It is money to them if they bag us," answered the other, with an expressive shrug of the shoulders and a hoarse laugh. "There's a reward of two hundred dollars offered for information concerning the raiders, or night-riders, as some folks call us."

"Perhaps some one's after it," suggested another.

"And what good 'd the reward be? It would melt or burn where we'd send him."

"Is it the gate at the stone bridge tonight?"

"No, I have heard it's to be another—one more familiar to some of our members," the speaker continued, casting a furtive glance at a number of the band standing near.

"Suppose it should be the pole of the New Pike gate, and Milt was chosen to do the cut-

ting?" The man at the fire spoke tauntingly.

"The pole of the New Pike gate won't be cut tonight, I'm thinking," said Derr quietly.

"Not if the Captain commands it?"

"No."

"Listen, you fellows—hear what this man's sayin'!"

"And what's more to the point, I'm willing to bet that he isn't going to insist on me cutting it, either," added Derr, glancing about him with a half-defiant air in which there was also the suggestion of a threat.

Quickly the attention of the others was drawn to the speaker, who had unconsciously straightened to his full six feet, while the rich color in his cheeks, augmented by the ruddy glow of the firelight, deepened perceptibly, and quickly spread to his throat and neck, which were partly revealed in their robust outlines, where the heavy coat was thrown back to the warmth of the fire.

"Any special reasons for not wantin' to cut down the pole of the New Pike gate?" asked one of the band, with a wink on the sly at his companions.

"I have," answered Milt frankly and seri-

ously. "One good reason I will state a little later, the other can be given right now. It seems a cowardly thing to do—the chopping down of a gate that's kept by two lone women. Now if it was a man, the case would be altogether different."

"It ain't the women folks we've got the grudge ag'in," spoke up one of the men. "It's the graspin' turnpike companies back of 'em we're after."

"Yes, but it's taking away the living of two worthy women," protested Derr.

"That can't be helped, though," argued the other raider. "If we're goin' to do away with toll-gates, an' have free roads, we can't play favorites, you know, by cuttin' down some poles, an' leavin' others standin', just on account o' family relations," he said.

"What's the talk?" The deep voice came from the outer gloom, and as the men glanced in its direction, the captain emerged from the shadows hovering close about the circle and joined the group.

An embarrassing silence fell suddenly upon the company, at the leader's presence, and each man waited for his neighbor to make reply. As

no one seemed inclined to answer, finally Derr spoke.

"It was concerning the New Pike gate. Some one suggested that I would be chosen to do the cutting of the pole."

"Well!" The captain fixed his steel cold eyes full on the speaker, while the semblance of a sarcastic smile hovered about his mouth.

"I have good and sufficient reasons for not wanting to cut down that pole, and especially if I was called upon tonight," continued the speaker quietly, his eyes meeting the captain's gaze unflinchingly.

"Have your reasons been called for?" demanded the leader with a contemptuous curl of the lip.

"Among other reasons," continued Derr, ignoring the question, "I don't see the need of disturbing that gate for the present, when so many others around here tonight might claim our attention."

The little groups merged into a large one, and general attention was quickly centered in the two men, for trouble seemed brewing in this quarter. As they stood face to face, eyeing each other keenly and coolly, the spirit of

unfriendliness that had long held a place in each bosom was plainly evident, and a clashing of strong wills appeared imminent. There had ever been a feeling of rivalry, dating far back to the days they had gone to school together in Alder Creek Glen, and pretty little Sally Brown was the figurative apple of discord between the two.

“His reasons for not wanting that gate disturbed may not be hard to guess, said the captain, a sneer lingering on his heavy lips. “He’s in love with the pretty toll-taker.”

“And the captain’s rather sore because she’s jilted him,” retorted Derr in clear, deliberate tones.

The leader’s face flushed crimson with anger at the words that carried with them the sting of truth, and a look of hatred blazed for an instant in his eyes as he turned them full on the speaker, standing calm and disdainful, meeting the look fearlessly.

Perhaps this utter lack of fear deterred the captain from his first impulse, for he knew that to press his adversary further at this moment meant a speedy settlement of old scores. Jade Beddow was not ready for such a course

just yet, indeed he knew a better plan of revenge, so with strong effort he managed to control the rage that filled him, and to bring himself to a more fitting realization of his present course of conduct.

“We haven’t met tonight to settle personal grievances,” he said, letting his eyes slowly wander to the men surrounding him. “These can be left to another time an’ place. Our business tonight is to strike another blow for our just cause, and the New Pike gate is the one to go down. Let those who are not cowards follow me. To your horses, boys!”

CHAPTER X.

A little before eight o'clock, while the young girl was still busied in the kitchen with the supper dishes, for on court days this meal was always a late one, Squire Bixler again passed through the New Pike gate on his way to town.

Sally's mother raised the gate for him, and curious to know the cause of his speedy return, straightway began to ply him with questions. When she came into the house after he had ridden on, the seal of secrecy being the price the Squire required of her for the information he had imparted, she heaved so deep a sigh, and looked so full of melancholy forebodings that her daughter quickly inquired the cause.

"Nothin'," answered the old woman evasively, but the tone and her actions suggested quite the contrary. Indeed, her face bore the unmistakable impression of an impending disaster. The girl's curiosity was at once aroused and piqued by her mother's bearing and words.

“But there is certainly something troubling you,” insisted Sally. “You look quite put out.”

“Well,” admitted the other grudgingly, “perhaps I am.”

“Then what’s the matter?”

“I’m under solemn promise not to tell anybody, not even you, but when a person don’t know what minute they’re liable to lose the very shelter over their heads, it’s high time for dismal looks I should say.”

“Are we in any such danger?” asked the girl quickly.

“I’m not sayin’ as we air or ain’t,” yet the speaker gave a most gloomy shake of her head along with the noncommittal answer.

“But you act like something serious was the matter.”

“I can’t well help showin’ what’s on my mind, I suppose.”

“Then why on earth don’t you say what’s troubling you?”

“When you’re told a thing, an’ then told positively not to tell it, how is a person to do?” asked Mrs. Brown in dire perplexity. Her

pledge to the Squire was already beginning to weigh heavily upon her.

"I don't see why you hesitate to tell me," said Sally emphatically; "I'm not a child that can't be trusted with a secret."

"I don't see the harm myself in your knowin' it," acknowledged her mother, "and that, too, when you'd be sure to find it out in a mighty little while, for as soon as the guards come, you'd know that somethin' was wrong."

"The guards?" echoed the girl. "Then it's something about the raiders?"

"I didn't say," answered her mother with exasperating evasiveness.

"But it is," cried the girl. "Surely I've quite as much right to know as you. Don't it concern me equally as much?"

"Of course, but then the Squire didn't seem to want to make you uneasy any sooner than was necessary. That's why he cautioned me about tellin' you, I suppose."

"And very thoughtful it was of him, too," declared the girl with shrewdly feigned graciousness. "So it was the squire that told you about the raiders?"

"Yes, and it goes to prove how much he really thinks of you, not to want you worried."

"That's true," the girl's manner took on a careless indifference, "He was speaking to me the other day about the raiders; what did he have to say to you?" she asked in an off-hand way that threw the mother quite off her guard for the moment.

"He was sayin' that he feared you'd be badly frightened if you knew the raiders would be here tonight."

"Tonight?" cried the girl excitedly, no longer acting a part.

"There! I've gone and let the cat out of the bag, after all!" exclaimed Mrs. Brown in sudden contrition. "You partly guessed it, though. I didn't tell you out and out." She came a little closer to Sally, while her voice dropped to a tragic whisper. "Yes, the raiders air comin' this very night."

"How does he know?"

"He didn't tell me, but he's found out somehow."

"What will become of us?" cried her hearer in genuine apprehension.

"Dear knows!" answered her mother melt-

ing into tears at the thought of the impending raid. "We'll likely have the roof burned over our very heads, and tomorrow will find ourselves without a shelter."

"Well, there, don't worry!" urged the girl, touched by her mother's evident distress of mind. "There's another shelter been offered us, if the worst comes to the worst."

"Whose?" questioned Mrs. Brown quickly, for the moment forgetful of impending danger in the thirst for further knowledge of this generous offer. "Has the Squire offered us a home?" she questioned eagerly, eyeing her daughter askant.

"Yes, he has," acknowledged the girl with a little show of hesitation; "not that I mean to accept it," she added to herself, with a pretended flare of courage that was far from real. "What does the Squire think the raiders will be apt to do?" she questioned, returning to the primary subject under discussion.

"He don't intend they shall do us any harm if he can help it. He's gone to town now to get men to come an' guard the gate, an' he hopes to ketch the last one of them lawless

raiders before mornin’,” declared the elder toll-taker.

“I hope not!” cried the girl impulsively as a sudden fear crossed her brain.

“You hope not?” repeated Mrs. Brown in open-eyed wonder, turning on her daughter in quick wrath. “Is Milt Derr one of them night riders that you talk like that, Sally Brown?”

“Of course not, mother, else they wouldn’t be coming *here*,” answered Sally with quick wit to repair the slip of her tongue. “I mean on account of the trouble it would bring to a lot of innocent people,” she hastened to explain. “Of course these raiders have friends and kinfolks, likely some of ’em acquaintances of ours up in the hills. Besides, the raiders think they’re mightily down-trodden and oppressed, for toll-rates *are* high, there’s no denyin’ the fact.”

“Sally Brown! I’m downright ashamed of you, that I am!” cried her mother sharply. “The idea of you takin’ up for them miserable law-breakers, an’ them tryin’ to burn the very roof over our heads, an’ take the daily bread out of our mouths. You must have gone clean daft.”

“I didn’t say I thought they were right,” persisted Sally. “I said it likely seemed so to them.”

“An’ you got no cause to say even that,” insisted Mrs. Brown, “you, that’s dependin’ on a livin’ by takin’ of the toll. It’s nothin’ short of downright treason!”

CHAPTER XI.

The girl had been dreading just such news as her mother had revealed, yet since the conversation with the Squire the day Sally had so unwillingly ridden with him from town, she had been hourly expecting it. Now that the ill news had really come, her present uneasiness was not altogether on her mother's account, nor her own. It was probable that her sweetheart was now affiliated with the band of raiders, yet if this was true, it seemed a little strange that the New Pike gate was the one to be attacked.

When Sally sat down to her sewing a little later, after her various household duties had been attended to for the evening, her thoughts were very far removed from her present work, and she was much more troubled and perplexed in spirit and mind than she cared to show.

At the time she had heard the talk between the Squire and his unknown informant, it was

evident that Milton Derr had not then joined the raiders, but from the trend of that conversation it seemed likely he would soon become a member of the band. He was evidently debating the feasibility of joining them. Had he done so, and was he now powerless to change or divert their plans?

It was not alone the news that the gate would be attacked which was troubling the girl, but the further information her mother had given that the plans of the raiders were known, and the Squire was even then in town organizing a posse to resist the attack and capture the band.

Supposing her sweetheart was now a member of it, and some subtle intuition was urging her to such belief, what would be the outcome of it all? This then was the trap the Squire was adroitly laying for his nephew. She had warned Milt of the danger, but had he heeded? The band was probably composed of men he knew well, and was doubtless gathered from the ready material to be found among the rugged hills wherein he dwelt.

There had ever seemed to exist among these people a certain wild spirit of adventure and reckless daring, which one naturally imbibed

along with the very air of these free remote hills, and the Squire's nephew was of that restive nature too easily attracted by anything savoring of excitement or danger, such as these lawless escapades might readily furnish.

On recalling a talk she had held with her sweetheart the Sunday evening before, when they rode together from Alder Creek meeting-house, she felt that her very own words may have had some weight in influencing him to cast his fortunes with the raiders. Though she warned him of such a course, yet in almost the same breath she told him of the Squire's prediction that the New Pike gate would be wrecked, leaving her mother and herself homeless, but she wisely said nothing about the Squire's offer of marriage, deeming it prudent to remain silent on this point for the present, at least.

She had appealed to the nephew to do what he could to prevent the destruction of the New Pike gate, and had meant to enlist his aid only so far as the exercising of his influence over any personal friends who might belong to the band of raiders.

As things now stood, a great danger lay in

the fact that the posse of men now being gathered together in town, would probably make speedy war on those who threatened destruction to the gate. There would doubtless be fighting, some might be killed, wounded or taken prisoners, and her sweetheart was as liable to be among the first as the latter, if he were a raider. What great relief it would be at this moment to know that he was not connected with those who had lately declared warfare on the toll-gates throughout the country!

If she could but manage to see him, even for a brief moment, a simple word of warning might avert serious trouble. There was still left her a faint chance for such warning to be given, for Milton Derr had gone to town that morning, and she had not seen him return, though it might be that he had passed the gate on his homeward way, while she was busied with her household duties.

She felt a growing eagerness to know if her mother had seen him pass, yet dared not ask. Finally she decided on a little subterfuge.

"Dear me!" she cried, suddenly pausing in her work and glancing at her mother inquiringly, "I forgot to send Phrony that skirt pat-

tern she asked me to hunt for her. Has every one passed living up that way?"

"I s'pose they have," answered Mrs. Brown grumpily. "It's gettin' late, an' if the country folks ain't at home by now, they oughter be."

The girl made a show of hunting up the pattern, then sat down with it and her sewing near the front door.

Several belated travelers passed, some rather the worse for having imbibed too freely of the cup that cheers, but the one she wished to see was not among them. Along toward nine o'clock a small party of horsemen came galloping along the pike, loudly hallooing and firing their pistols as they came, and for a moment the girl thought the raiders were surely at hand.

Then quickly realizing that the cavalcade was coming not from the direction of the hill country, but the town, and that the night was yet too young for raiders to be abroad, she understood that it was merely a drunken crowd on their homeward way, therefore she hurried out and raised the pole, then fled into the house and blew out the light, as the horsemen went

dashing by, in a volley of shouts and oaths, like a miniature whirlwind.

Just as the clock was striking nine, and when her mother had once more fallen asleep after her recent rude awakening, the girl's attentive ear caught the sound of a horse's familiar tread, and tiptoeing lightly out on the platform, she softly closed the door behind her and awaited the rider.

She was not at fault in her surmise, for the horseman was the one she had hoped to see, and at her low summons he rode close up to the platform where she stood, all impatient to divulge her message.

"I thought you'd never come, or else that you had already passed the gate without me seeing you!" cried Sally in an eager undertone when he drew rein.

"I would certainly have started earlier if I'd known you were waiting," answered the rider contritely.

"Did you know we are expecting the raiders to pay us a visit tonight?" she asked hurriedly, coming at once to the point.

"Pay this gate a visit?" queried Milt in gen-

uine surprise that proved her words news to him.

“Yes.”

“Are you quite sure about that?” he asked thoughtfully. “How do you know it’s to be this gate?”

“The Squire came by on his way to town only a little while ago, and told mother. He’s gone now to raise a posse of men to guard the gate.”

“Here’s trickery,” thought Milt. “I was led to believe it was to be some other gate for tonight’s raid, or else I’ve got things badly mixed. The Squire said it was this gate?” he added aloud.

“That’s what he told mother. I didn’t see him. You mustn’t ever tell that I told you, never!” she insisted.

“I never will,” he declared fervently. “And how did the Squire know about it?” he added thoughtfully.

“I don’t know, likely from the man who is acting the spy for him.”

“I wonder who that man can be?”

“I don’t know, but the Squire’s got somebody in his pay who is not only spying on the

raiders but on you also. He's acting a double part."

"And you say the gate is to be guarded to-night?"

"Yes, the guards will be here soon."

"Well, perhaps that may scare the raiders away," said the young man reassuringly. "I'm awful glad you told me about it."

"I thought you ought to know," said Sally in a low tone, "for perhaps you have friends that might be interested in such news."

"This gate shall never be molested as long as I can do anything to prevent it," said Milton Derr earnestly, bending sideways until his arm encircled the waist of the pretty toll-taker on the platform; "and if it ever is, you can understand that I am powerless to save it. Good night, sweetheart!"

CHAPTER XII.

The girl stole quietly into the toll-house after her lover had ridden away toward the misty hills. She found her mother still sleeping soundly in her chair, quite oblivious of surroundings, and little dreaming that the secret the Squire had urged her to keep so securely had reached a third pair of ears already in its swift journeyings.

Catching up her sewing again, which she had quickly dropped on the floor in her eagerness to see the belated rider, Sally began to sew away industriously to make up for lost time, while her thoughts flew a good deal faster than her needle.

Her surcharged mind was now happily relieved of a portion of its burden of fears. There was no longer any danger threatening her sweetheart, so far as the present intended raid was concerned, and possibly this itself would fail of fruition.

Soon after ten o'clock the sheriff and a posse of armed men appeared.

"You keep late hours, Miss Sally," he said when she and her mother came out to receive them. "I expected to find you both asleep."

"Not when we are expecting company," the girl answered with a laugh that was somewhat forced; "that wouldn't be good manners, you know."

"It's no use to go to bed," insisted Mrs. Brown. "I couldn't sleep a wink, not if my life depended on it, that I couldn't." Sally smiled faintly, thinking of the recent long nap her mother had taken, and of the warning that had been given, quite unknown to the sleeper, thanks to this period of oblivion.

"I do hope none of you will get hurt!" cried the girl in deep concern. "It seems dreadful to think that perhaps before morning a very battle may be fought right around this quiet spot."

"Don't be alarmed," the sheriff insisted. "I look for little trouble or bloodshed either."

"No more do I," thought the pretty toll-taker, with a secret satisfaction she admirably concealed.

"I expect to take the rascals so completely by surprise they will have a chance to make but little resistance," the officer continued reassuringly, for the girl's apparent fear appealed to him. "Perhaps we may be able to capture the whole band without loss of a single man."

A feeling almost bordering on resignation had gradually supplanted the disturbed condition of Mrs. Brown's mind since her daughter's reassuring confession that the Squire had placed a shelter at their disposal, in case the raiders deprived them of the one they now had. She began to feel that the threatened calamity might, after all, take on the characteristics of a disguised blessing, since it would help to bring to a climax a state of affairs she had long striven, though unsuccessfully, to mold to her purpose, and that through the raiders the Squire might also manage to get him a wife, which, up to the present moment at least had proven a most elusive quantity.

With the coming of the posse to guard the gate, Mrs. Brown's spirits took on almost a jubilant turn, for though the raiders might fail in their present venture, they would ultimately succeed in the destruction of the New Pike

gate, and its doom would probably not be far distant, in spite of officers or guard, while the price of its downfall would be the speedy realization of the mother's fondest dreams concerning her daughter's future.

"We might just as well lay down on the outside of the bed, dressed as we are," said Mrs. Brown, as she led the way into the house, after the men had been placed on guard. "It's no use stayin' up, though, of course, I don't expect to close my eyes the entire night, for nobody can tell what may take place before mornin'."

"The raiders may not come, after all," ventured Sally, hoping to allay her mother's evident fears, "though, as you say, it's just as well to look presentable, in case we should be turned out of the house and home in the middle of the night." She gave a covert glance in the small looking glass on the tall dresser as she spoke.

"There's at least one that will not be captured tonight, whether he is a raider, or whether he isn't, and the Squire may find that his traps are not as carefully set as he thinks,"

said the girl to herself as she blew out the light, and lay down.

The incidents of the past few days came crowding confusedly through her brain as she lay thinking over the many entanglements that seemed tightening their meshes closer and closer about her.

As the night grew on apace, a suggestive sound by her side proclaimed that her mother had fallen asleep, despite all predictions of a watchful vigil, and as the girl lay and listened to the droning monotone, it finally lulled her into forgetfulness and slumber.

Darkness and silence hovered over the New Pike gate, and while its inmates slept on through threatened danger, others were yet awake and watchful along the opposite side of the road, their alert and crouching figures hidden in the gloom of the sheltering stone wall as the guard impatiently awaited the coming of the raiders.

CHAPTER XIII.

At the captain's arrogant words, flung at Derr in the wake of a scornful laugh, the riders began to move slowly in the direction of a near-by cedar thicket darkening the entrance to the quarry. At this spot the horses were hitched, guarded by a member of the band, who at the same time guarded the approach to the rendezvous.

Milton Derr stood motionless, silent and defiant, with tightly compressed lips, and in his dark eyes a vengeful, half exultant light.

Should he let them go unwarned? This was an easy and speedy way to even up with Jade Beddow for his insulting words, and his intended blow to Derr through the downfall of the New Pike gate.

Silence on the part of his enemy would surely bring harm this night to the captain of the band, and also to the raiders themselves, yet many of these were Milt's friends, and

must not be sacrificed to his own hot anger and hatred of one man. This were cowardly. It was his duty to speak out plainly for their sakes. Understanding this, he made a sudden move forward, and called out sharply:

“Listen to what I have to say!”

As the men looked back he raised his hand warningly. “The captain has given you *his* reasons as to why I have so frankly spoken against raiding the New Pike gate tonight, now I will give you *mine*.”

He paused a moment and looked around on the waiting crowd.

“It’s because the plans of the night-riders have been found out, and a posse of men are now waiting at the gate to give a warm welcome to those who come.”

At his words a sudden confusion fell among his listeners, as when a bomb is exploded in the ranks. The men stood irresolute, alarmed, looking first at the captain, then toward the spokesman, whose tall dark figure loomed up against the background of gray rock dimly outlined by the expiring fire.

The captain hesitated, uncertain what move

to make; then he came back a few steps to where Derr stood.

“How do you know this?” he asked sharply.

“I know it,” answered the other quietly, “and that’s enough.”

“But how do you know it? Who told you?” The leader grew insistent.

Derr compressed his lips and made no answer.

The captain gazed at him steadfastly some moments, then turned abruptly toward his men.

“You have heard what he says, boys, that our plans are found out, and the gate under guard. If this is true, there’s a traitor in our midst, and this is his work.”

A deep silence followed these suggestive words. The men glanced furtively at one another, as if a sudden distrust had arisen, specter-like, among them. The band separated into little groups and fell to talking in low tones among themselves, with now and then a suspicious look shot in Milton Derr’s direction, but he stood silent and impassive, a little apart from the others, seemingly oblivious of these glances, or of the words to which they gave rise.

"This may be only a hatched up tale to scare us off," suggested the captain at last, looking inquiringly around him.

"Remember I have given you all fair warning," Milt said quietly, looking beyond the leader to where the men stood in scattered groups.

"Who is your authority for this report?" the captain once more asked.

"I learned it, that is all you need to know."

"When did you hear it?"

"In time to warn you."

The captain turned away with an impatient gesture and a muttered oath. "Perhaps it wouldn't be a hard matter to tell how the toll-gate people learned of it," he said with meaning emphasis in his tone.

"There may be something in this, after all, so what's the use of running into danger when you can steer clear of it?" asked one of the raiders. "The New Pike gate will keep till another time."

"But if there's a traitor in our midst, what other time is so safe for us?" the leader interrogated. "The only course before us is to strike now and as often as we can, guards or

no guards. For my own part I don't believe the gate is guarded."

A warm discussion arose among the men, and hot words were bandied to and fro. A few favored the postponement of the intended raid. Several, along with the captain, were inclined to discredit the story that the gate was under guard, and the majority advocated a bold assault, even in the face of danger, which served to lend a certain zest to the act.

Through it all Milton Derr stood silent, and offered no advice.

"Well! what shall we do, boys—go or not?" asked the leader impatiently.

"Put it to a vote."

"Agreed!" the leader answered. "All who favor making the raid, step to the right. How many of you? Twenty. A fine showing, my trusty lads! Cowards are in the minority tonight. If one goes, all should go. Only a traitor would hesitate. To your horses!"

"Free roads! Down with the toll-gates!" The cry arose in a hoarse howl as the men moved quickly in the direction of their horses.

Derr stood hesitating, abashed and vanquished. If he now refused to go along with

the others it was but the signing of his own death warrant, and the invoking of swift punishment. He would be proclaimed a traitor, branded as one. Rather would he run the risk of getting killed by the officers of the law than thus incur the enmity of the band, and perhaps suffer the penalty of a traitor's deed.

By his presence he might still be of some benefit to the inmates of the toll-house threatened, and possibly through the influence of friends among the raiders the building might be spared and only the pole cut down.

If the captain persisted in venting his anger and spite on a couple of helpless and defenseless women, and was fully determined to burn the New Pike-gate, and make a repetition of the Cross Roads affair then—Milt's hand unconsciously grasped the handle of his pistol—the band might be speedily called upon to elect a new leader.

Milt slowly followed the raiders down the hill and joined them at the thicket. At a word from the captain the cavalcade set out through the keen frosty air, the clang of many hoofs on the loose stones along the way echoing amid the silent hills, and breaking sharply into the

quiet of the night. Now and then, a tiny trail of sparks flashed beneath the flying iron shoes like a nest of glow-worms scattered into the darkness.

Around the base of frowning, tall, uprising hills the raiders swept in a swift gallop, now through gloomy rock-bound ways, past quiet farm-houses, by fallow fields, following the winding courses of the road that trailed under the dim starlight like a ribbon of mist between the silent, opaque hills.

Still on and on the horsemen rode, sometimes dropping into a slower gait, then spurring their horses anew, with never a jest as they rode along, nor a fling of laughter or song to the darkness—a shadowy, silent band with suggestion of deep-set purpose in the ominous quiet they maintained. When at last they swung around the curve of the pike and came in sight of the New Pike gate, the captain drew rein and called a brief halt.

“Go forward!” he commanded, selecting Derr for the mission.

“Let me go! I’m not afraid!” hastily cried another member of the band, as Milton hesitated and seemed on the point of refusing. It

was Steve Judson who spoke, and there was a touch of eagerness in his voice as he made the request.

"I have chosen the one to go," said the leader sternly. "If the gate is guarded, as he seems to think is the case, he is on better terms with the toll-takers an' their protectors than any of us."

"Aw, let me go!" persisted Steve. "That's always been my duty, an' I'm not afraid to shirk it now. Send me ahead!"

"You stay here!" commanded the captain decisively. "I've got other work for you when the time comes."

"Go forward!" the captain continued, addressing Milt. "If you find the coast clear, ride on beyond the gate, then signal us, an' guard the road from that point."

"I have told you that I believe the gate to be guarded," answered Derr quietly. "I have warned you that it was to be. Do you command me to ride into almost certain danger?"

"If you know it to be guarded, you stand in no danger from your friends," answered the leader coldly. "If we find you have betrayed

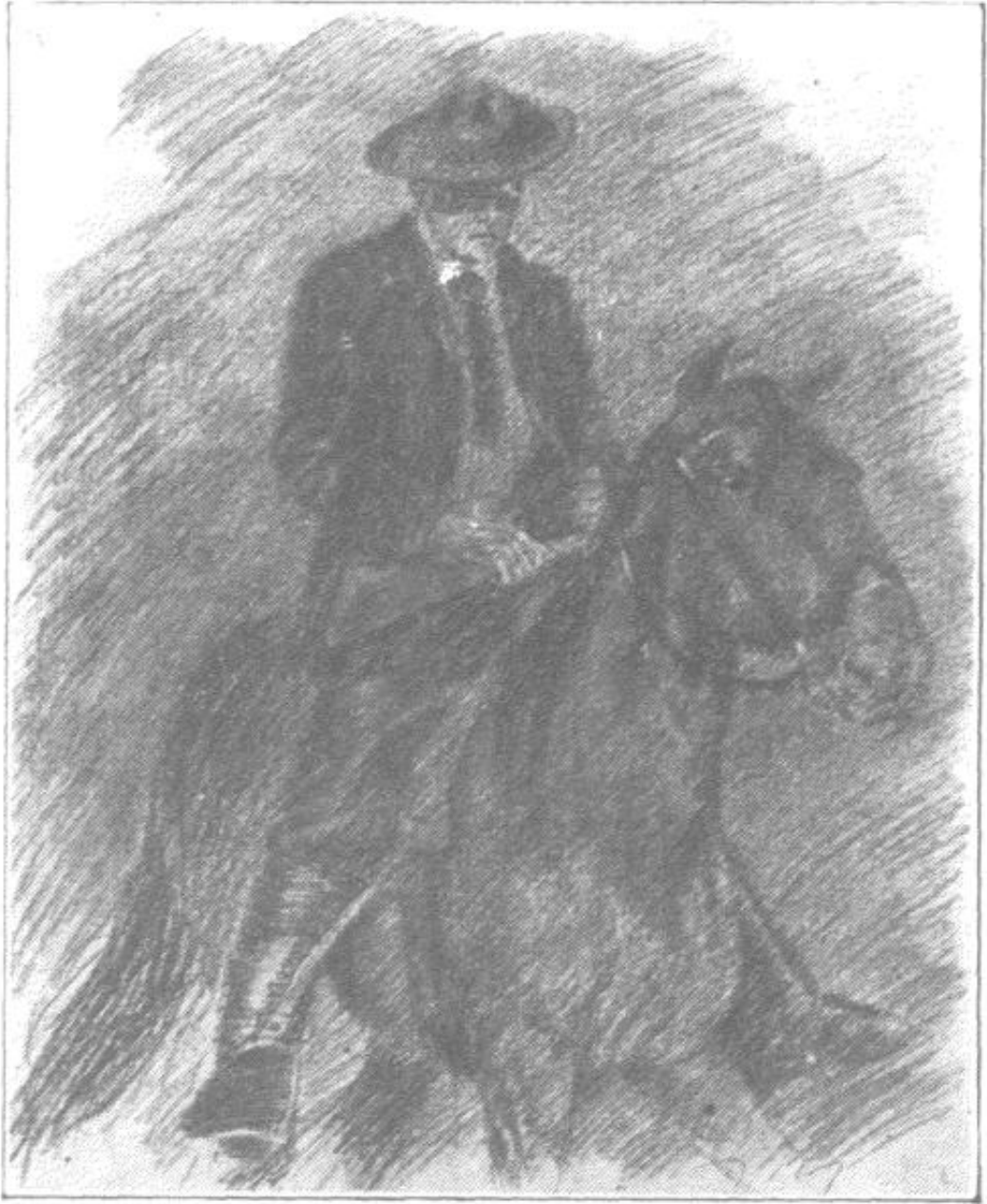
us you will stand in very great danger from your enemies."

"I have not betrayed you, I have only warned you," insisted Milt.

"Then you should be willing to share the danger with us. A brave man never fears danger if his duty demands it. Go!"

"I will go, then, since you command it. Remember, though, comrades," he added, turning to the members of the band who were nearest to him, "if I fail to get back, my blood be upon this man!"

He turned and rode quickly through the darkness toward the New Pike gate.



HE TURNED AND RODE THROUGH THE DARKNESS.

CHAPTER XIV.

On the Squire's return to town, zealously urged by his mission to warn the officers of the law of the intended attack on the New Pike gate, he felt that supreme elation of spirits belonging to a man who already scents splendid victory in the near future.

Indeed, it promised to be a double one, for not only would he be enabled to strike an effective blow at the raiders, whose warfare on the toll-gates threatened him with a considerable financial loss, but he would also have it in his power to crush one whose ever-unwelcome presence in the neighborhood seemed likely to deprive the Squire of winning a wife.

The wily old man reasoned with himself that he would much prefer to have his nephew alive and in the penitentiary than simply dead. Incarceration would prove a far more lasting and complete revenge than death. In death there would only come a quick oblivion to the

Squire's victory, on the nephew's part, while in a long imprisonment, which to the victim would be a living death, there would yet remain a daily and hourly comprehension of unhappy facts, besetting the helpless prisoner like a pack of hungry wolves attacking their prey—an ever-present hideous knowledge of his own powerless condition, and his uncle's complete mastery of the situation.

It was this wish, this growing hope to place his nephew in just such a living tomb, that fanned the hatred of the Squire into a glowing heat, and made him all the more determined that Milt should soon feel the blighting power of his wrath, even through walls of massive stone, and behind barred doors.

All the way to town the old man fed his sluggish imagination by picturing his kinsman and rival thus imprisoned, slowly eating away his heart in rage and solitude, understanding full well that his sweetheart had become the wife of the man he most hated in all the world. Ah! what could be a greater punishment than this? Death would prove sweet compared to it.

The Squire chuckled to himself in a sort of

fiendish delight at the mental picture of anguish he had conjured up.

In their last bitter quarrel, when the young man had been driven from the Squire's home, the nephew had boldly laughed in his uncle's face, taunting him with his age and decrepitude, and declaring that he would yet win the girl in spite of all that the old man might do.

Youth and manly beauty are a powerful offset to wealth and age in the eyes of a young woman. The Squire understood this fully, and chafed under the knowledge, but he resolutely determined to see what craft and cunning could accomplish in the unequal struggle. He made up his mind to marry the pretty toll-taker, though there were a dozen importunate suitors in the way. He would ruthlessly trample them all underfoot, or sweep them aside, as he meant to do his nephew, showing neither pity nor mercy.

Ofttimes perseverance is even more effective than love, and the Squire was not of the kind to be easily thwarted when he had once made up his mind to attain a desired result. Stubbornness and determination were his strongest characteristics. These two traits, cleverly

united, have carried many a man to success.

Deep down in his wicked old heart he had carefully considered the plan of having his nephew put quietly out of the way—the Squire knew a man that money could easily buy for this purpose—but the Squire disliked to part with money, and besides he did not care to place himself in a position to be bled by a hireling.

For obvious reasons, therefore, it would serve his purpose much better if Milt got himself hopelessly entangled in the meshes of the law by his own acts, rather than the Squire should be accused of helping to bring about his nephew's ruin. There would be much less difficulty in winning the girl, the old man thought, ignorant of what she already knew.

As matters now stood, everything was working beautifully to his interest, and with the exercise of a little diplomacy, such as he well knew how to employ when occasion demanded, his plans would soon be happily accomplished, and his nephew's downfall speedily brought about.

When Squire Bixler got home again, after an interview with the sheriff, he replenished

the fire, closed the shutters, and discarding his heavy boots for his carpet slippers, he gathered the papers about him, and sat down to read. Although his usual bedtime had passed, he only yawned occasionally, and consulted his heavy time-piece, or glanced at the tall clock in the corner.

Along toward the midhour of the night he suddenly aroused himself from the stupor of sleep that was beginning to lay hold of him, and, straightening himself in his arm-chair, listened attentively.

A sound which seemed at first elusive grew clearer to his alert ear, arousing his drowsy faculties to fuller consciousness. It was an easy matter to interpret that sound aright—indeed, his ear had done so quickly. It was a welcome sound for which he had been impatiently listening all these long, weary hours, and it signified the raiders were abroad.

The old man sat motionless, listening intently. Clear and distinct, in measures musical as steel hammers on an anvil, came the rapid hoofbeat of horses along the pike, now louder where the open fields spread out on

either side of the road, now dull and muffled when a hillock intervened.

As the sound grew nearer the Squire hastily arose, and blowing out his candle went to the window and opened it. The body of horsemen were even then passing his avenue gate.

Now the raiders were climbing the little hill that arose between his place and the toll-house, each fall of the iron shoes seemed a sharp, clear note, played in staccato time, on the hard, white surface of the pike, then the notes grew less distinct, softened and shaded as by a soft pedal, when the raiders descended the farther side of the hill. They must soon be at the very gate.

The Squire listened. There came a pause in the hoof music, then a solitary horseman took up the refrain. The listener recalled to mind the request that his recent nocturnal visitor had made concerning this advance guard—that harm should not come to him—and a grim smile played over the old man's face as he silently hoped that this one, too, might fall. The Squire had urged upon the sheriff that no man should escape—not one.

Suddenly a shot rang out—then another—two, three—a half-dozen. Quickly a volley

poured forth, startling the night with clamorous echoes.

The fight was on in fierce earnestness between the raiders and defenders of the gate.



CHAPTER XV.

The distance that Milton Derr had to go to reach the New Pike gate, from where the raiders halted and held parley, was but a short one, measured by paces, yet during that brief ride many irrelevant things came crowding fast upon his memory—indeed, it seemed that his whole life's history was swiftly reviewed in that brief period.

His boyhood days arose to his mind—those careless, happy days of early youth that were spent amid the wild, sweet freedom of the hills, from which he had just now ridden—the old schoolhouse in Alder Creek glen, that forgotten spot where pretty Sally Brown had first ensnared his boyish heart and held it a willing captive ever since.

He recalled to mind the sharp pangs of jealousy Jade Beddow took a delight in arousing in his youthful bosom by showing marked attention to the object of their mutual admiration

—then of gloomier matters, his mother's illness and her death, which had wrung his heart with the bitterest grief that had ever crept into his young life. There came to mind a memory of the subsequent home with his uncle—a home that meant little else than a mere shelter, and an opportunity for much hard work, for the Squire was a grasping man, close and calculating, and required of every one the last atom of effort.

Most clear in his memory was that eventful day when his uncle first learned that the smiles of the pretty toll-taker were rather for the nephew than for the uncle, and this discovery seemed suddenly to change the Squire's indifference toward his ward into an intense hatred, which smoldered for a while, then at last broke forth into a fierce flame of passion, when there was a bitter quarrel, and the young man was driven from his uncle's roof, and went back to live amid his native hills once more.

When Milton Derr made up his mind to join the raiders, he was actuated by the two strongest passions that sway the human heart—love and hate. The first and uppermost one urged him to join the band in order that he

might be able to influence the members to spare the New Pike gate, for the present, at least; the second made it evident that, by aiding in the general destruction of toll-houses throughout the county, and the abolishment of tolls, he would be in a position to do his kinsman much damage, and affect the most vulnerable spot in evidence—his pocket. Thus, in Derr's bosom, love and hate held almost equal sway.

All these things passed in hurried view through the rider's excited mind, like a fleeting panorama, brief, yet clear and intense as the glimpse of a surrounding landscape seen by the flash of the lightning's path across the starless heavens.

He once more recalled to mind the conversation that his sweetheart had overheard and repeated to him, which had taken place between his uncle and some unknown man upon the public highway. Could this mysterious person have been Jade Beddow, and had they arranged it between them to have him sent forward so that he might be shot, or taken prisoner? This was evidently the trap that had been so adroitly set, and into which he was now riding, though not without protest.

Won to this belief, he still rode onward unflinchingly toward the toll-house now looming up before him like a ghostly warning, and dimly outlined against the cold gray midnight sky.

Nature herself seemed steeped in profound slumber at this wan, late hour, and neither life nor movement was visible about the place. The solitary horseman appeared to be the only living object in all that cheerless, dimly-defined landscape. There was no sign of danger on any hand, no suspicious movement of a lurking enemy. The deep silence of night's midhour brooded over the quiet scene, and its peace fell heavily upon it like the mantle of darkness round about.

The lone rider began to look about him with growing confidence. It was all so quiet, so still, so filled with the hush of midnight—surely the monition he had received that the gate would be guarded must have been built on mere rumor without the foundation of fact.

When he came to the gate, he found the pole up, as it was wont to be at so late an hour of the night, and after pausing a brief moment, thinking tenderly of one within the darkened

toll-house, he passed from under the raised pole, and rode a short distance along the road.

Once again he paused, and looked back, and listened. No sight or sound betrayed the presence of guard or officer. It must be that the posse had failed to materialize, believing the rumor of an impending attack mere idle talk. With a feeling of relief the horseman raised a whistle to his lips and blew a sharp call as a signal that the raiders might advance.

In quick response the clatter of many hoofs came beating down the road in rhythmic measure.

Suddenly—breaking harshly into the musical ring of the hurrying hoof-beats—rang the discordant note of a shot from out the darkness, and quick upon it came another, while the advance rider, startled and surprised by its unexpectedness, heard the bullet singing keenly past his ear.

An answering fire from the oncoming raiders, shooting at random, seeking an unseen and hidden foe, awoke the echoes, and speedily a volley of shots from both raiders and guards filled the quiet night with tumultuous sounds.

For a brief space of time Derr sat motionless

on his horse, making no effort to escape, stunned by the surprise of his attack, then realizing that a fight was really on, that the gate was under guard, and, despite his warnings, the band had gotten themselves into a jeopardous situation, while he, being a sworn member, must now stand or fall with it. He turned quickly about and dashed back to join his comrades.

The first shot had been the premature discharge of a gun in the hands of a nervous guard, who had fired before the raiders had reached the spot where the men lay in waiting.

This, coupled with the fact that the stone wall behind which the guards were concealed, was on a stretch of ground sloping from the road, caused the later volley of shots fired on the raiders to speed harmlessly overhead, while the raiders' answering fire was quite as futile.

The latter had been quick to respond to their unseen assailants, and had pressed on, reassured by the first single shot, but when met by a determined volley, the captain gave orders for a hasty retreat, quickly realizing that the band had ridden recklessly into an ambush, and that the odds were greatly against his men.

As the raiders turned, the advance rider dashed back to join them. Several bullets sang a keen note of danger as he galloped by, but he was unscathed.

A little beyond the gate one of the riders fell, or was thrown from his horse, which seemed to stumble, then quickly regain his feet, and, riderless now, dashed along the road after the retreating band.

As Milt came up, he suddenly checked his horse at the spot where the accident occurred, for the fallen man had risen to his feet, and was sorely in need of succor, since his horse had taken flight without him.

As he stood in the road, a dark shadow on a light background, seemingly dazed and uncertain what to do, Derr pulled up alongside, and bracing himself in his stirrups, leaned forward and cried hurriedly, "Leap up behind me!"

The man quickly obeyed, though clumsily, for his right arm appeared to be of little service to him, but with the mounted man's assistance he managed to climb up behind, and throw one arm around his deliverer, then both men bowed low over the saddle, yet not a mo-

ment too soon to avoid a parting volley fired at the two on the fleeing horse.

"The rest rid off an' left me, but you risked your life to take me up," muttered Steve Judson, as they galloped on through the night. "Milt Derr, I promise you I won't forget tonight."

"That's all right; hang on!"

CHAPTER XVI.

The lurking shadows along the stone wall suddenly grew into animated forms, and the silence was broken by excited speech. The raiders faded as quickly into the night as they had come, while the faint echoes of retreating hoofs betokened a rapid flight of the band toward the hill country.

“Have we bagged any game?”

The guards hastily scrambled over the rock fence after a parting volley had been sent after the last retreating horseman, who had tarried a brief while in his retreat, and each guard was eager to find an answer to the leader's question.

“One man fell or dropped from his horse, I'll swear to that,” the sheriff made reply, looking along the gloom of the road with expectant eyes. “We must surely have wounded one of them. It cannot have been a total loss of lead.”

“No, for I’m hit,” a voice made the doleful assertion out of the darkness farther along the fence line.

“Hello! Scott! Is that you? Are you much hurt?”

“Shot in the shoulder.”

“Is that so?” asked the sheriff concernedly. “I’ll look after your case at once. Anybody else hurt?”

“I believe a bullet went through my hat and grazed my skull”—this a second voice tinged with grave anxiety.

“If so, it probably flattened the bullet,” was the unfeeling remark of a companion.

The girl from the toll-house appeared just then on the platform—a sudden apparition, startled of face, and with a hand that shook perceptibly as she carried an old tin lantern.

“Is anybody hurt?” she anxiously inquired.

“A wound in the shoulder of one of our men; nothing serious, I hope,” and the sheriff came forward to reassure her.

“And the raiders—what of them?” The girl’s query was hastily made.

“One fell from his horse, but we can find no trace of him. He seems to have escaped. Lend

us your lantern," the sheriff added; "perhaps he crawled off into the weeds."

"Here's a hat I found in the road!" The words came from an excited guard.

"Fetch it to the light!" This from the sheriff.

The guard obeyed. As the hat was held close to the light of the lantern, which the girl held obligingly over the rail, the men crowded around, eager to examine the one trophy of battle.

"There's blood on it!" some voice exclaimed. "We must have wounded one of the rascals at least. Likely he's in hiding now, close by."

"Lend us your lantern, Miss Sally."

The sheriff reached out for it, but before his fingers closed over the handle, the girl's nervous hand suddenly relaxed its hold, and the lantern fell to the hard bed of the pike. The glass in the sides shivered as it struck, while the candle rolled out and was quickly extinguished in the white dust of the road. The girl became the picture of consternation.

"Oh!" she cried, "just see what I have done!"

"Perhaps it's the sight of blood. It makes some folks grow faint."

The sheriff spoke consolingly, pitying the girl's embarrassment, and covertly regretting the accident.

"I'm all upset!" acknowledged the pretty toll-taker frankly. She looked it, seemingly so innocent the while, one would scarcely have suspected the accident to have been hastily planned by woman's nimble wit, in order to gain yet more time before a further search could be made for the wounded man.

When the hat was held up to the light, the girl recognized it almost instantly as one Milton Derr was in the habit of wearing. He had worn it that very day when he passed through the New Pike gate. Its recent discovery by the guard, and the fresh stains of blood upon it, now filled her with sudden terror and consternation.

Was Milton Derr among the raiders? The hat was a silent witness to the fact. Had her lover been wounded? The blood stains gave conclusive evidence. Was it possible that Milt had ventured back with the raiders in the very face of the warning Sally had given him? Why had he risked so much? Ah! was it for her sake? She asked herself this with a sudden

glow in her heart, set aflame by her lover's devotion, and a quick resolve was formed to aid him in his present strait.

Many perplexing thoughts arose. Why had he not in turn warned the raiders as she had expected him to do? Perhaps he had done so, but without avail. Could they have ignored the warning, or have forced him to come back with them? Possibly he came of his own accord to be of whatever assistance he could in the face of danger that threatened the inmates of the toll-house. The girl was in a sea of grave perplexities and conflicting thoughts.

The voice of the sheriff close at hand broke into her bewildered train of thought and recalled her abruptly to a sense of her surroundings.

"Miss Sally! I have stepped on the piece of candle and broken it. Can you get me another?"

"Yes, certainly; I'll go at once," she answered hurriedly, glad to escape into the toll-house, where her mother was busied hunting bandages with which to dress the arm of the wounded man.

"It seemed as if I'd never be able to find an-

other piece of candle," said the girl in apology when she finally came out after quite a little search. "My wits have left me completely—I'm dazed."

"Hadn't you better leave the hat with me?" she asked with affected indifference as the sheriff and his posse started off with the light to look for the wounded raider along the road.

"I might as well do so;" then, as he was about to comply, the sheriff added on second thought, "no, I'll take it along to shield the candle from the wind, now that the lantern glass is broken."

At the spot where the hat had been picked up the searchers found some dark splotches sprinkling the dust of the pike, as if blood had fallen there, but the owner of the lost hat was nowhere to be found. The men searched carefully some distance along the way, and closely examined the patches of dusty weeds in the fence corners, but without reward.

"I am positive one of the raiders carried him off," insisted the guard.

"But for Gregory getting excited and firing before the raiders had gotten in close range, we would certainly have killed or captured

some of them, perhaps have bagged the whole band by closing in upon them from each end of the road. This comes of having green recruits," the sheriff added grimly.

When the posse had gone with the lantern, Sally went once more into the house and began to assist her mother in caring for the wounded guard, but the girl's thoughts were far from being centered on the object of her present skill and care, and she listened momentarily and with growing anxiety for additional news concerning the owner of the lost hat.

Could it be that it was not Milton's, after all? She felt almost positive that she had made no mistake in regard to its ownership, and she had suggested the leaving of the hat with her that she might give it a closer scrutiny and satisfy herself on this point.

If the hat were really Milton Derr's, on the under lining, inside the band, was his name and hers, both done in red ink, along with an arrow-pierced heart, and the date on which the names had been written—September 10th.

There had been a little picnic on this date. She and Milton, along with Sophronia and

her beau, and a few others, had gone for an outing up in the hills. The usual rain that invariably and maliciously awaits such gatherings suddenly came up, and the party had taken shelter for a time in the old schoolhouse in Alder Creek glen—the very log building where Sally's first girlish fancy had been captured by Milt's dark eyes and ruddy face. Here, as a stripling, he had fought battles for his lady love, and Jade Beddow had sought in vain to supplant him in her affections.

While the picnic party had waited for the rain to abate, Milt had usurped one of the children's desks, and written the two names on the inner lining of his hat-band, covertly showing the results of his skill to Sally.

If these names should be discovered, and discovery was imminent, it would clearly fasten the ownership of the hat on Milton Derr, even if no one could identify it otherwise. She felt a growing eagerness to get possession of the hat, and tear out the tell-tale lining, yet she dared not betray her anxiety, lest it arouse suspicion and hasten the discovery she would gladly avert.

In the midst of her uncertainties and fears

she caught sound of Squire Bixler's voice outside the toll-house.

He had hurriedly put on his shoes and great coat, and ridden over to the gate to learn the results of the fight between raiders and guards, prudently waiting, however, until the firing had ceased; and he had heard, with deep disappointment and regret, the retreating hoof-beats of horses galloping toward the hills. Despite the sound, he hoped that one raider at least had been left behind.

The Squire's chargin was poignant when he learned that not a single member of the band had been either killed or captured, and that the sole spoil of battle, on which he had so largely counted, was but a gray felt hat, streaked with blood, that had been picked up in the middle of the dusty road.

"By heaven!" cried the Squire wrathfully, when this single trophy was shown him, "I'll find the owner of that hat and punish him, if it takes every detective in the state to help me to do it."

CHAPTER XVII.

The morning following the exciting experiences of the raiders' attack and repulse at the New Pike gate, soon after the clearing away of the breakfast dishes, Sally, on the alert, caught sight of Squire Bixler's buggy coming over the hill, the loose side-curtains idly flapping to and fro in the fresh morning breeze like the wings of some bird of ill-omen. Indeed, she felt, on seeing the vehicle, that its very appearance presaged evil, if not to her, at least to one very dear to her.

Usually she let her mother open the gate to the Squire if his coming was noticed in time for an avoidance, but this morning she made it convenient to be out on the platform, sweeping away industriously, when he drove up.

"Good morning, Miss Sally! I suppose you are quite glad to find yourself alive, and with the toll-house roof still over you."

"Yes," she answered promptly, "glad and grateful, too!"

"What brings you out so early this morning?" she asked, smiling pleasantly on the Squire as she raised the gate which had so fortunately escaped the raider's axe the night previous.

"Business," answered he with emphasis, "important business. Before the day is over, I hope to have a warrant served on the owner of that hat which was picked up last night. If I can get only one of the rascals caught and safely jailed, it will not be such a difficult matter to ferret out the rest of the gang."

"Have you discovered anything more?" asked Sally, trying to disguise the anxiety in her tones as she made the inquiry.

"Nothing definite, although there's one man among the guards who thinks he can identify the hat. I'm taking it to town now to show to the merchant that probably sold it."

The girl's heart sank within her at the words. It would be little short of a miracle if the tell-tale names were not found and the hat's ownership revealed.

While the Squire was speaking, Mrs. Brown came out on the platform.

"Let me see that hat," she said. "It's likely

I may know the wearer myself. I was so busy last night attendin' to George Scott's arm that I didn't do more than glance at the hat."

The squire handed out a package done up in a piece of newspaper, which Mrs. Brown opened, and taking the hat held it up at arm's length, perched on her outspread fingers, viewing it critically, her head slightly askew.

"I've seen that hat before," she said thoughtfully; "now who was a-wearin' it?"

"There's likely a hundred such hats in the county," interposed Sally quickly. "I've seen a dozen or more myself."

"No, you don't see so many of these light gray felts," avowed her mother, bringing the hat nearer. "Mebbe it's got a cost mark, or the maker's name; that would tell a body more concernin' it."

She turned the hat upside down and looked carefully at the lining.

"Let me take it into the house and brush some of the dust off it," interposed Sally hastily, fearing every moment that the hidden names would be revealed, under her mother's inquisitive scrutiny.

"No! no! let it be, just as it is," said the

Squire, perchance put on the alert by Sally's manner, and suspicious of her ill-concealed desire to get the hat in her possession.

"Look here! what's this on the underside of the lining of this band?" asked Mrs. Brown, as she ran her fingers around the inside of the crown, and pulled down the lining. "It looks like writing, only it's red," she added, squinting her eyes after the manner of one whose vision has begun to fail.

At that moment Sally felt as though she fairly hated her mother's prying nature.

"What is it, Sally?" asked her mother; "your eyes are younger than mine."

The girl, after a careless glance, but with a sickening sense of fear taking possession of her as she recognized the arrow-pierced heart and the two names written underneath, answered in as calm and collected voice as she could command, "It looks like streaks of blood."

She partly averted her face as she spoke, for she felt that her mother or the Squire would read in her very eyes the secret she was striving to hide. There was no longer a doubt of the hat's ownership. It was Milton's Derr's beyond all questioning, and the discovery of

his name and hers written therein was now but a matter of brief delay, as the Squire's next words seemed to indicate.

"I'll have it closely examined when I get to town. It will not be a hard matter to locate its owner, I think."

"Would you mind giving me a seat to town?" asked the girl suddenly, beset with a new resolve.

"Certainly not." The Squire was plainly tickled. "I'll be only too glad of your company," he said, smiling genially.

"What's goin' to happen?" asked Mrs. Brown wonderingly. It was a new mood for Sally.

"I've just thought of something that I've got to do, and if the Squire'll take me along with him, it'll save me the trouble of saddling Joe. I'll be ready as soon as I get my cloak and hat," added she, disappearing in the house.

"Humph!" exclaimed Mrs. Brown, looking first after her daughter, then at the Squire. "This looks a little as if Sally was comin' to her senses at last."

"Just give her a little time, my dear ma-

dam, a little time," advised the Squire, smiling all over his fat, red face. "She'll come around all right by and by."

When the Squire and Sally drove off, she seemed lost in thought, and only answered in monosyllables to her companion's gallant attempts to be agreeable.

"What's the matter, Miss Sally?" he asked at last, piqued at her silence and indifference. "You act as if you might be in love," he added with a jocose look.

"Perhaps I am," acknowledged Sally turning the full battery of her pretty eyes upon her companion, until his pulse quickened as it had not done in years. He made an effort to speak, but the words failed him, and he only edged a little closer to her. For a wonder, she did not attempt to draw farther away. Was she really coming to her senses, as her mother had predicted?

"Do you remember the ride we took a few weeks ago, an' what you said to me?" she asked slowly, and with averted eyes.

"My dear, I have thought of little else, I do assure you," answered the Squire promptly,

suddenly finding speech, now that the dazzling battery was withdrawn.

"Well, I have thought a good deal of it myself of late," admitted Sally thoughtfully. "You profess to think a lot of me, but I expect you would refuse me the least little favor I might ask of you."

"Have you usually found me a hard-hearted old skinflint?" asked the Squire reproachfully.

"I've never put your kindness to a very great test, as yet. I thought I would begin with asking a little favor. You wouldn't refuse me that now, would you?"

The girl looked up smiling into the old man's face, and brought all the coquetry at her command into play.

"What is the favor?" asked the Squire shrewdly. "I never like to make a promise till I know what I'm promising."

"It's about the smallest possession you have, and the one least valuable to you."

"Well, what is it?"

"I want the hat that was picked up last night."

"Hum—m—m!" said the Squire medita-

tively. "In what manner does that hat concern you?"

"How it concerns me, does not concern you," retorted the girl promptly, with an arch glance.

"I don't know about that. Whatever concerns you, concerns me deeply, ducky!"

"Will you give me that hat?" persisted Sally.

"You fear it will be recognized?" ventured the Squire, and the girl winced under the words. "Well, it will be, before I've done with it. Of course I know it's that rascally Milt's hat," added the Squire shrewdly following up the clue the girl's manner and request had given him. "Haven't I seen him wear it, time and again? He had it on Court day," hazarded the speaker.

He noted the quick start his companion gave, and the look of fear that overspread her face and crept into her eyes. A sudden thought occurred to him. He was now in a better position to strike a bargain than he soon would be again.

"Now, suppose we put this matter on a strictly business footing," he said blandly.

"You want the hat and I want a wife. A fair exchange is no robbery."

"Don't say that!" exclaimed Sally, as though a sharp pain had suddenly entered her heart. "You are cruel!"

"Not in the least!" retorted the Squire. "It's you that's cruel, my dear! You have it in your power to make me the happiest of men, and incidentally keep a friend of yours out of the penitentiary. The whole matter rests with you."

The girl made no answer.

"The case stands thus," he persisted. "If my nephew is a lawbreaker, he deserves punishment. As I am president of this road, and a large stockholder, too, and he's doing his utmost to injure and destroy my property, I fail to see why I should show him any sympathy or favor. If I do, it will be solely on your account, not his. It's up to you whether Milt goes free or is punished."

"On just what conditions will you let him go free?" asked the girl quickly.

"On your promise to marry me."

"Oh, no!" she cried sharply, "not that!"

"Just that," insisted the Squire.

"And if I don't promise?" she asked in a low tone.

"It puts him in a place where you can't marry *him*," answered her companion promptly.

They drove on in silence until the edge of the town was reached.

"Here we are in town," the Squire said. "Shall I drive you to the sheriff's office with me?"

"Why are you going there?" asked his companion faintly.

"To give up this hat and swear out a warrant for its owner."

"Don't go!" pleaded Sally.

"It all rests with you as to whether I go or not," replied the Squire, his bold, un pitying eyes bent full upon her. "Milt can either be a free man or a felon—which shall it be?"

His eyes were fixed on hers in a concentrated gaze that seemed to fascinate her like the gaze of the wily serpent charms the ensnared bird. There was a confused buzzing in her head, a thousand small voices crying out, "Save Milt! Save Milt!" Her very power of will appeared to be ebbing away.

She saw only those hard, unyielding eyes, she heard only those inner voices crying out in her lover's behalf.

"I'll promise!" she faltered.

"When?" asked the Squire.

"I don't know, some of these days," she cried desperately, quite at her wits' end.

"That's too indefinite," insisted her companion. "S'pose you marry me a week from to-day?"

"Oh! no! no! not that soon! Give me a little more time," she pleaded. Something would surely come to her aid, if she gained time, she knew not what. A wild thought came into her head that perhaps she might yet run away with her lover. At all events, a delay would give him time to get away, whether she went or not.

"Two weeks, then," said the Squire slowly, "no longer."

"Well," she said faintly.

"Then you'll agree to marry me?"

"Yes," she answered recklessly.

"Two weeks from to-day?" he insisted.

"Yes," she answered again, her voice dropping almost to a whisper.

“All right! A bargain’s a bargain!” cried the Squire gleefully. “I’ll drive to the sheriff’s and tell him I lost the hat coming to town.”

“Give it to me!” asked the girl eagerly.

“Oh, no, my dear, not yet!” he answered, with a grimace, thrusting the bundle into an inner pocket of his great-coat. “I’ll just keep it next to my heart as a reminder of your promise. I’ll give it to you the morning of our wedding—as a token of love and affection,” added he with a chuckle of satisfaction.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A larger number than usual of possible customers and evident idlers were gathered at Billy West's country store on the Tuesday morning following Court Day, discussing the latest news.

The building was a small one-room frame, set in an angle made by the Willis Mill dirt lane and the New Pike, an ideal spot for an exchange of news, often bordering on gossip, and a convenient halfway resting place for those homeward bound, or else on their way to mill or town.

The proprietor's small stock of merchandise consisted of a heterogeneous collection, well suited to the needs of the locality, and ranging in variety from knitting needles, for the industrious matron at her fireside in the long winter evenings, to plow-shares, which her sturdy spouse might grasp when the soil demanded tilling in the spring. The varied

mixture of farming implements, groceries and clothing presented the appearance of having been deposited by some friendly passing whirlwind, for the owner was of far too sociable a nature to devote much time to "stock-keeping."

When an article was wanted, it generally had to be hunted for, unless it chanced to fall under the immediate range of vision of salesman or customer, while the crowded shelves and counters presented a bewildering array of tinware, glassware, patent medicines, clocks, trimmed hats, churns, gaudy neckwear, cheap clothing, mock jewelry, hair-oils and colored perfumes put up in glass bottles of seductive shapes, along with sundry articles great and small necessary to the needs and adornment of the people of the surrounding country.

It was not for lack of time that Billy allowed his stock to fall into this chaotic confusion, for he had much leisure on his hands, but, as I have before remarked, he was of a sociable nature, and usually spent his spare moments tilted back in a well-worn chair under a locust tree, if the weather was warm, indulging in neighborhood news, or else was engaged

in an exhaustive argument with his circle of solons as to how the government should be properly run.

If the season necessitated shelter, the usual coterie removed its sittings to the rear of the store, while during the rigorous winter months checker-playing afforded amusement, the board being of white pine, home-made, in alternate inked squares, and the checkers of black and white horn buttons supplied from the general stock.

On the morning I have mentioned, the air was yet cool from a frosty night, but the sun shone brightly, giving promise of speedy warmth, as the day advanced, and the little company chose the sunlight, being sheltered from the breeze by the front of the building, which faced the east.

Moses Hunn, an old stager, was descanting on the previous night's raid, having first borrowed a chew of long-green tobacco from his nearest neighbor. Moses was an inveterate chewer and had been relying on his friends for tobacco for the last twenty years.

"Yes, sir, they say them night-riders fit like wild cats."

"The guards didn't seem to be of much use," interposed Billy.

"They were pretty good at stopping bullets," Moses averred. "George Scott was shot three times in the leg an' twice in the body, I heard, an' four bullets grazed Joe Waters' skull."

"It must be bullet-proof," a voice insisted.

"The news is they've shot one of the riders, too. Leastways, blood was found on the pike, an' also on a hat one of the raiders dropped."

"Any of you wearin' new hats this mornin'?" asked Billy with an affected show of inspecting the head-gear of the crowd.

"I noticed Mose limpin' as he come up," a voice declared.

"Mose has been drawin' a pension for that same limp for a good many years past, so I don't think the guards can be charged with *that*," affirmed the storekeeper.

"Well, folks seem bent on havin' free roads," remarked the owner of the limp, as he sighted a knot-hole in a box near by, and, with the aim of a practiced chewer, adroitly sent a squirt of tobacco juice through it.

"Yes, an' I'm mightily afraid folks'll have

the worst of the bargain when they do get free roads," answered Billy, with a dubious shake of his head. "We won't have no such good roads as we've got now."

"Free roads'll make dead agin you, Billy," insisted Mose. "I'm not blamin' you for not favorin' 'em, for when folks can go to town, an' it not costin' 'em a cent, of course they're goin' so you'll lose many a good nickle that now drops in your till."

"How did the sheriff get wind of the raid?" asked Billy, changing an unpleasant subject.

"There must be a traitor."

"Lordy! I wouldn't care to be in his shoes if they ever find him."

"They'll find him all right enough."

"An' swing him, high as Haman."

"Sure!"

Along in the evening, soon after sundown, Billy West closed his store a full half-hour earlier than usual, and went to his boarding house, not a great distance away. A little later he might have been seen cantering down the pike on his chestnut filly, arrayed in his best suit, and wearing the reddest and most conspicuous necktie his stock afforded, while the

oily smoothness of his locks, and the odor of cheap cologne that hung persistently about him, announced the fact that he was on pleasure bent. To one acquainted with the state of his affections, it was an easy matter to guess that old man Saunders' was his probable destination.

This proved to be the case. Only the day before he had made an engagement with Sophronia to escort her to the New Pike gate, where she was to spend the night with her bosom friend, Sally, then go on to town the next day to do some shopping.

"I scarcely knew whether to come for you or not, after what happened last night," said the cavalier apologetically, when he reached Mr. Saunders'.

"I couldn't have blamed you, if you hadn't come," declared Sophronia frankly. "Is it safe to go?" she asked in sudden perplexity.

"I don't think you'll be disturbed tonight, after the failure the riders made last night. There's an old sayin' that lightnin' seldom strikes twice in the same place."

"But night-riders may," insisted Sophronia.

"I doubt it. Even if they should come,

they wouldn't want *you*. I really don't know of but one person that does," Billy added with an engagingly meaning look.

"I could name half a dozen, at least," retorted Sophronia, with a coquettish toss of her head, as her cavalier assisted her to mount.

Sally was most glad to see her visitors, for she earnestly hoped through Sophronia or her beau, at least, to learn something of Milton Derr—whether there were any rumors of his being hurt, or if either of them had seen him since yesterday. If not, it augered ill for the owner of the blood-stained hat which had been picked up in the road near the toll-house.

Finally, when her mother had gone out of the room, Sally hurriedly asked concerning the young man, and on learning that he had not been seen, she added that she had an important message for him, and asked Billy to tell him so within the next day or two, if possible.

That night in the privacy of her room, and under a promise of the deepest secrecy on Sophronia's part, Sally confided to her bosom friend the besetting fear that Milt had been wounded the night before.

“Try and see him for me. If he’s much hurt, let me know at once, but if he isn’t, tell him to leave here as quickly as possible, that he is strongly suspected of being a raider, and to go away before any arrests are made. Tell him to go at once.”

“How did you find out about the night-riders coming?” asked Sophronia.

“Through Squire Bixler. He’s got a spy that’s keeping him posted, and, I believe, this spy told him they would come last night.”

“How do you know there’s a spy?” asked her friend thoughtfully.

“I overheard him talking to the Squire one day when I was hid behind the stone wall that runs along the pike,” and straightway the girl related the whole occurrence to her friend. “It’s a hatched-up plot between the Squire and this man to get Milt into trouble,” she added in conclusion.

“Didn’t you see who the other man was?” asked Sophronia, beginning to connect this fact with some other circumstances in her mind, as links are added to a chain.

“No I was afraid to peep over the fence for fear they might see me.”

“Could it have been Jade Beddow?”

“No, I would have known his voice. It wasn't him, I'm certain of that. There was something about the man's voice that held a familiar sound, as if I had heard it before, but I can't place it.”

“Do you think you would recognize it if you should hear it again?”

“Yes, I'm sure I should.”

“Then I b'lieve I can run that spy to the ground,” said Sophronia decisively. “I believe I know the man an' the place where he's buried the money he got for tellin' on the raiders.”

“You don't say!” cried Sally, in open-eyed wonder.

“Yes,” answered her friend impulsively. “You go back with me to-morrow noon, when I come from town, an' I'll take you to the very spot, an' show you the very man.”

CHAPTER XIX.

Sally needed but little persuasion to consent to go home with her friend the next day, for in addition to Sophronia's promise to show her the supposed spy—the man who was in league with the Squire against his own nephew—she had also promised Sally to get word to Milton Derr to come to her house that night.

In case the young man was wounded and could not come, a trusted messenger, either Billy West or Sophronia herself, would see that he received Sally's message of warning.

Shortly after the two girls reached Mr. Saunders', they set out to pay a casual visit to Mrs. Judson's, ostensibly to learn how the rag carpet was progressing, but chiefly that Sally might see and hear the master of the place, and so decide if Steve Judson were really the man she had over-heard plotting with the Squire.

The edge of the ravine was reached, and

Sally was taken to the clump of cedar bushes from behind which her friend had covertly watched the secret burial of the jar containing the money.

"I wonder if the money's still there?" asked Sally in a low tone, as the tree was pointed out to her.

"I reckon so," answered Sophronia. "We might go look, only there's a possible danger of his coming upon us in the act. Hush! listen!" she cautioned, almost in the same breath, warningly pressing her companion's arm. "I hear somebody comin' up the ravine now. Don't move! I shouldn't be surprised if it wasn't Steve himself," she added in a whisper. He's comin' to see if his Judas money is safe!"

"Suppose he should spy us?" asked Sally in sudden trepidation.

"But he can't, these bushes will hide us securely. "Yes, it's him," she continued softly, as she cautiously parted the thick foliage and peered through; "he's comin' up the ravine, an' he's got his arm in a sling," she added a minute or two later as she withdrew her face

from the opening and signalled Sally to take her place.

Thus the two, alternating their keen watch, saw Steve reach the spot Sophronia had pointed out but the moment before, as the secret burial place of the treasure, and when he had reached it he immediately began to dig with one hand in the ground to unearth the glass jar.

He was some little time in doing this, hampered as he was with one arm in a sling, but at last the job was happily accomplished, and holding the jar between his knees, as Sophronia remembered also to have done, he unscrewed the lid with his free hand, and was soon deeply engaged in counting over the bills.

"Hello! Steve! what in the devil air you doin'?"

So intent was Judson in his pleasant and unusual occupation, and so interested the two spectators behind the cedar bushes, that the presence of a fourth party was quite unknown and unsuspected by all until a voice broke abruptly and startlingly on the quiet of the spot.

Steve gave a nervous start, as if he had re-

ceived an electric shock, and almost dropped the roll of bills that was spread out on his knee, while the quick move he made overturned the jar at his feet, and sent it rolling down the declivity, until it broke with a sharp crash on the rocks in the dry bed of the stream below.

Even the two girls came near betraying their presence by a cry of surprise at the unexpected intrusion. Close upon the words of the new-comer, and before Steve could gather up his money and hide it, the bushes on the opposite side of the ravine, right above Steve, were parted, and a man caught hold of a wild grape-vine hanging from a tree, jutting out over a ledge, and lightly swung himself down to within a few feet of where Steve sat. It was Jade Beddow.

“I went to your house huntin’ you, an’ your wife said you was down in this direction somewheres. How’s your arm gettin’?” the speaker suddenly caught sight of the bank bills on Steve’s knee, and broke into a low whistle of astonishment.

“Well,—great—Je—ru—sa—*lem!* where’d you git all that money?” he asked in frank surprise.

"I—I—I've been savin' it up for a rainy day," stammered Steve, nervously clutching the bills in his one hand, and crushing them into his broad palm, as if to hide them from Jade's keen eyes.

"How much 've you got there?" questioned his companion curiously.

"I don't know," answered Steve, hurriedly. "Not much, though—I was just countin' it when you come."

"It rather surprised you, didn't it?" asked Jade with a laugh.

"I should think so, acknowledged Steve. "You must have slipped down here mighty quiet."

"I did," admitted Jade. "I wanted to see what mischief you was up to. I didn't expect to catch you countin' money like some banker. What's this hole in the ground? Been buryin' it, you d—n miser?"

"It's safer than riskin' it in a bank, where you don't know who's going' to steal it."

"That's true," agreed Jade, stooping to pick up the scrap of paper which had been wrapped around the money, and had now dropped on the ground at Steve's side. It

was the identical scrap that had given Sophronia a clue as to how this money had come into Steve's possession, and when Jade picked it up, she waited anxiously to see if he would also make a similar discovery.

At first the intruder glanced at it carelessly and seemed about to crumple it up in his hand, then suddenly the whole expression of his face changed as his eyes fell on the printed matter. He read it hastily, and quickly turned on Steve in accusing anger.

"You scoundrel!" he cried, shaking the scrap of paper in his companion's face. "You got this money by sellin' out. You've betrayed us!"

"I haven't," Steve stoutly denied, although his face turned a sallow white as he spoke. "Who says I told on the band?"

"The proof's right here," affirmed Jade, again shaking the scrap of paper violently in Steve's face. "Here's the reward offered for information concernin' the riders. You're the traitor, and you alone!"

"I'm not!" persisted the accused, though his voice seemed less assertive than before, and held in its tone a quality of fear. "You've no

right to say so. I picked up that scrap of paper on the side of the road the other day."

"Yes, an' you also picked up the traitor's price along with it," sneered Jade Beddow. "I'll just save this for future use," he added, folding the paper and thrusting it in his pocket.

"What use?" asked Steve nervously.

"As evidence when you come to be tried for a spy," answered Jade calmly. "You haven't forgot this soon the penalty of betrayin' our band, have you?" he continued in a sterner voice, fixing his cold, piercing eyes full upon his companion.

"I never done it," muttered Steve, letting his eyes drop before the close scrutiny of Jade's gaze. "You cain't prove it."

A sudden thought came to the accuser as he stood looking at the culprit, who squirmed about uneasily under the penetrating eyes, and the tones that Jade next employed suggested rather an argument than a threat. His voice dropped into almost a persuasive key

"Now look here, Steve!" he said quietly, "I've caught you dead to rights, an' you cain't squirm our of it, so you needn't try. You sold

yourself for this money, don't deny it. You haven't saved up fifty cents in the last ten years, you know it, yet here you sit with a handful of crisp new bank-notes, tellin' me you earned 'em honestly. Ha! ha! that's a good one! The devil himself would laugh at a joke like that."

Jade Beddow folded his arms and looked down on the poor wretch at his feet, who gave no evidence of the humor of the situation.

"Now see here, Steve! you're in a tight fix, sure an' certain, but if you'll do just as I tell you, I'll promise to get you out."

"How?" asked Steve hoarsely, a growing sign of weakness manifest.

"By fixin' the deed on somebody else."

"Who?"

"Milt Derr."

Steve remained silent.

"Fix it on him, an' it saves you. You'll have to lie a bit, but you're good at that."

"I cain't put it on him—don't ask me!" cried Steve sharply. "He done me a good turn only the other night. I cain't lie on him now."

Jade gave a sudden, short, harsh laugh.

"Your conscience is gittin' mighty tender, all of a sudden," he said derisively.

"He stopped an' took me up behind him, after the rest of you had rid off. But for him I'd be in jail, right now."

"All right! you can do as you please about the matter," answered Jade coolly. "Only there's a much hotter plac'n the jail, they say, which you stand a mighty good chance of reachin', an' d—n quick, too. If you want to suffer a traitor's fate, you can do so, I'll see that you get your just desserts, an' quickly. I've showed you an easy way to escape. You can take it or leave it, just as you choose."

He turned as if to go, while Steve caught at him, as a drowning man at a straw.

"I'll testify ag'in him!" cried Steve despairingly.

"Very well! That's a bargain. We're goin' to have a meetin' to-night, at the old stone quarry near the bridge. Be on hand without fail, an' remember, that it's *him* or *you*," he added significantly.

CHAPTER XX.

The two girls clung closely to one another, after the manner of frightened womankind, striving vainly to abstract a grain of courage from a united fear—in the eyes of each a growing terror.

“We must find Milt and give him warning!” gasped Sally faintly to her companion, at last gaining courage and voice as the two men went slowly down the ravine, their voices dropping lower and lower until they grew but a dull, unintelligible murmur to the attentive ears bent keenly to catch their meaning.

“Yes,” agreed Sophronia, “without delay. Is Steve Judson the man you overheard talking to the Squire?”

“The very one. I recollected his voice the minute he begun to speak.”

“A pretty pair of villains they are,—him an’ Jade, too!”

Sally was already busied with her plans for

her sweetheart's safety. "I'll try to beat 'em at their very own game," she said determinedly. "The first thing to be done is to see Milt."

"Yes, we must find him at once," agreed her companion.

"Let's go straight home, get our horses, and ride over to Mr. Pepper's where Milt works. We must see Milt himself, not trust to a message."

"He can't be badly wounded, else they wouldn't expect to try him tonight," said Sally thoughtfully, hope springing anew in her breast.

"Neither Jade, nor Steve talked like he was hurt at all. Perhaps he isn't."

As the girls talked and planned, beset by many fears and uncertainties, they walked hurriedly across the fields, keeping pace with their nimble tongues, and when Mr. Saunders' house was reached, they quickly saddled the horses, and set out forthwith on their quest.

Disappointment awaited them at their journey's end, for when they came to Mr. Pepper's place, they learned that Milt had gone across country to attend to some business for his em-

ployer, and it was uncertain at what hour he would return. Sophronia and Sally looked at one another in dire perplexity.

"Want to leave a message?" asked Mr. Pepper.

"If Mr. Derr comes any hour before midnight, tell him to ride over to my house," said Sophronia. "I have a very important message for him." They turned away. "He evidently isn't wounded, an' likely he won't get back in time to be summoned by the raiders," she added hopefully, as she and her companion rode homeward. "Now, what's to be done in the meantime?"

"I'm goin' straight home," declared Sally, "an' keep a sharp look-out at the gate. Mr. Pepper said Milt might come back by way of town. I can trump up some excuse to mother about not staying all night with you, as I intended. If Milt comes back to Mr. Pepper's you'll get to see an' warn him, an' if he comes by the gate—I'll get to do it. That's all we can do."

"Suppose we both fail?"

"Then I'll go to the old quarry tonight," answered Sally.

"No!" cried her companion aghast.

"Indeed, I will," insisted Sally, coolly, "I'll not only go, but I'll see that Milt's not convicted on the false words of those two lying villains."

"You're really not in earnest, Sally Brown!" cried Sophronia, half in astonishment, half in admiration at the daring announcement.

"But I am, I mean every word of it." The girl had inherited from her forbears a touch of that intrepid spirit that prevailed amid the hills.

"I wouldn't go for worlds!" cried Sophronia shuddering.

"I guess you would, if it was *your* sweetheart that was in danger."

"I don't believe I could go, even then," admitted Sophronia. "They'll kill you!" she declared in growing terror.

"Not when I tell them I sent a warning to the band by Milt, and point out the very man that did betray them."

"But remember, the leader of the night-raiders is Jade Beddow. He will surely do you an' Milt all the injury he can. Oh, Sally,



"YOU'RE REALLY NOT IN EARNEST, SALLY BROWN!"

don't think of running such a risk! Let's find Billy West an' ask him to go."

"It wouldn't be as safe as for me to go," demurred Sally. "I'm not afraid. They're not goin' to hurt me. Let me have your father's pistol when we get back. I'll take it along, an' use it, too, if there's need."

As the two girls excitedly discussed the situation, Sally decided that she would not go back home as she had first intended. There were too many chances of missing her sweetheart by so doing. Besides, if the two girls separated, Sally would not know whether her friend had seen Milt or not. This was a point they had both overlooked.

It was agreed, then, that the safer plan would be for Sally to remain at Mr. Saunders' until late bedtime, then, if Milt had not come, she would manage, with Sophronia's help, to slip quietly out of the house, saddle Joe and go direct to the old abandoned quarry where the farce of a trial would be held.

When bedtime came, and no sign of Derr, the two girls succeeded in slipping out of the house without detection, when they quickly saddled the patient Joe, and later parted in the

darkness, Sophronia still urging her companion to think once again before starting forth on so perilous a journey.

Unshaken by her friend's forebodings, the toll-taker set out courageously into the lonely night, bent on accomplishing her sweetheart's release. She was familiar with the location of the dirt lane, at which she must turn off in order to reach the quarry, yet, in the haste of her mission and the perturbation of mind under which she was laboring, she turned into the wrong lane, and had gone some distance before discovering her mistake. By the time she had retraced her way many valuable moments were lost.

The night was wearing on. In the hilly and sparsely settled region through which she rode, it seemed already past midnight, and her road was solitary and forbidding. Even the rocks, and trees and clumps of bushes along the way took on grotesque and often threatening shapes to her excited imagination as she passed them in the semi-darkness.

At times, these dimly defined forms became terrifying monsters of the night, guarding the road along which she passed, like fabulous

creatures of fairy-land protecting the approach to some magic domain. Vague, silent, mysterious, they loomed up on either hand—gigantic, somber sentinels.

The chill of the night air, which lay heavily in the shadowy ravines, between the uplifting hills, penetrated her clothing and seemed to reach with its benumbing breath her very heart, yet she pressed on, undaunted.

She paused a brief moment at a small brook that crossed the road on the way to the quarry, and as she listened there came the dull hoof-tread of approaching horses—a cavalcade, it seemed, as she hearkened in sudden nervous terror, for the raiders were evidently close at hand.

Were they coming from, or going to the quarry?

For the moment she could not decide whether the sound was behind or in front of her. The reverberant hills seemed to be playing pranks with the echoes, and as she sat motionless on her horse and listened, a feeling of faintness came over her at the possibility of the sound's direction.

What if she were too late, and the raiders,

returning from the old quarry, had already wreaked their vengeance on the hapless victim? The thought appalled her in its cruel suggestion, and her heart grew heavy with forebodings; then close upon her terror and despair the glad fact rushed to her relief that the horsemen were behind, not in front of her, and there was yet time in which to state her lover's case.

The raiders' rendezvous lay beyond, some little distance up the road, as she remembered its location in bygone days. There was scarcely time to reach it before the hurrying horses. Perhaps it would be the better plan to conceal herself somewhere amid the shadows along the road until the cavalcade had passed, then quickly follow.

She recalled to mind that a little further down the brook was a thicket of water willows, now a splotch of blackness in the vague landscape, and, after a moment's hesitation, she turned her horse's head in this direction.

Scarcely had the obscurity of the spot enfolded her, when the raiders came sweeping by—an ominous shadowy band, crossing the shallow stream at the place she had but re-

cently quitted, then galloping rapidly along the road which rose sharply toward the hill where lay the place of meeting.

The quarry was hollowed out of the far side of the hill, around whose base the stream wound lazily, and to go by way of the winding road was a more circuitous route, while to climb the hill shortened the distance greatly.

The girl decided on this latter route—she would climb the hill on foot. It would take less time, and time was now most precious. Possibly the raiders would place a sentry at the entrance of the quarry, so that she might not be able to gain access, even if she should go around by the road as she had at first intended.

Acting on this sudden decision, she quietly slipped from the saddle to the ground, hurriedly tied the bridle to a bending willow, and, after giving Joe a friendly, reassuring pat, started to climb the hill.

The way was rough and unfamiliar, and in the darkness, made yet more dense by clumps of cedar trees and bushes that thickly clothed the hillside, she was often compelled to grope her way along to keep from stumbling over the knotted roots of the trees that crept out from

between crevices in the rocks, twisting over the ground like monster, hideous serpents, guarding the approach to the rendezvous.

The ascent was slow and tedious. Finally the summit was reached, and choosing her bearings from its commanding height, she began to descend the opposite side toward the quarry, the long accumulation of fallen cedar spines deadening the sound of her light footstep until she was able to reach the very edge of the excavated portion of the hill without detection, guided thither by a dim light below the surface that faintly defined its rugged outline.

Spent of breath, she crouched down in the shadows behind a clump of dwarfed cedar bushes fringing the ragged edge of broken rock, and peered cautiously into the quarry.

A scant fire had been hastily kindled close against the rocky wall, and in a semi-circle around it the raiders were now gathered. The wide-brimmed, slouch hats they wore partly concealed the faces beneath, and the girl's eager eyes traveled anxiously from one dark form to another.

Finally they rested on the object sought.

Standing almost beneath the spot where she crouched in hiding was the accused, his head boldly erect, his bearing defiant, as if he feared no man, and cared naught for the two who had come to bear false witness against him, and to swear away his life.

CHAPTER XXI.

The raiders were gathered in a small alcove of the quarry, sheltered on three sides by walls of rough-faced limestone, jagged and broken as the quarrymen had left them years before, and this secluded spot made a counsel chamber little liable to intrusion, and well-suited to its present use.

Milton Derr was standing nearest the fire in an angle made by the walls, while others of the band were ranged in a semi-circle across the wider space opening into the larger part of the quarry, the captain standing at the end of the line furthest from the prisoner.

Above them the girl crouched in hiding, screened by the overhanging darkness and the fringe of cedar bushes along the edge, yet from her vantage ground she could clearly see what was taking place below, and easily overhear all that was said.

Steve Judson was called to testify. She

heard him coolly bear witness to having seen the accused stop at the New Pike Gate, and hold earnest converse with "that Brown gal" as he designated Sally. Steve claimed to have come up in the darkness and recognized the two at the gate as he passed through.

He wove quite a plausible story out of whole cloth, saying that on recognizing Milt, and knowing his fondness for the girl at the toll-house, he, Steve, at once suspected that the plans of the raiders for that night were being discussed.

To satisfy himself on this point, after riding along the road a little distance, he dismounted, climbed the stone wall and crept back quietly, keeping in the shadow of it, until he was near enough to hear a part of the conversation that took place at the gate, and then he overheard the prisoner tell of the raid that was to be made a few hours later.

At the conclusion of Steve's story, the captain called attention to the fact that on this same night, before the hour of attack, Milton Derr had been boasting among his comrades at the place of rendezvous that the pole of the New Pike Gate would not be cut down on that

night. He, alone of all the raiders, seemed to know that the plans for an attack were known, and the gate would be under guard. Twice had the captain asked, in the presence of the members of the band, to be given the name of Milt's informant, and twice had Milt refused to answer.

More than once during Steve's false testimony the listening girl, with eyes blazing forth something of the fierce indignation she felt, nervously sought the pistol at her belt, in a stern resolve to use it on the accomplished liar, who was thus deliberately swearing her lover's life away.

She remembered, however, that this man was but the frightened tool of another. At heart, the witness did not wish to do Milt an injury. Steve had admitted as much that afternoon in the ravine, while talking to the captain. Jade Beddow was really the one who was at the bottom of this piece of villainy. His hatred of Milt, coupled with a desire to be revenged on the girl who had scorned him, was prompting Jade to this present step.

"This fellow is a liar and an ingrate!" cried Milt fearlessly at the conclusion of Steve's tes-

timony. "The story just told is false in every particular."

"Yet the man who declares these charges false is the only one amongst us who knew that the gate would be guarded," said the captain, turning to his men.

"I gave you all warning of the fact," answered Milt.

"The warning was likely given more to shield yourself than us," retorted the leader with a sneer. "If you went, you would be as liable to injury as the rest of us; if you prevented us from goin' it would serve your purpose; if you sneaked out of the affair, it would fasten the guilt of a traitor on you. This is the sum an' substance of it all."

The captain turned once more to his men. "If it was known that the gate was to be attacked on this night, it is proof we have a traitor in our midst. If this man is the only one who knew the gate would be guarded, it stands to reason he is the only one who told it was to be attacked. Who else but the prisoner had an interest in protecting the New Pike Gate? The case is as plain as day."

"I was told under a pledge of secrecy the

gate would be guarded. I gave you the benefit of that warning!" protested Derr.

"If there had been no traitor there would be no need of any warning," answered the captain, then his words took on a greater force of meaning—

"Brothers! comrades! there is a traitor in our midst. The repulse we met with the other night proves beyond a doubt that our most secret plans are made known to our enemies. Who, then, is this traitor? Cain't you pick him out? I know of only one person among us who would like to see the New Pike Gate still stand after all others had gone down. I think you also know who this man is, for the testimony just now given has made it clear.

"No one but Milt Derr seemed to know the gate would be guarded the other night, no one but the girl at the gate knew it was to be attacked. It was to the interest of each that the other should know the plans of raider and officer,—a touching and mutual exchange of confidence," the speaker suggested sneeringly.

"If the prisoner was warned, as he says he was, who but the girl at the gate could have warned him? If this was the case, how did

she know the gate was to be raided unless told by her sweetheart? Who else but the man in love with the toll-taker would run the risk of betraying his comrades, knowing full well the penalty of the act?"

Then the captain broke into a fierce tirade as he shook his hand menacingly at the prisoner. Jade possessed a certain rude power of oratory that could at times be made strongly effective on his followers—the peculiar magnetism of a fierce, headstrong nature that overpowered and controlled weaker ones.

"There stands the traitor before you! Your liberty and lives are threatened by a constant danger so long as it lies in this man's power to betray you. He has already used that power—he will use it again if he can. As you each and every one know, there never was, and never can be but one sort of a safe traitor, an' that is—a *dead one*. It is your liberty, or his—which shall it be? The hour to decide is at hand. There is no time for delay. Choose!"

When the captain had ceased speaking, a deep silence fell upon the group of waiting men, and so deep did it seem in the stillness of the night and the great loneliness of the spot,

that the listener, crouched in the shadows above, was almost won to the belief that the loud beatings of her heart, or her stifled breathing, would be heard by those gathered below, and her hiding-place revealed.

The captain waited expectantly, looking closely from one face to another, noting keenly and exultantly the dawning of distrust and fear that slowly overspread each countenance, as troubled waters communicate their motion until the whole silent pool is disturbed; then he spoke again, slowly, deliberately:

“The case is in your hands, comrades! We have a common interest in the protection of our liberty an’ ourselves. Shall it be freedom for him, or imprisonment for us? What shall be done?”

“Draw for the red bean!” a voice called out sharply and discordantly. It was Steve Judson who spoke.

“Yes! yes! the red bean!” a chorus of voices clamored, quickly seizing the suggestion as a solution of the problem confronting them. A look of approval came to the captain’s face, while his eyes flashed forth a malignant triumph.

"You shall draw for it," he answers briefly, taking from his pocket a small leathern pouch, which he shook vigorously, then untied and opened.

"Draw!" he commanded, holding out the pouch to the man nearest him. The raider hesitated a moment, then put his thumb and forefinger into the pouch and drew forth a bean, which he concealed within the palm of his hand without a glance at it.

Stepping aside, the first man gave way to another member of the band, and thus in succession the drawing continued until each raider, save the prisoner, had drawn from out the leathern pouch a bean, and held it within the hollow of his hand, while neither he nor his neighbor knew whether it was a bean of white, or the fatal one of red that had been drawn.

Steve was the last to draw. As he stepped forward, no one saw the captain slightly relax the fingers of the hand holding the pouch, nor suspected that the small object they had retained until this moment was covertly released and dropped to the bottom of the pouch as it was held out to Steve.

“Hands up! your oath!”

Each man obeyed, the last man to draw holding his left hand aloft as his right was in a sling. Thus, with hand upraised, every man swore to a strict performance of his duty, taking upon himself the oath that if he held the red bean he would visit upon the traitor wherever found, whoever he might be, the punishment that a traitor's act justly merited, or that having failed in his oath, the same judgment he had withheld might be visited on himself who had foresworn his oath.

Then each man came singly before the captain, and opened the palm of the hand that both might know who held the fatal red bean.

The fire had been replenished and stirred into renewed brightness while the drawing was taking place, and as Steve came forward and opened his palm, a bright flame suddenly shot up from the fire, a slender, wavering torch, shedding a momentary light on the group, and on the two standing together.

As the captain and Steve looked downward into the latter's outstretched palm, each saw a round, red object lying there like a great drop of blood.



A TYPICAL NIGHT RIDER.

CHAPTER XXII.

All this while the girl crouched close to earth, immovable, breathless, keenly alert amid the gruesome shadows hovering along the broken line of rock. There was a strange and terrible fascination in the scene enacted below her—a fascination she would fain shake off, yet felt powerless to overcome, like the fatal spell a serpent weaves when it charms a victim.

To her perturbed brain it seemed an oppressive dream, an unhappy nightmare, born of the surrounding gloom, and still she understood that it was most real, that the little drama, with its environment of night and secrecy and threatened crime, was one of momentous import to her and to her lover.

Was it now time for her to act, to take her part in it, or must she wait a little longer for her cue? Should she reveal her presence and appeal to the members of this lawless band,

denouncing its unscrupulous leader, and his traitorous ally? Would the raiders believe her story, and listen to a petition for her sweetheart's liberty, after having heard Steve Judson's strong testimony, strengthened by the captain's philippic?

True, she might conduct them to the very spot wherein the real traitor had concealed his ill-gotten gains, and where she had overheard him plotting with the captain against the prisoner, but the money was no longer there, and with Steve and the captain both against her, she could hope to accomplish little. Neither would hesitate to go to any length to prove her statements false; besides, there was no time to prove words true—it was a moment for action, not for words. Whatever was done must be done this very night—at once.

On one point her mind was fully set—harm should not befall the innocent victim of this foul conspiracy, while she could raise a voice or hand to prevent it. A plan of succor must be speedily decided upon. Persuasion seemed the only feasible one in her present strait. Might she not state the whole case calmly and dispassionately to them? Surely they would

not be deaf to reason or entreaty. When they were brought to realize the fact that it was through her the band had been warned of the gate being under guard the night of the attack, their gratitude alone should insure her both justice and mercy for the one whose cause she pleaded.

Among these lawless men there were two who stood in the way of Milt's liberty, the others were negative save as their own personal safety was concerned, and of these two active enemies, the captain was by far the most dangerous. With his evil influence removed, Steve would no longer be an enemy to the prisoner. Yet how could that influence be taken away in time to be of benefit to Milt? A sudden thought came to the girl that startled and terrified her with its meaning.

There was a solution to the problem. The means for removing this baneful influence was close at hand—within her very grasp. But could she do this deed? Had she the courage to attempt it? She resolutely nerved herself to the effort.

Slowly drawing the pistol from her belt, and noiselessly sinking on one knee, that she

might the better rest her arm and take a more accurate aim, the girl carefully sighted the captain's dark form, while her finger trembled nervously on the hammer of the weapon.

Just a slight pressure—the mere movement of a finger—and a soul would be sent quickly into eternity. Yet what an evil soul it was and to what lasting punishment! As she thought of it, in all its terrible import, her own soul turned faint, and her fingers grew limp and purposeless. Oh! it was a fearful thing to do, to shoot one down like a wild beast, and far worse to hurry one so deeply charged with wickedness into eternity, without a moment's time in which to cry out for forgiveness for his evil life.

Were she to commit this deed, would not its terror abide with her for all time—a hideous ever-present spectre, that would follow her through life? She recalled to mind a sermon she had once heard in Alder Creek glen, in which had been pictured in powerful intensity the wrong of taking human life, and the murderer's unrest and troubled conscience forever after. Must she be a taker of human life?

Then would her own soul be stained with

crime, her own hand prove the fatal instrument for sending a lost soul to a judgment in which there could be no hope, from which there was no appeal. The word of God himself was against such an act, for in letters of flame the sentence seemed to flash into her brain—"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay."

No! no! she must not blot her soul with this awful act, there was surely some other means to employ, some method less dreadful by which she could save the one in peril. She would wait a little longer, hoping without hope as it were.

Her arm rested idly on her knee, her finger fell away from the trigger she had come so near to pressing, while a half exultant joy leaped in her soul that she had not obeyed the first savage impulse to which her troubled mind gave birth. Not yet had she usurped God's prerogative.

"Am I to be shot down like a dog?" cried the prisoner sharply.

"A traitor may meet his death by rope, bullet, or knife. He deserves to suffer by each separate means," said the leader with a signifi-

cant glance rather at Steve than at the prisoner.

"See that the prisoner is safely bound." At his command Steve stepped forward and closely examined the cords with which Milt's ankles and wrists were bound. His hands were tied behind him, and with his feet in the shadow the watcher on the rocky ledge above had not noticed until this moment how utterly helpless he was.

Once more she grasped the pistol with a determined grip, and breathlessly looked down on the group beneath her. A crisis was surely approaching.

The captain gave a brief command.

Two of his henchmen—men as unscrupulous and callous as he—began to remove some flat stones that were laid on a pile of cedar logs near the rocky sides of the quarry just beyond the prisoner. This spot was partly in the shadow, and Sally had not noticed it until her attention was directed thither.

She leaned forward cautiously, and looked down in wonder and perplexity while the stones were lifted off, then two of the logs were shifted to one side, while a dark, irregular

opening was revealed in the rock floor, as if the mouth of a small cave had been uncovered.

Indeed, such was the case, for on blasting away the rock, some years before, this aperture had been discovered, and as it was a dangerous opening, descending far downward into the very heart of the hill, it had been closed by means of the cedar logs, and the large flat stones laid on top of them.

As the logs were lifted to one side, a member of the band standing near, dropped a loose stone into the opening, while the girl anxiously listening, quickly caught her breath as she heard the object falling down and down, striking against the uneven sides of the pit in its descent until it seemed to have penetrated the very bowels of the earth.

The man who had dropped the stone shuddered and turned away.

"The devil take me! if I believe that hole has any bottom to it," he said in an awed voice, and quickly the thought flashed into Sally's brain as to the purpose for which the pit had been uncovered, and why the abandoned quarry had been selected for a meeting-place this night.

Was a human body to be sacrificed to the fearsome depths of that dark cavern? The thought appalled her more than all else that had gone before, and she grew faint with terror. Even the prisoner seemed to look in speechless horror toward the black opening as if he, also, guessed the peril that threatened him.

The very members of the secret conclave gazed with awe-stricken faces on the yawning, ominous hole, as though they were beginning to weaken at so dire a punishment. Even the act of a traitor seemed scarcely to merit a fate this terrible. Only the captain and his ally appeared unmoved and unrelenting. On the former's face a look of fiendish triumph slowly settled, as he gazed steadfastly into the awesome blackness of the cave-like opening—a hard, evil face it was, that held neither pity nor regret.

“To your horses, boys!” The leader spoke quickly, commandingly, for his keen eyes saw signs of weakening among his followers. “Remember your oath! Remember your safety!” he called out warningly.

“And remember the blood of an innocent

man is on your hands!" cried the doomed man despairingly. "I sought to save your lives—you are wrongfully taking mine!"

"He lies!" thundered the captain. "He sold himself to the officers of the law, an' but for a premature shot we might all now be dead, or in prison. They did not fire on him, bear in mind, but waited until he had passed on, an' given the signal that all was safe, an' we come near ridin' into the trap that was laid for us. He is a traitor to us, an' to our cause, an' deserves a traitor's death!"

The accused began again to speak, but the captain cut short his words, fearful of their effect on the hearers.

"Gag the prisoner!" he commanded, and despite Milt's protests, the order was speedily carried out, and soon the prisoner was lying bound and gagged, close to the dark opening piercing the very earth. "To your horses!" the leader cried savagely, "and to hell with all traitors."

For a moment the members of the little band appeared to hesitate, moved by conflicting impulses, but the instinct of self-preservation is strongly implanted in the human breast, and

will crowd out many noble qualities. The vacillation was but momentary; slowly and silently the men began to move away, each one eyeing his neighbor askance, as if to discover who held the fatal red bean within his keeping.

Thus they melted into the night, stealing like dissolving shadows down to the thicket below where the horses were hitched.

Soon after the tread of many horses' feet broke into the hush of the lonely scene. Some seemed going in one direction, some in another, and on the sleeping hills a darkness lay heavily—a darkness such as hides many a ghastly crime.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The cheering light of hope began to break upon the crouching figure on the ragged edge of rock above the quarry, as she watched the men disappear, one by one, into the darkness on their way to their horses.

It suddenly dawned upon her that the hapless prisoner was to be left, bound and gagged, in this lonely spot until the return of that member of the band who had drawn the red bean. Some subtle intuition warned the alert onlooker that this one was either the Captain or Steve. Possibly both might return on the murderous mission, and, but for her, only the few faint pitying stars of heaven would be witnesses of a dastardly crime, darker than the night itself.

Supremely glad the girl felt at this moment that she had not been unduly hasty in her actions, for, by waiting, she would now have but one, or two at furthest, to overcome in order that Milt Derr might go free.

Swift upon the thought came another—that by acting quickly she might be able to liberate the hapless prisoner before even these two should return.

If she were but swift enough in her movements to reach the quarry and give her sweetheart the pistol she carried, then would it bode evil to the one who should come to wreak the oath of vengeance against the victim.

She waited impatiently yet a little longer until the spot should be utterly deserted, and when her ears at last caught the sound of retreating hoofs descending the rocky hill, she tightly grasped one of the cedar bushes and leaning over the edge of the jutting rocks called softly:

“Milt! Milt! I’m here. I’ll soon set you free. Don’t lose heart!”

She understood that he could make no response, that the cruel gag prevented it, but as she listened intently, after her low-uttered words of encouragement, she heard him raise his fettered feet and strike them on the rock floor, one—twice—as if in response to her words of cheer.

The light from the smouldering fire had

grown too dim for her to see the movement, or note the look of bewilderment and incredulous surprise that swept over the prisoner's face, as he turned his body slightly, and looked up in the direction from which the voice had seemed to come.

"I'm on the ledge of rock above the quarry," Sally continued, hurriedly. "It's too steep to climb down, but I'll go around, and come to you."

Quick upon her words, she sprang to her feet, eager to skirt the edge of the quarry, the light of love, which is stronger than sun or moon, guiding her steps through the night's labyrinth. Had not her thoughts been entirely absorbed by the great eagerness in her heart to reach her lover and set him free before the return of his enemies, she would have marveled at the ease and speed with which she moved in making her way down the rugged hill toward its entrance.

And still it seemed an interminable journey, each step haunted by the fear that the one on whom the fatal choice of executioner had fallen might return and wreak his vengeful

mission before she could reach the spot by the circuitous route she had to take.

This fear, while it startled her, also urged her footsteps to greater haste, and at times she almost ran. Suddenly her feet became entangled in one of the many creeping wild vines that spread a tangled network in her path, and unable to recover her poise, she fell headlong to the ground, striking heavily.

In a wilted heap she lay there for some minutes, stunned by the fall, seemingly not caring to move; then, on slowly regaining her scattered wits, and recalling the haste and importance of her mission, she made an effort to regain her feet.

Along with the effort a sharp pain darted through her ankle—so sharp and severe that she came near crying out, and after making a step or two forward, she sank, with a little moan, down on the ground again, clasping her spent ankle with both hands.

A swarm of terrifying thoughts came crowding swiftly upon her. Had she broken it? If so, what should she do in her utter helplessness? A most unenviable situation it was—alone and crippled, far from human aid, a soli-

tary object for pity, lying helpless amid those silent, gloomy hills, while the only person on whom she might have called in her dire extremity, was even more helpless than she, and urgently needed her assistance even now to avert the terrible fate that was drawing very near to him.

As she sat thus in her abject misery, aloof from succor or sympathy, rubbing her sprained ankle aimlessly the while, and bemoaning by turns her misfortune and suffering, and the cruel situation of the bound and helpless prisoner within the stone quarry, she finally attempted to move her foot gently to and fro, and found to her surprise that the accident was only a sudden wrench, painful but not lasting. Hope once more buoyed her up, yet all this delay was a waste of precious time she could ill afford to lose.

After a little prudent waiting she once more gained her feet and carefully took a step or two forward, and though the effort cost her some agony, it was not so intense as before, and seemed gradually wearing away, so with renewed determination she struggled bravely on, at times compelled to sit down on the ground

and tightly clasp her ankle with both hands to deaden the pain.

As she sat thus, rocking to and fro in her suffering, her ear caught the sound of a horse coming up the hill in the direction of the quarry. Up she again started, in a fresh frenzy of terror, her physical pain giving way to the greater mental agony that beset her. Forgetful of her recent accident, only remembering that the thing she had most dreaded might speedily come to pass, despite her efforts to prevent it, she struggled on.

The pain seemed suddenly to go as quickly as it had come, and she pushed resolutely onward, unmindful of her weak ankle or of the darkness, praying fervently the while that strength might remain to her, and enable her to reach the quarry before the horseman did.

The sound of the hoofbeats ceased. It was probable the rider had dismounted and was making his way on foot to where his victim lay. She was tempted to scream out—to rend the very silence with frantic cries for help, yet to what purpose? It might only serve to hasten the dastardly work. Oh, that she had waited

at the edge of the quarry, and sought to defend her loved from that secure vantage ground!

She gasped a prayer for aid, for strength, and redoubled her speed. At last the quarry's entrance was reached, and she had to pause a brief moment to catch her spent breath. Then, in an agony of suspense, she peered anxiously forward into the darkness and silence of the place.

From out the gloom she heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Her heart stood still. Was she, indeed, too late? Had the cruel messenger already accomplished his bloody mission, and was he now returning from the scene of his dark crime?

As these questions flew to her troubled brain, there came the perplexing knowledge that the sounds she heard were those of two men coming toward her, not one, and she felt, rather than saw, the presence of two dark forms rapidly approaching. Had Jade Beddow come back with Steve? They must both have ridden one horse.

She would soon be discovered. Her life would surely pay the penalty of her presence there. But at least Milt's death should be

avenged. She cared for naught else that might happen. She drew the pistol from its holder and leveled it at the two shadowy forms looming up before her.

Suddenly from out the darkness and gloom there came the sound of a voice, low and guarded, yet the voice she most cared to hear in all the world—the voice of Milton Derr. It seemed as if the very dead had spoken.

“Did you come back alone?” the voice asked of the companion shadow.

“Yes, but the Captain may also soon return. Why do you ask?”

“As I lay in yonder place, another voice than yours spoke to me out of the gloom, and bade me have courage.”

“You must have dreamed it,” insisted Steve, for it was he. “We two must be the only livin’ bein’s on this hill, unless some other member of the band came back to set you free, as I have done. Whose voice was it?”

“A woman’s.”

“Then I know you dreamed it. What woman would be in this lonely spot at such an hour of the night? But let’s not waste time in idle talk. You must get away from here, an’

that quickly. Put as many miles as you can between this place an' daybreak. They turned your horse loose, but perhaps it would be better for you to make your way on foot. You must not be seen in this part of the country again, for if the Captain finds out I have not kept my oath, I will have to suffer in your place."

"How can I get away, where can I go?" Milt anxiously asked.

"Go up into the mountains—out West, anywhere except near this spot," urged his companion. "Here's a little money to take along with you."

The two men were now close upon Sally, as she crouched in a dark angle of the rocky wall, and, although they spoke in low tones, she heard each word. So near were they, in fact, she could have touched them by stretching forth her hand.

"You have done me a good turn, Steve. I shall never forget it!" cried Milton Derr, gratefully.

"You don't owe me any favors," answered Steve, hastily, almost roughly. "The Captain had me in a tight fix, an' I had to say what I

did, an' do what he told me to do, but I never meant to harm you. I haven't forgot the other night. Good-by, Milt, take good care of yourself!"



CHAPTER XXIV.

After Steve Judson had gone rapidly down the hill to where his horse was hitched and his companion was about to follow, Sally quickly put forth a detaining hand, and lightly touched him. "Milt!" she whispered.

Twice before, on this same night, he had heard that familiar voice calling to him through the darkness, and there seemed something strange and uncanny in its mysterious repetition. Was it a trick of his lively imagination, or could there be something at fault with his brain? Yet the touch reassured him. The presence must be something tangible.

"Sally!" he breathed in a low tone, filled with wonder.

"Yes, I'm here," she hastened to reply, at the same moment emerging from the dark angle of the wall and stepping to his side, while he stood rooted to the path in utter amazement at her presence.

"Sally," he again said, taking her into his arms and softly kissing her lips. "Is it really you? What brought you to this lonely spot?"

"The fear that harm might come to you," she answered, simply.

"But how did you know I was here? How came you to find this secret place?" he asked, still sorely puzzled.

"I'll tell you as you go back," she answered hurriedly. "There's no time now. It's a long story. Let's leave this place as quickly as possible. It is a dangerous spot, and each moment we tarry increases the danger."

"But how in the world did you get here?" he persisted, as they started down the hill.

"I rode old Joe. He's hidden in the willow thicket down by the branch. He will carry double," she continued. "Let's go to where he's hitched, an' I'll take you as far as the New Pike Gate, then you can ride him to the station, and take the first early train. Just turn Joe loose. He'll find his way back home."

"Then it was you who called to me as I lay in the quarry, gagged and bound," said Milton, as they hurried onward through the darkness, Sally directing the way to the clump of

willows, and as they went along she told him something of what transpired during the eventful day.

"I was half tempted to believe I had heard a spirit voice," continued her companion, tenderly, speaking of his own unhappy experiences at the quarry. "It seemed as if you had really spoken, yet, as I lay and listened, I could not imagine how you could be so near me at that hour and place. It must be a dream, I reasoned, a blessed dream, born of the darkness to cheer and comfort me in my last moments on earth, for such I believed them to be. You cannot understand what a solace it was to me, even to feel that your spirit was near me."

"I did not intend that harm should come to you if I could prevent it," said the girl, earnestly. "If worse had come to worst, I had a bullet for Jade Beddow's heart, and one for Steve's, too," she added, with emphasis.

"Then you heard them go through the farce of trying me?"

"Every word of it. I was looking down into the quarry all the while. Once I drew a bead on that villain, Jade Beddow, but something prompted me to wait yet a little longer. How

glad I am that I did so. For you are now free, and, thank heaven! there's no bloodstain upon my hands."

Soon Joe was gratefully turning his head toward home, though his burden was a double one.

"And so Steve is the real traitor?" said Milt, as Sally gave an account of the interview she had overheard between the Captain and Steve in the ravine near the latter's home.

"Yes, Jade Beddow worked on Steve's fears in order to make him lay the deed at your door."

"It seems that Steve is not altogether bad. He still has a spark of gratitude in his bosom, but was forced to make charges against me in order to shield himself."

"Jade Beddow is at the bottom of it all," insisted Sally, "either he or your uncle. They both want you out of the way, and will stop at nothing to carry out their plans. I don't know which is the greater villain of the two."

"Perhaps I'd better stay around here a day or two longer, and settle some old scores before I go," said Milt, thoughtfully.

"No! no!" the girl interposed, hastily. "You

must leave here to-night. There are far too many dangers threatening you here, besides, your staying would bring speedy vengeance on Steve Judson. Both his safety and yours depends on your getting away as quickly and secretly as possible. No one must see you go, no one must suspect you have gone."

"And if I go far away?" questioned Milton, with a deep touch of tenderness creeping into his voice, "if I find a home elsewhere, and can get steady employment, will you come to me when I shall send for you?"

"Yes," was the exultant answer that quickly arose to her lips, but suddenly she remembered her promise to the Squire, and this bitter recollection brought with it a sickening sense of the binding obligation she was under for the sake of another's safety, and the unhappy knowledge stifled the one small word that was trembling for eager utterance on her very lips.

"Will you come, sweetheart?" persisted the young man, in tones of persuasive tenderness, mistaking her silence for maidenly reserve, "or shall I come back for you when the time is at hand to claim you for my own?"

"No! no! Milt, you must not think of com-

ing back, when once you are safely away!" she cried impetuously.

"Then you will come to me?"

"Wait until you see what the future has in store," she answered evasively.

"There's only one thing I care for it to have in store for me, and that is *you*. You will come to me?" he persisted.

"If nothing prevents, I will come," she stammered. "But one cannot always tell what lies before."

"What is there to prevent?" he demanded, sharply, a ring of jealousy creeping into his tones. "What could there be?"

"A hundred things might arise that we know nothing of now," she answered hurriedly, understanding full well that she stood on most dangerous ground, that to confess to her lover the one thing that stood in the way of her going, would be to shatter all the plans she had laid for his own safety.

She knew that rather than have her keep faith with the Squire, the nephew would deliberately give himself up to the officers of the law, and loudly proclaim the ownership of the hat which was about to cost Sally so great a

price. No hope could she have to get her sweetheart away did he but suspect the sacrifice she was about to make for his sake. Neither prayers nor entreaties could avail in the face of such knowledge.

For one brief moment a thought of escape came to her. She was sorely tempted to break her promise with the Squire, to delay her marriage with him, finding one excuse and another until she could hear from the absent one, and make her preparations to join him. Then all might yet end well.

But there was her mother to be considered. She was about to forget this very important item in such an arrangement. What would become of her mother, should Sally do such a thing? She could not be left to the Squire's wrath, nor could she go along with her daughter. It seemed the meshes of fate were drawing tighter and tighter around the girl. All avenues of escape appeared closed to her.

"To-day and to-night have been too trying for me!" cried Sally, wearily. "We both know what the past has been, we neither can tell about the future, so let us talk only of the present. That concerns us most."

“But I don’t understand,” began Milton. “This seems a new mood. It isn’t like you, Sally. You don’t mean that you are beginning to care less for me?”

“Have I acted to-night as if I was?” she asked sharply; his words had stung her into sudden resentment. “Did my going to the old deserted quarry for your sake, look as if I was caring less?”

“No! no! forgive me!” he cried, humbly, abashed by the reproof of her words. “I did not mean that. I know your heart is mine, else you would not have been the brave and fearless girl you were to-night. God bless you!”

CHAPTER XXV.

To Sally the next few days were more full of disturbing thoughts than events.

So far as Milton Derr's safety was concerned, her mind was at ease, for he had succeeded in getting away, and no one was the wiser regarding his going—no one but herself and Steve.

The horse that Milt had ridden on the night of his mysterious disappearance, and which had been turned loose by the raiders, had gone back to Mr. Peppers', and the general impression seemed to be that its rider had left that part of the country on account of the toll-gate troubles, with which his name was now being connected.

Sally had arisen even earlier than usual the morning following her night journey to the old quarry, and, as she had expected, she found Joe waiting patiently at the lot gate to be let in. This she managed to do before her mother

was up; therefore, no explanations were necessary, save to explain that she had not stayed overnight with Sophronia, and had quietly let herself in by means of the back door, so as not to disturb her mother, who had gone to bed.

With each day slipping stealthily by, like the waters of a deep stream, whose surface seems almost stagnant, the time was drawing near to hand when the girl had promised to purchase her sweetheart's liberty with her own bondage.

Now that Milton Derr was spirited safely away, quite beyond the reach of the Squire's hatred and vengeance, the temptation fell heavily upon the pretty toll-taker to repudiate her part of the bargain, given under such stress of anxiety. Such a promise should not be held inviolable. The Squire had deliberately forced her into it by his threats against his nephew.

Yet the promise had been given in good earnest at the time, and accepted in good faith. The Squire had abided by his promise, she must now do likewise.

Apart from all this—independent of the right or wrong, justice or injustice of the mat-

ter, the fact was self-evident, that though the nephew might be beyond the reach of the Squire's anger, she and her mother were not.

His rage must of necessity fall on the defenseless heads of both, and the girl felt far more helpless now than before her champion had gone, for, in losing him, she had lost the only knight who might valiantly fight her battles.

Looking at her helpless condition, there seemed but one thing left her—a marriage to the Squire. What though it should be a loveless one? Such marriages took place day after day, and some of them appeared to even bear the seal of contentment, if not of happiness. Not that this could ever prove true in her case. It were a thing impossible, with the memory of one she really loved ever enshrined in her heart.

Fate, however, seemed determined to require a sacrifice of her, so why not make it and end the unequal struggle?

Milton Derr was now not only a fugitive from justice, but debarred from ever returning, by the edict of the band, which had believed itself betrayed by him. To its members

he was literally dead. For his own sake, as well as for Judson's safety, he could not hope to come back. There was still less hope that she could ever go to him, with her mother also to be provided for, and so—what did it matter if she paid the debt she had incurred? There was no one to suffer but herself.

The Squire had confided to her mother the girl's promise to marry him, and Mrs. Brown was diligently spreading the news daily, despite her daughter's wishes to the contrary. Soon the announcement of the wedding was made in the town paper, to the girl's great disgust and indignation. Both the Squire and Mrs. Brown had conspired in this public notice of the approaching marriage, and the hapless girl began to feel, as they had intended, that matters had gone too far for her to rue the bargain.

Every allusion to the affair made her heart-sick and miserable. Mrs. Brown, who was filled with plans regarding the event, strongly urged a church wedding in town—it would have proven a morsel of supreme delight to her, but Sally steadfastly refused to consider the matter even for a single moment. She

would be married at the toll-house, and at no other place. No one should witness the marriage but her mother, not even Sophronia was to be invited.

This decision was a great grief to the mother. She had hoped and planned for far more elaborate things. In vain she reasoned and expostulated. It was all to little purpose—the girl was determined and obdurate. Arguments and entreaties were of no avail, not even inducements, for the Squire had given Mrs. Brown a sum of money quite sufficient to purchase the prospective bride a handsome wedding outfit.

Sally was also firm and immovable in her rejection of this proposed expenditure. She would not receive any wedding finery from the Squire, nor would she marry in any that his money had purchased.

“He must take me as I am, or not at all,” she said.

“Sally, I don’t know what to make of you!” cried her mother, in dismay. “Refusin’ a bran’-new weddin’ dress that’s offered you.”

“He can buy me dresses after he’s bought



"SALLY, I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO MAKE OF YOU,"
CRIED HER MOTHER.

me," answered Sally, bitterly. "I won't accept them now."

The moments sped like birds of evil passage. Nearer and nearer drew the hour of sacrifice. Each day that might have been so full of joy, under other circumstances, was one of prolonged unhappiness, and she scarcely knew whether to rejoice or grieve when it was ended, for the morrow would be but a repetition of the day that had passed, and one day nearer the goal of her misery.

The Squire would have proven a most ardent suitor had Sally consented, but she would have none of it. He hovered about the toll house, with the persistency of a youthful swain, fired by his first grand passion; but the bride elect very promptly sent him about his business, whenever he came spooning around, and curtly announced that she was busy getting ready to marry him, and, therefore, had no time for sentimental dallying.

If, notwithstanding these repeated rebuffs, he chose to linger, it fell to Mrs. Brown to entertain him, which she generally did by finding excuses for Sally's brusque manners and

strange words. "Skittish colts make the tamest ones in harness," said she.

"When they're properly broke," thought the Squire, with a quiet chuckle of satisfaction.

On the evening before the wedding the prospective groom presented himself at the New Pike Gate. His efforts at rejuvenation, in dress and manner, would have struck Sally as comically grotesque but for the part she was to play in the tragic comedy.

"I thought I'd drop in to see if there's anything you wished done before to-morrow," said he, in a half apologetic way, as he readily interpreted the look on Sally's face to mean disapproval of his presence.

The girl's heart gave a sudden leap of terror. To-morrow! Was it possible that her marriage was this near? She had tried to put away the thought of it, day by day, as if this could lengthen time, or stay the unhappy event, and now the hour was almost at hand. She might no longer forget, or put the fact aside. The shadow of its actual presence overshadowed her and chilled her very heart.

A wild impulse flooded her brain, like a tidal wave from the sea of her despair. She

would appeal to the Squire for a release from her promise—humbly petition his better self to spare her the misery of a marriage, loveless at least on her part. It could only bring sorrow to her, and doubtless unhappiness to him; since he could not wish to wed a wife, who brought him no love, and only deep aversion.

Yes, she would appeal to him—it was the one final hope left her. He must not, could not refuse to release her after such a confession. When at last he started to go, the girl quickly caught up her hat, and said, “I will ride with you along the road a little way.”

“And after to-morrow, it will be all the way in life together, eh?” asked the old man jocosely, chucking her under the chin with one of his clumsy fingers. She instinctively shrank from his touch, but followed him into the night.

Without, the elements seemed as foreboding as the girl’s own unhappy thoughts. An ominous sky brooded in gloom. In the north a huge pile of clouds, sullen and heavy, lay banked high above the horizon, threatening hills of blackness that seemed to hem in her little world of woe. Gusts of wind from time

to time came sweeping by, boisterous heralds, precursors of threatening storm.

As the girl and the old man stood on the platform, after the door was shut behind them, he was the first to speak, as she unconsciously drew a little nearer to his side before a passing gust.

"I must have a kiss, my dear—one little kiss, on this, our marriage eve."

Her first impulse was to push him rudely from her, to deny him flatly such a request, though surely a lover's prerogative on the eve of marriage. Then, remembering the purpose for which she had followed him into the night, and the appeal she was about to make, she quickly realized that she must touch his compassion, not arouse his prejudice, if she would hope to win. Perhaps a submissive acquiescence on her part at this important moment might help to gain her cause.

She paused a brief moment, nerving herself for the trying ordeal, then resolutely putting aside her aversion, holding in check all mutinous thoughts, she hastily put up her lips and lightly touched his red, coarse cheek.

As she did so, a sudden flash from the mut-

tering sky, like a reproof from heaven itself, for the act, made day of the night for one brief instant, and the clearly defined scene was enveloped in darkness again.

The Squire's back was partly turned toward the road, but Sally, looking out full upon it, saw in that brief flash of vivid light, clearly defined against the white background of the pike, Milton Derr standing in the road not ten paces away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A pall of swiftly enveloping blackness closed about the toll-house and its surroundings, which had been revealed for one short space.

The girl started back with a sharp cry, wrung from her in surprise and consternation at the sudden apparition she had beheld, while the Squire, naturally mistook her perturbation for fear of the storm.

"Come! don't be afraid, my dear, you are quite safe," he said, soothingly, striving clumsily at the words to slip his arm about her waist. But she adroitly avoided the movement and retreated toward the door of the toll-house.

"Hurry home!" she cried anxiously, thinking rather of ridding herself of his presence, than of entertaining a fear for his safety. "The storm is near at hand."

"It's a good deal bluster," answered the

Squire calmly, after a critical glance heavenward. "It may not rain at all. I hope it may not, as to-morrow's our wedding—only think of that, chickie, our wedding day!"

"Hurry home!" repeated Sally, faintly, scarcely knowing what she was saying, and only desirous of hastening his departure, and ridding herself of his hateful presence—doubly hateful at this moment. There was a touch of very entreaty in her voice.

"I thought you were going to ride with me a little way," remonstrated the Squire in disappointed tones. "You said you were."

"No! no!" answered the girl hastily, "it's dangerous—besides, it's growing late."

"That's scarcely treating me fair," protested the Squire, but he good-naturedly shambled along the platform, and went to get his buggy. "We won't begin to quarrel this early," he added with a laugh, "so—good night, my dear! and pleasant dreams to you!"

"Good night!" echoed Sally, mechanically. She stood motionless until the sound of the vehicle grew faint in the distance, then, with quaking frame, she hurriedly jumped off the platform into the road, and groped her way to

the spot where she had seen the dark, solitary figure standing fully revealed in that brief, intense light.

She had heard no sound, save the Squire's clumsy movements, and later the rumble of his buggy along the pike, and as she eagerly started forward, the thought came to her that perhaps she was the dupe of her own vivid imagination—that the motionless figure imprinted on the retina of her eye, as it had been etched on the background of the night, was the creature of her excited brain, and had no part in the darkness without.

“Milt!” she called out softly, inquiringly.

She strained her ear attentively to the silence. The sound of labored breathing near at hand betrayed the presence she sought, and putting forth her hand fearlessly she touched the substance of the shadow she had seen.

“Milt!” she once more called aloud.

With a gesture of impatience, or anger, she knew not which, he roughly shook off the hand laid lightly upon him, with the impatient mumbling of a fierce oath.

“So, it's true,” he said at last; but his voice sounded strange and harsh, and totally unlike



**"SO IT'S TRUE," HE SAID, BUT HIS VOICE SOUNDED STRANGE
AND HARSH.**

the familiar caressing tones she had so longed to hear once more.

A deep silence fell between them, and in its strained quiet she could hear her heart beating loudly in her bosom, as if it were the pendulum of some muffled clock ticking off the dreary moments of a life.

"Yes," she answered, finally breaking the intense silence, her voice scarcely more than a faint whisper. It seemed that an age had passed since the question was asked.

"Sally!" he cried sharply, as if her reply had been a keen knife thrust. "You don't mean it!"

"It is true," she said, simply.

"And I would not believe it, even though I read it by chance in one of the papers from here. I said it was a lie. I really thought it was one—a wicked lie—a damnable one—I didn't know women," he added, with a bitter laugh.

"Don't blame me, Milt," she faltered. "I did it for the best."

"For the best?" he echoed, scornfully, swift anger following close upon his words. "Is it

for the best to wreck my life—my faith in you?”

“It need not wreck your life, it must not,” answered Sally, earnestly. “I’m not worth it. Oh! why did you come back?” she asked sorrowfully.

“I came back to convince myself that it was a lie. I was a fool for coming, I’ll admit that; but women have made fools of men ever since the days of Eve.”

The two walked on up the road, further away from the toll-house.

“You should not have come back,” persisted the girl. “I hoped you never would. I beg you to go away again, this very night. It is best for us both. Some day you will find a true woman who is worthy your love,” she added with a sob rising in her throat, but Milt in his anger and resentment failed to rightly interpret its meaning.

“Then you have been fooling me all the while!” he cried, hot with indignation. “You have made me believe that you cared nothing for him—that you loathed him, even—well, perhaps you did, but you loved his money—you’ve sold yourself for that.”

"No! no! Milt, don't say that!" cried the girl imploringly. "I may have sold myself to him, but not for money—don't think that of me!"

"If not for money—for what?" demanded Derr, sternly. "For what else but his houses and lands?"

Once again the impulse was strong upon her to confess the truth, yet swift to follow the impulse came the unhappy knowledge that to do this would be to seal Milt's fate. If she would save him, she must sacrifice herself. For his sake her lips must remain mute now, and perhaps forever.

"It *is* a sale, an outright sale!" persisted Derr. "You really don't care for him, you never did. It is only his money you are after—money, not love has won the day, it always will. I might have known as much, but I was simple, and had a simple faith. I didn't understand the falseness of women's hearts."

"Would I have risked my life, as I did, to get you out of the clutches of the raiders that night, if I had cared nothing for you?" asked Sally in sharp earnestness, unable longer to bear his reproaches in silence.

“And to what purpose?” demanded her companion. “Why didn’t you let them kill me, as they proposed doing? It would have been kinder to have let them put me out of the way,” he added bitterly.

“Oh, why didn’t you stay away, when once you had gone?” she asked. “It would have been far kinder to me.”

“I begin to understand now why you were so anxious to have me go,” he said. “Probably you feared I would make trouble. Did you think I might attempt to harm your youthful, handsome lover?” he asked, sneeringly. “No wonder you only cared to talk of the present, not of the future that night we parted. No wonder you parried my questions when I asked if you would some day come to me. I marveled then at your strange silence, but the reason is now as clear as day. All the while you were urging me to go away, you were expecting to marry him after I had gone! Confess now—wasn’t your word given to him before I went away?”

“Yes,” acknowledged Sally, “but let me explain a few things you do not understand, I”—

“It is unnecessary,” quickly interrupted

Milt. "Those things I *do* understand are all-sufficient for me. You wanted me away from here, and you succeeded in getting me to go—you preferred the Squire's money to my poverty, and you are on the eve of getting his money, too. Perhaps you are in league with those rascals who may have meant only to frighten me, and cause me to run away, like a cowardly cur. They might not have harmed me—I doubt now if they intended to.

"It is not too late, though, to thwart your plans and his," continued the speaker with increasing anger. "You are not yet married to that brute, and, by heaven! you shall not be! I swear it! I will kill him first—the scoundrel! the hound!" he cried passionately, overswept by the rage that swayed him, like a tree twisted by the storm.

"Milt, Milt, don't talk that way! You mustn't harm him! You shall not!" cried the girl, terror-stricken by the passionate utterances of her companion.

Her words were but fuel to the flame. They goaded him into a sort of frenzy.

"So you beg for him, do you? You don't want him hurt—your lover, your husband that

is soon to be. By heaven! I'll wring his wrinkled, villainous neck like I would a chicken's, d—n him. He's driven me from his roof, he's taken you from me, but I'll even up old scores at last."

As the maddened man started up the road, Sally frantically caught hold of him, striving to pacify his anger, to reason with him, to make him understand his unjustness toward her, but he roughly shook himself free, and moved the faster.

"Milt! Milt! come back!" she cried entreatingly, but he made no answer, and hurried on. "Milt, listen to me! It's all my fault. I, alone, am to blame. Come back! For God's sake, don't do anything rash!"

Again she tried to overtake him, to lay hold of him, but he broke into a run, and left her far behind, crying entreatingly to him through the darkness.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The darkness enveloped the hurrying man as it had done once before this night, when he stood silent and motionless in the middle of the road, near the toll-house, yet the girl still followed his retreating figure persistently through the gloom, beseeching him to return, to relinquish his fell purpose.

She stopped at last, understanding that it was futile to follow further, that he was deaf to her entreaties to turn back, and that she could no longer hope to overtake him. As she stood still and listened, she heard him retreating footsteps growing fainter and fainter far up the road.

Some minutes later, a second vivid band of light revealed his tall, dark figure sharply silhouetted against the sky, from the brow of the hill he had climbed, then darkness came again, like a black curtain, and blotted him from sight.

The girl stood for some time in the middle of the road, with hands clasped tightly together, and tear-stained face, striving to think connectedly, to reason calmly in the face of a new trouble.

What must she do? Which way to turn?

She well knew Milt's disposition—a veritable powder magazine it was, readily ignited by an angry spark, yet soon over with, a flash in the pan, one might say, without a bullet behind to be sped on its mission of evil.

Such dire threats as he had just uttered, were but the violent outburst of a sudden passion, and signified no durability of purpose, no fixed resolve. Long before he could reach the Squire's place, his better judgment would surely prevail—the calm after a spent storm. Probably he was already beginning to repent his hot temper, and regret his hasty speech.

That it was without cause Sally could not aver. From Milton's standpoint, at least, he must feel that he had been most shamefully used, not so much at the hands of the Squire, in the present instance, as by the girl herself. How meanly he must think of her—heartless, mercenary, hypocritical! And yet she dared

not defend her actions by telling him the truth.

As she stood thus, uncertain and confused, looking anxiously toward the hill where she had last seen the solitary figure crowning it, a reassuring thought came to her. Even should Milt go as far as the Squire's, he would not be able to gain entrance to the house, for his uncle had doubtless reached home before this, and he would be little likely to admit any one into his house at that hour of the night, especially an avowed enemy, such as he knew his nephew to be.

If Milt attempted to make any trouble at all, he would wait until the morrow—her wedding day. How hateful the thought of this event now seemed to her! She felt at the moment that if Milt would only come back and tempt her to flight, this unhappy marriage would never take place. She would risk anything, everything, and marry the younger man despite all else. Why had she not thought of this sooner? Oh! yes, she remembered, it was on her mother's account. What would become of her?

As the unhappy girl recalled her lover's angry words, she felt that she deserved them

all—each word of harsh reproach, of fierce anger, and just scorn. It was a very wonder he had not offered to strike her dead as she stood before him. To think he had even been a witness to her kiss, and had moreover heard from her very own lips the confession that she was about to wed his hated kinsman. It was little wonder that Milt was half crazed by jealousy and rage.

If he did but know the terrible sacrifice she was about to make for his sake, he must surely pity her, and no longer taunt her for her seeming perfidy and falseness of heart.

The girl found herself wondering that her lover's anger had not centered on herself rather than the Squire. She was the one on whom the younger man should have avenged himself. Perhaps it was a fortunate thing, after all, that she had not followed him further into the night. He might have been tempted, in his ungovernable rage, to wreak his vengeance on her as well as on his hated kinsman. A strange, unusual timidity suddenly took possession of her—a feeling that was near akin, to dread of the younger man, irresponsible in his jealous rage, though scarcely a fear of the man

himself, so much as of the demon of jealousy she had aroused in him.

Beset with this new sensation, she peered cautiously into the night, as though one might be lurking in hiding near by, ready to spring forth upon her, then realizing that nothing but darkness lay around her, she abruptly turned her steps toward the toll-house.

Alas! the bitter disappointment of life. Thus had come to naught all the efforts in Milton Derr's behalf, her own sacrifice a useless thing, since, instead of averting the dangers that threatened him, she had unwittingly been the cause of involving him in yet greater perils.

Even though his threats against the Squire were but idle ones—blasted buds of evil without promise of fruition, as she believed them to be, still, if Milt persisted in tarrying longer in the locality, he was not only putting his own life in jeopardy, but would also bring on Steve Judson swift retribution as well.

She had tried to impress these facts on Milt's mind before he had gone away. Why had he not remained away as she had entreated him to do, on parting?

Then she remembered that he would not have returned—that he would probably have known nothing of her marriage until it was too late, if he had not read an announcement of it in the papers. Her mother was really at the bottom of it all, she was chiefly to blame for Milt's return; for many things, in fact, now bearing the bitter fruit of sorrow.

Mrs. Brown had caused the notice of the marriage to be put in the paper without her daughter's knowledge or consent. Sally had begged her mother to say as little about the wedding as possible, and if that obdurate person had only heeded the request, all this present trouble might easily have been avoided.

Beset with anxious doubts, intangible fears, disquieting thoughts, feeling the while most bitterly toward her mother for the officious part she had persistently played in all this unhappy affair, Sally retraced her steps slowly to the toll-house.

Poor girl! Truly her marriage eve was not a propitious one.

The first objects on which the girl's eyes rested the next morning, when she awoke after a troubled sleep, were the simple wedding

garments spread out carefully on some chairs near her bed, and as she lay and looked at them in bitterness of heart and spirit, she heard her mother astir in the kitchen preparing breakfast.

Sally half rose in bed. Her very heart seemed faint within her as she gazed on all this hateful reminder of what the day held in store, and with a quick sob she buried her face in her hands.

As she sat thus—a tearful, sobbing figure—surely a strange posture for a prospective bride on her bridal morn, she heard a horse galloping swiftly along the road, and as the sound came nearer, she found her attention gradually absorbed by it. There seemed something of undue haste in the rider's speed.

A moment later the winded animal stopped at the toll-house gate, while a loud knock quickly summoned Mrs. Brown to the door. Sally's alert ear caught the sound of a negro's voice without, speaking rapidly and excitedly, then a sharp exclamation from the toll-taker followed.

The listening bride-elect could not distinguish the negro's hurried words, nor guess the

import of his message, but finally she caught one single word that her mother uttered, and that word was—"murdered."

Scarcely had it reached the girl's strained attention, when she sprang hurriedly out of bed, and catching up her wedding dress threw it hastily over her shoulders. Then her strength seemed suddenly to go, and she stood trembling and white, her eyes fixed on the door of her room in a vacant stare, her mind a blank to all surroundings.

Her mother found her thus when she came into the room a few moments later, visibly agitated.

"You heard it then?" she said huskily, looking into Sally's terror-stricken face.

"He could not have done it!" gasped Sally, brokenly. "It was only an idle threat," she added, her voice sinking to a whisper.

"Of course he didn't do it!" exclaimed her mother, catching only her daughter's first words. "He was murdered—murdered in cold blood!"

The girl opened her mouth as if to speak again, but the sound crumbled to unintelligible murmurs, as the fear of uttering words no

ear must ever hear flashed through her bewildered mind, so she stood looking blankly at her mother, with wide-open eyes of horror, while the color fled from her face, leaving a ghastly pallor instead.

All the dreadful interval she was thinking of Milton Derr rather than his victim, and she started like a guilty thing at her mother's next words:

"There's but one person in the whole wide world who could have done this, to my thinkin', an' that's Milt Derr!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Throughout the day there seemed an interminable passing the New Pike gate. Many stopped to condole with its inmates, a few through genuine sympathy, a greater number urged by a secret desire to see how the bride-elect bore up under the dire misfortune that had come almost with the suddenness of the lightning's stroke. The curiosity of these was baffled, for the girl shut herself closely in her own room, and denied herself to all.

When the news of the tragedy reached town the coroner came out to the Squire's place to hold an inquest, while numerous others followed in his wake, drawn thither by the morbid interest that attracts many to the scene of similar crimes.

Mrs. Brown waited on the gate, eager to know all that was thought or said of the deplorable affair, and though her daughter asked not a single word, the mother, who plied

with voluble questioning almost every soul that passed through the gate, told her from time to time of the rumors that were afloat. Thus the girl learned of the verdict on the coroner's return—that Squire Bixler had met his death in his own room the night before, by a knife-thrust at the hand of some person or persons unknown. The victim had evidently been dead several hours when his body was found by one of the servants who came to see why the Squire was so tardy on his wedding morn.

Robbery may have been a cause, for the Squire's pocket-book was found lying open and empty at his side, and a small drawer in the tall clock had been pulled out and searched yet the victim's heavy gold watch had not been taken, and nothing else in the room seemed to have been disturbed or molested.

The murderer had not broken into the house, evidently, for the front door was found to be unlocked, and an entrance and exit had doubtless been effected through that. Considering this fact, it seemed a highly plausible theory that the murderer must have been admitted to the house by the Squire himself, and

that it was doubtless some one whom the Squire well knew, else the door had not been unlocked to this one in the late hours of the night.

The Squire was dressed, with the exception of his coat and shoes, and had evidently not gone to bed, therefore the murder must have been committed along in the early part of the night, before his usual bedtime. The body lay on the floor near a candle-stand before the fire. The candle had burned entirely down in its socket, and the melted tallow had afterward hardened into a cake round the bowl of the stick. Amid the embers in the fireplace, under the charred end of a log that had burned in two and fallen to one side, was found the remnant of a gray felt hat.

From the position and range of the cut in the body, the blow had probably been given while the victim was standing up facing his assailant. His murderer had not stolen upon him unawares. The blow had been a true one, and had gone straight to the heart. The one thrust had been sufficient, and the victim had dropped at the feet of his slayer.

When all these various facts had been

learned, active minds began to cast about for some clue as to the identity of the murderer, and for some motive besides robbery.

While the Squire had never been a very popular man, in a general way, he was not known to have a single enemy who would be likely to do so dastardly a deed. Neither was the Squire in the habit of keeping money about the house, so that if the murderer knew the ways of his victim, he could not hope to gain a rich reward, therefore some motive besides robbery must have actuated the crime. What this motive was, had yet to be discovered, provided the adage came true that "murder will out."

Of those who were unfriendly to the Squire, none was so prominent to mind as his nephew, Milton Derr, no one would be more profited by the Squire's death than he, for he was next of kin, and, his uncle being unmarried, the property would revert to him. This point was especially emphasized—the uncle being unmarried, and the fact was strongly commented upon, that it was on the very eve of the Squire's marriage that he was murdered. Could the motive have been jealousy? The

cause of the open rupture between the two men was generally known—that a woman was at the bottom of it and this woman was the one to whom the Squire was to have been wedded. The whole story was told and retold with many variations.

The neighbors spoke of these things in guarded undertones and with grave shakings of the head, and although no outspoken accusations were made, there was an undercurrent of suspicion, deepening into belief, and growing hourly, like a stream that rapidly swells beyond its banks when fed by countless minor tributaries. Public opinion was slowly and surely fastening the deed on the nephew's shoulders.

These vague rumors and surmises were conveyed from time to time by Mrs. Brown to her daughter's ears, and while the girl steadfastly and persistently asserted Milton Derr's innocence, there was, nevertheless, a horrible and slowly strengthening conviction at work in her own bosom which she could neither silence nor subdue—a conviction that warned her she was building on false hopes, which might at any moment crumble at the touch of circum-

stantial evidence, and reveal her lover not only to the world, but to her own prejudiced eyes, as a murderer whose soul was stained with a dark crime.

Closely allied to this harassing fear was a far different feeling that she could neither still nor repress, though it seemed a heartless and even cruel one—a feeling of great thankfulness that the Squire's untimely death had relieved her of a sacrifice that would have been but a living death to her.

How could she be sorry that he was no longer alive to claim this sacrifice? To pretend to a grief she did not feel was but base hypocrisy. Within her heart of hearts she was glad that she was free. Her only sorrow lay in the tragic manner of his death, and in the secret fear that Milton Derr, half crazed with a passionate jealousy, was responsible for it. Had it been possible to recall the Squire to life again, and so blot out the fearful act of the past night, she would most gladly have done so, and accepted her fate without a murmur, if its reward had been Milton's safety and innocence.

Possibly she was the only one who knew of

Derr's presence in the neighborhood the night before. If such was the case, and he had succeeded in getting away without being seen by others, she would keep the dreadful secret securely locked in her own bosom, and no one should ever suspect its presence. She centered all hope of his safety on this supposition.

Along toward noon, some one passing the New Pike gate on the way from town, brought the latest news bearing on the tragedy.

As Mrs. Brown sought her daughter's presence, as soon as the informant had gone, her tone was almost jubilant, as she said:

"Well, they've caught the murderer."

The girl looked up at her mother mutely, almost piteously, as if she would be spared the unhappy tidings, of whose evil import some subtle intuition had already reached her brain.

"It's just as I expected," continued Mrs. Brown, full of the news she had brought. "They caught Milt Derr as he was gettin' on the cars at Grigg's Station, fifteen miles from here. The sheriff had telephoned to all the places around to be on the lookout for him. He had sold his watch, and was about to buy

a ticket somewheres out West when they arrested him. They've brought him to town, an' he's safe in jail there now, thank goodness! There'll soon be a first-class hanging in this neighborhood. I hope," she added, with fervor.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The next day the Squire was buried.

The funeral seemed one of especial sadness, shadowed as it was with the stain and mystery of a dark crime, and with neither kith nor kin present to mourn, for Milton Derr was behind iron bars, and the girl flatly refused to attend the funeral, despite her mother's urging.

"I won't add a hypocrite's tears to my other shortcomings, and neither will I be a show to some folks who will go more out of idle curiosity than sympathy," said the girl, decisively, and so her mother went alone.

The toll gate was thrown open to the public during the funeral, which was no more than a proper mark of respect to the Squire's memory, for he had long been president of the road, and was a large stockholder, besides.

The day itself was one of gloom and dreariness, with low-hanging clouds surcharged with sullen rain, while at each frequent blast

of wind there was a skurrying of fallen leaves, seeking, like sentient things, to find shelter from the pitiless rain.

The interment was in the family burying ground, where the first wife lay at rest, and the tall weeds and grasses of the enclosure were trampled by many eager feet.

During the services, which were held in the house, the women and children huddled together in the "best room," looking about them with awed, half-frightened faces, as if a ghostly visitant might suddenly stalk forth out some gloomy corner, while the men stood in little groups in the hall, or the Squire's "living room," and when they spoke in low tones, it was mostly of the man within the prison cell, and little of the one within his coffin.

The coming of Mrs. Brown, unaccompanied by her daughter, gave new food for comment, and for a time following her arrival, the victim and the accused were both forgotten in the fact of the strange absence of one who might almost be called a "widowed bride."

Early that morning, on looking from the toll-house window, the first sight to greet the unhappy girl had been the hearse containing

the casket for the Squire coming along the road from the town, and the sight had so unnerved her that she once more shut herself in her room, a prey to harrowing thoughts.

Long after the mother had gone to the funeral she sat motionless and dazed, listening in a sort of hopeless apathy to the sound of vehicles rolling by, carrying those to pay their last tribute of respect to the dead; then, after ages, it seemed, she heard the sound of their return, and understood that "earth had been given to earth," and still no widow's weeds were necessary for her, no blinding tears need be shed—in truth, they would have been but a cruel mockery.

She felt a profound pity for the one whose life had gone out so quickly, and in so tragic a manner, yet there was a deeper pity, and—God forgive her!—a changeless love in her heart for the poor, unfortunate being, whose insane jealousy had brought him to his present strait. Yet why blame him? She, herself, was the cause of it all. She could not help but remember this; indeed, she did not wish to forget it. It was his great love for her, and her own seeming unworthiness that had

wrought his ruin. She was the guilty one in the eye of God, not Milton Derr.

A day or two after the funeral, Billy West came by the gate one afternoon on his way from town, and brought word to the unhappy girl that Milton had asked to see her, and begged that she would come to the jail. He had something of importance to say to her.

"How does he look? How does he seem to bear up under the strain?" asked Sally, anxiously.

"He's broken down considerable," admitted Billy. "He looks ten years older, to my thinkin'. Of course, I said what I could to cheer him up, but I'm afraid he's got himself into a pretty bad box."

"I don't believe he did it," affirmed Sally, faintly, but she turned her eyes away as she made the denial.

"It don't look possible," agreed Billy. "It really don't. I never would have thought it of him. I hope he can prove himself clear of the deed."

"Won't you ask Sophronia to come by tomorrow and go with me?" asked Sally, thoughtfully, "I hate to go alone."

"Yes, to be sure," answered Billy, "I'll ride over to-night an' see her."

On the morrow Sophronia came. Mrs. Brown at once suspected Sally's motives in going to town, and when she put the question point-blank to her daughter, Sally frankly confessed that she was going to see Milton.

"Sally Brown!" cried her mother, with her hands upraised. "The idea of your standin' there, an' tellin' me you air goin' to see that miserable murderer, that's not only cheated you out of a good husband, but out of a lot o' property besides. He ought to be hung, an' you know it!"

"He sent for me, and I'm going," answered Sally, simply.

"Well, go!" cried her mother, wrathfully, "go! an' soon folks will be sayin' that, like as not, you also had a hand in gettin' the Squire put out of the way. It seems a hard thing to say about your own child, but I declare it begins to look like it," added Mrs. Brown, bitterly.

Quick upon the words the girl's eyes flashed forth something of the indignation she felt at their cruel significance, and an angry torrent

of denial rose to her lips, and yet it was suddenly stayed by an inner voice that seemed to say—"Who but you has brought it all about?"

She did, indeed, have a hand in it, but not in the way her mother suggested. Sally turned away and made no answer.

When she was brought face to face with the prisoner, the gloom of the place, the grated cell, the dismal air of confinement, burst upon her in startling reality, and forced on her lively imagination the full significance of her lover's peril.

Milt looking pale and careworn, while in his dark eyes lingered the look of the hunted, supplanting the frank, free gaze they had worn in his careless freedom. He was a prisoner, and the sweet freedom of the hills was no longer his portion. It was some moments before the girl could trust herself to speak, and in Milt's eyes there also lingered a suspicious moisture.

The jailer and Sophronia had discreetly withdrawn to the further end of the dim corridor, and were talking over Milton's case in low voices of deep concern.

"Sally," said the prisoner, in an undertone

that reached only her ears, "I have sent for you to put myself right in your eyes. After what happened the other night, and what I had said to you in my ungovernable jealousy, there's only one thing you could think of me in connection with this miserable affair, and I can't blame you in the least for thinking it. You, of all others, have the best right to call me a murderer, but as God in heaven is my judge, I swear to you, by the sacred memory of my dead mother, that I did not commit that crime!"

"I couldn't bring myself to believe you would do so dreadful a thing," said the girl, tearfully, looking into his dark eyes with the mists of doubt clearing her own, despite all the damaging circumstances.

"I didn't do it!" asserted Milt, vehemently. "I know that everything points to me as the guilty man, in your eyes, at least, but I am not guilty. It is true that I was in a frenzy, and quite beside myself with anger when I made those foolish threats. If I could have met my uncle, then and there, I think I could have throttled him and been glad of the chance.

"Before I had gone half the distance to his

house, I began to understand what a fool I had been, and I was half tempted to turn back and beg your forgiveness, but pride would not let me, and I walked on almost to my uncle's gate that leads into the avenue.

"As I walked along, I began to reason more calmly with myself. Why should I burden my soul with a crime on account of a woman that had treated me thus falsely? What good could come of it? I was a fool for ever coming back. I should have stayed when once I had gotten safely away.

"To be seen in this locality was only courting death, not only for myself, but for Steve Judson, who had befriended me. After the risk he had run to save my life, it would be perfidy to bring vengeance on his head by my return. I truly hope he has left this part of the country since they have caught me," added Milton, earnestly.

"While I was thinking over all these things," he continued, "I heard a horseman coming along the road, and fearing that a flash of lightning might reveal my presence to some one I knew, I hastily climbed a fence opposite my uncle's place, and started off across the

country in the direction of Grigg's Station, fully determined that I would take the first train possible, and forever leave this spot.

"Imagine my consternation when I was arrested the next morning, charged with the very crime I had threatened to commit the night before in my blind passion.

"I could scarcely believe that it was not some hideous joke that was being played on me, as a just punishment for my wicked thoughts, and when they told me my uncle was dead—murdered—and that I was accused of the crime, my own actions must have led them to believe me guilty. I almost began to wonder, if, in some insane moment of self-forgetfulness, I could really have committed the deed. Then calmer judgment came to my rescue and proclaimed my innocence. This is the truth, the whole truth, of that wretched night, Sally!" cried Milt.

"I believe you, every word" said the girl simply.

"That is why I sent for you. I wanted you to know the full facts in the case. If you believe me innocent, I can stand the censure of the whole world."

"And now that the Squire is dead, and can no longer harm you, I too, have something to confess," admitted the girl. "I am now free to tell why I promised to marry him. I did it for your sake, Milt."

"For my sake!" he echoed.

"Yes, the night the New Pike gate was attacked, your hat was found near the toll-house, in the dusty road. Don't you remember you had written both our names under the lining the day of the picnic last September? Squire Bixler had that hat in his possession, and was taking it to town to give it to the officers. I knew if they closely examined the hat, they would find our names, and I knew you would be arrested and sent to prison. So I promised to marry the Squire if he would give me that hat, and let you go free."

"And you did this for my sake?" asked Milton Derr, falteringly. "Sally! Sally! can you ever forgive me?" he cried penitently.

But even as he looked, pleadingly, anxiously, into her upturned face, the light of forgiveness had already illumined the gentle, tear dimmed eyes.

CHAPTER XXX.

The fall term of court was now in session, and Milton Derr was put on trial for his life.

The case, deeply tinged with romance and mystery, aroused a lively and unusual interest, both in the town and county, and during the progress of the trial the courtroom was crowded with interested spectators.

While the prisoner had seemed at first both careless and indifferent regarding his fate, now, since his interview with his former sweetheart, he began to feel a strong and urgent desire to prove his innocence, and to do what he could to help clear the mystery of the murder.

The girl had given him a point to unravel.

“Do you remember telling me that a horseman came down the road the night you were near the Squire’s gate?” she asked of Derr on her second visit to the jail.

“Yes, it was the fear of meeting this horse-

man, and perhaps being recognized by him in the lightning's sudden glare, that led me to quit the highway and take to the fields."

"Well, that horseman never passed me, and I feel sure he never passed through the New Pike gate," said Sally, thoughtfully. "I waited in the road some little time, hoping you would turn back, and even after I had gone to bed it was a long time before I fell asleep. I heard no sound of passing. Whoever that rider was, he stopped at, or near Squire Bixler's place, and came no further. If we could manage to find out who this person was, the mystery of the murder might be solved."

There was little evidence to be introduced on either side during the progress of the trial, and what little there was helped to weigh against the prisoner. His movements at Grigg's Station were those of a man striving to avoid notice, indeed, his whole bearing before and after his arrest was that of a guilty person seeking to make good his escape.

The accused offered no explanation of his presence at the station, where he was on the point of buying a ticket to the West when arrested. To have done so he would have had

to disclose his connection with the raiders, the cause of his flight and return, and his presence in the immediate neighborhood of his uncle's farm on that fatal night.

He was in an unfortunate position, it seemed, when everything appeared to work to his disadvantage, and help throw suspicion on his movements, and yet he dared not turn the needed light on them. He knew he was safe, so far as Sally was concerned, in regard to meeting her at the toll-gate, and the idle threats he had uttered against the Squire in the first heat of passion and jealousy.

His enmity toward his uncle was too well known, however, to escape comment, and was easily proven, along with sundry angry words he had uttered against his kinsman when first he had left his uncle's roof, words that had lost nothing of their sharpness by the lapse of time, and were now repeated with such embellishments that even the speaker had difficulty in recalling or recognizing the original form in which they had been first uttered.

Moreover, the great benefits that the nephew would derive from his uncle's death, should it occur before a marriage could take

place, were clearly brought forth, and a strong incentive shown for the commission of such a deed, at the especial time it occurred—the eve of the Squire's wedding.

When the evidence had been gathered—it was scant enough at best, and sadly damaging,—the case was presented to the jury by the speakers on each side, with facts so skilfully juggled, now and then, that an impartial listener would scarcely know how to place them aright.

Sometimes flowery rhetorical effects were used where facts were few, that words might count instead, until there seemed never to have lived so just, upright and beloved a man as the squire, or so damnable and blood-thirsty a villain as his nephew.

Sally came to court each day, along with Sophronia and her father. The three sat anxiously throughout the trial, hopeful and despondent by turns, as the prisoner was upheld or denounced, one hearer, at least, never wavering in the belief of his innocence from beginning to end.

Late one afternoon the case was finished and submitted to the jury, but scarcely a soul

quitted the courtroom, so deep an interest was felt, each one remaining, impatiently waiting for the verdict, which might come early or late, no man knew.

When the doors had closed upon the retiring jury, the Judge picked up a newspaper on his desk, and leaning back in his chair began to read, while Sally, noting the act, wondered within herself how one could seem so calm and indifferent, when a man's very life hung trembling in the scales of justice. Her own brain was in a whirl of excitement and anxiety. She was scarcely able to think connectedly, and to her narrowed range of thought it seemed the very world must pause in anxiety while so weighty a matter was in the balance.

The afternoon grew on apace. The dull gray shadows within the corners of the courtroom deepened and spread until the rows of expectant faces became a blurred and indistinct mass, except where the bands of light, falling through the windows, gave them a certain ashen pallor.

Once or twice Mr. Saunders moved uneasily in his seat. He knew it was growing late, with many things at home demanding his

attention—the stock to be fed, the horses watered, the night's chores to be done—yet he felt he could not pull himself away until he had heard some message from the jury room, either of good or evil.

The others waited, too. A vague hum of voices talking in low undertones gradually overcame the quiet that had fallen on the waiting crowd, and from time to time anxious and impatient glances were shot toward the closed doors, through which the jury were to come.

The gray evening shadows without, presaging the approach of night, perhaps the prisoner's doom, silently crept into the room, mingling with the gloomier shadows within the building. Presently the janitor came and lighted some ill-smelling lamps, one upon the Judge's desk, the others clinging to the grimy walls, and soon these lights began to struggle through the smoky chimneys, striving against the deepening shadows in unequal battle, as the good frequently combats with the evil in our natures.

At last, after interminable hours of suspense, it seemed to the waiting girl, the slow tramp—tramp—of the jury down the stairway

from the room above, struck her expectant ear like the doleful tread of a funeral procession. Nearer and nearer came the sound, then the courtroom doors were thrown open, and the twelve men entered, two by two, and quietly took their places in the jury box.

The Judge had laid aside his paper, and was leaning attentively on the desk, while every neck was craned forward in eager expectancy. A profound hush fell, and each ear was bent to hear the verdict, whose grave import many already guessed. Those in the rear of the room were tiptoeing and peering anxiously over the heads of the ones in front, while a few who had been waiting on the outside of the building now hurried in and pressed quickly forward.

Sally sat immovable, her hands clenched tightly in an agony of cruel suspense, her heart-throbs sounding in her ears like funeral bells, her face immobile as stone. She had given one swift, piercing look toward the jury as they entered, as if to read in advance the verdict they had brought, and the grave, stern faces she saw froze her very heart with the dire import of that verdict. From the jury her eyes

had centered on the prisoner, who had lifted his head, and was calmly awaiting the words that were to give him freedom, or—he dared not think further—life had suddenly grown very sweet to him.

The clear voice of the judge broke in upon the profound silence that had fallen on the entrance of the jury:

“Gentlemen, have you found a verdict?”

“We have,” the foreman answered.

“The Court is ready to hear it.”

The foreman stepped forward, and, clearing his throat, began to speak: “Your Honor we, the jury, find the prisoner is”—

A slight commotion made itself manifest at the door of the courtroom. The judge cast an inquiring glance in its direction, and rapping sharply on his desk cried out:

“Silence in Court!”

The noise increased. A voice was heard calling, “Hold! Hold!”

At the sound, Sophronia turned quickly and looked in the direction whence it came. Billy West was calling out, and pressing through the crowd, holding aloft a legal-looking docu-

ment which he waved excitedly toward the judge.

“Hold, your Honor!” he cried again. “Stay the proceedings of the Court! An innocent man is on trial! I have here a sworn confession from the one who killed Squire Bixler. It was Steve Judson. Steve was shot about noon to-day by Jade Beddow, who was also killed in the fight. Steve sent for me to come an’ bring a notary public along.

“Here is Steve’s dyin’ statement. Squire Bixler owed him some money and refused to pay it. Steve went to his house that night to collect it, and in a quarrel that followed, he stabbed the Squire. Milton Derr had nothin’ to do with the crime. He’s innocent!”

The excited messenger strode forward and thrust the paper he carried into the outstretched hand of the Judge. A wave of surprise swept over the courtroom, and the murmur of voices grew louder until it finally broke into a loud cheer of victory for the prisoner.

After the introduction of this new testimony, the jury promptly retired, and in a few moments brought in a verdict of “Not guilty.”

In all the confusion that arose with the

clamor of many voices around him, Milton Derr seemed to hear but one faint voice close to his ear, to feel the pressure of one gentle hand alone, to look into but one pair of tender, truthful eyes—all the rest was but a blurred and indistinct memory.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Ten Years After

“Sally, those awful Night Riders are around again.”

“No, Milt, you don't really mean it?”

Sally looked up quickly from her sewing across the hearth to where her stalwart husband sat with crossed legs, making of his swinging right foot a make-believe skittish horse for Milton, junior, age three.

“Father, what does Night Riders mean?” asked a young girl of nine or ten standing near, who had her mother's fair complexion and richly tinted hair, but her father's dark and expressive eyes.

“They are men who band together and ride through the country at night for the purpose of forcing people to do certain things that the band demands. The members usually go masked so that they may not be recognized.”

"Then they must be wicked men," continued Alice frankly, "if they are so afraid they will be seen. Did you ever see a Night Rider, father?"

"A long time ago," answered Milt soberly, but with a mischievous twinkle in his eye as he glanced across at his wife, "and he was a pretty sorry sight, I must say."

"Has ma seen one, too?" persisted Alice, with the insistence of childhood.

"Yes, dear, when I was a girl and lived with your grandma before she died, at a toll-gate just down the road apiece, I saw a Night Rider then."

"What was he like?" questioned Alice, deeply interested, "Was he scary looking?"

"No," said her mother hesitatingly, "I thought him rather good-looking at the time," and she smiled over at her husband.

"Was he as good-looking as father?" asked Alice, following the glance with her keen young eyes.

"Nothing like," affirmed Sally emphatically, and then she and Milt both laughed.

"What are the Night Riders after now?" she

inquired some time later, after the children had gone to bed, and the two sat talking by the fire. "There are no more toll-gates to be raided."

"It's the tobacco question now, instead of free roads, and it's becoming a very serious one."

"I knew that in some parts of the old Blue Grass State the tobacco growers were having considerable trouble, but I hadn't heard that mischief was brewing in this quarter."

"Yes, the trouble is spreading generally throughout the tobacco growing regions of the State. Successful raids have been made on several cities and towns, and the large independent warehouses burned; buyers for some of these houses have been severely whipped, and in some cases ordered to leave the State. Troops have been ordered to several points to protect property and maintain order, and the Governor has been called upon to suppress the lawlessness that is abroad."

"Why, this is worse than during the toll-gate troubles," said Sally.

"Much worse," assented her husband. "The

loss of property is very much greater. Barns have been burned filled with tobacco, and hundreds of plant beds scraped, and a promise is being exacted from the growers not to produce a crop this present season. It's a sort of triangular war in which the grasping Trust—the pooled Tobacco Association and the Independent growers, all figure," added Milt.

"And have you agreed to pool your tobacco?" asked Sally, when the serious situation had been more fully discussed.

"No, I think I have the right to dispose of it as I see fit. I am a free man, and live in a free country, and I don't intend to be coerced. I have sold my last year's crop to an independent buyer, and will begin delivering it sometime within the next few days."

"I hope there'll be no trouble over it if you do," said his wife earnestly. "I have had quite enough experience along the line of night riding to last me for several years to come."

"I scarcely think any attempt will be made to intimidate *me*," asserted Milt confidently. "In some places threatening letters and warn-

ings have been sent to persons who have fallen under the displeasure of the band, but nothing of the kind has occurred about here."

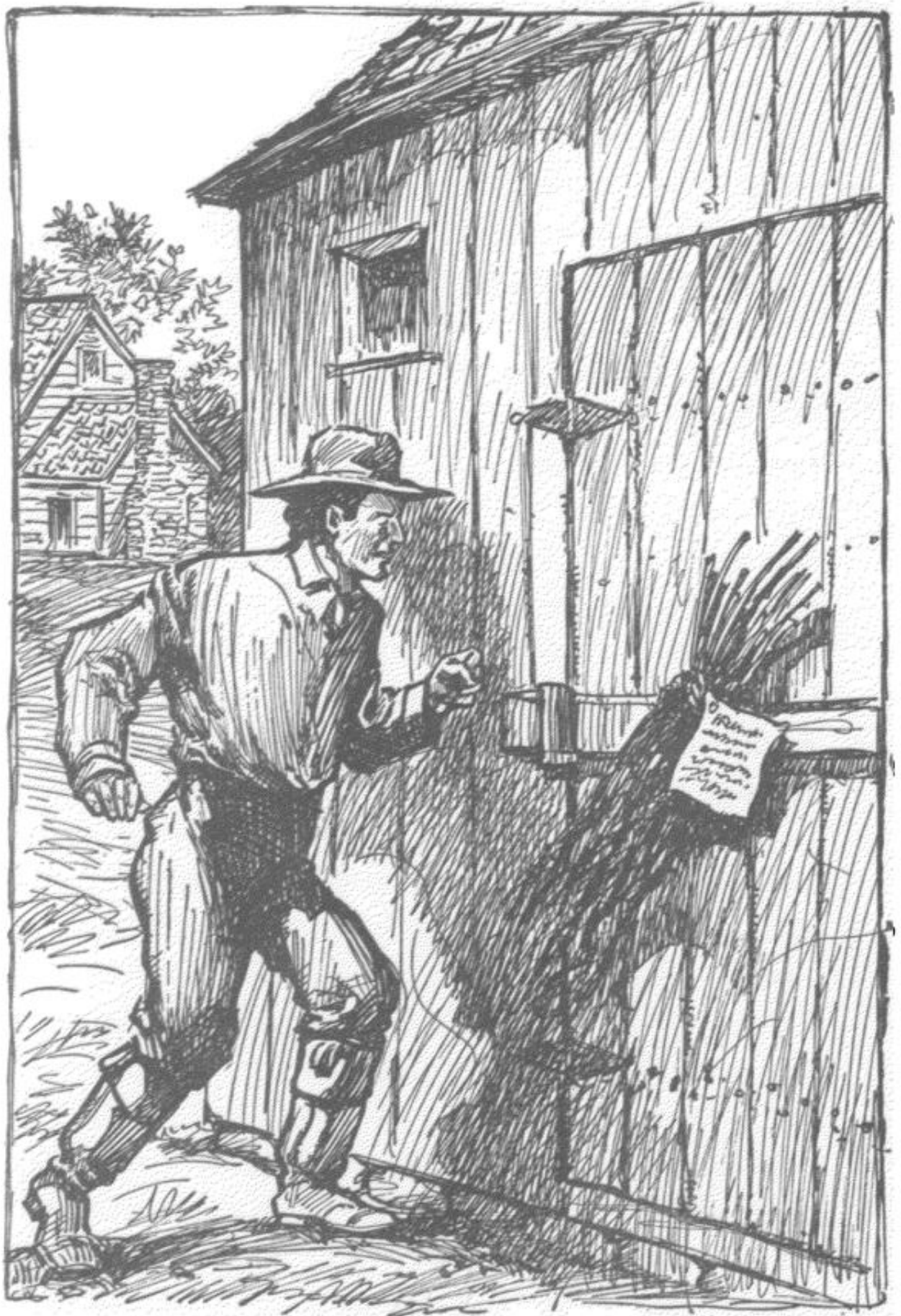
"Don't you think it would have been a wise plan to let the growing of tobacco alone until these troubles are settled?" inquired his wife.

"No, I do not. They are trying to force the farmer to cut out his crop of tobacco this year, but—as I have said before—this is a free country, and it seems to me a man should be allowed to grow what he chooses on his own land."

"It would seem so, and yet when to do this is to invite trouble, it appears to me that the wisest thing would be to leave the matter alone."

"I hate to be driven against my will," argued Milt. "I have set out to raise a crop of tobacco this season, and I don't want to back down. That is why I have put my plant bed in the garden near the house, so I can protect it, if necessary. I think, though, there need be no uneasiness along this line."

The next morning on going to his barn, Milton Derr found tied to the barn-door a bundle of switches and a crudely written note to which was fastened some matches and a cartridge.



DERR FOUND A BUNDLE OF SWITCHES AND A CRUDE NOTE ON HIS TOBACCO BARN DOOR.

The note ran as follows :

“Milt derr, you’r bein watched, we have an eye on you, we hear you air goin’ to turn dumper an’ sell yore crop to independents, also air fixin’ to raise another crop. Better not, these three things air for sech as you. Yore weed may go up in smoke before it’s ready for the pipe. Go slow. N. R.”

Milton Derr slowly read over this illiterate note some two or three times before he seemed to gather its full meaning, then he carefully folded it up and put it in his pocket. Surely someone must be trying to play a practical joke on him by sending such a communication as this, and yet, taking into consideration the numerous rumors of happenings in other localities, this ill-spelled epistle possessed all the ear marks of a genuine note of warning from the terrible Night Riders.

“I must keep this from Sally,” he muttered, “at least until I can get my tobacco safely delivered, and it’s up to me to deliver it at once, before the Night Riders conclude to pay me a visit, as this note intimates they may do in the near future.”

“Sally was not so far from wrong after all, when she said trouble would come of this,” he added. “When once I can get my crop safely delivered and out of my barn, there is little further danger to apprehend.”

Acting on this supposition, Milt immediately after breakfast began preparations for removing his crop, and with the aid of two hired men was ready by noon to start for the point of delivery some miles distant, telling his wife that he would return sometime during the night.

After supper Sally sat down to do some mending, and among other things to fix the pocket-linings of the coat her husband had laid aside for a heavier one during his long drive, and this note of warning, which he intended to keep from her knowledge for the present was the first thing she came across during her self-imposed task.

CHAPTER XXXII.

On reading the threatening anonymous missive which her husband had put in his pocket and forgot to change to his other coat, Sally quickly found food for disquieting thoughts. What if the Night Riders should learn that he was away delivering his tobacco, and were to come during his absence? Still, if they intended coming, she hoped that it might be on this special night while her husband was away from home. She did not fear for herself but only on his account.

Then she fell to wondering when her husband had received this warning—there was no date on the note from which to learn. Milt had made no mention of its receipt, even when he was talking about the Riders to her the night before. This silence on his part, and the fact that he had so suddenly decided on delivering his tobacco at once, won her to the

belief that the threat was a thing of very recent occurrence, perhaps of the past few hours, and that to it was due his present haste to get his barn empty before any unwelcome nocturnal visit should be made.

Suppose the Riders had spies out, and were aware of the fact that her husband was even then delivering his crop to independent buyers, and should try to capture him on his way home. A great uneasiness took possession of her at this thought, and after several futile attempts at sewing, she finally let the garment drop to the floor, and with clasped hands sat staring intently into the fire, and listening anxiously for some sound betokening her husband's return. Every now and then she went to the front door, and looked anxiously out. The early spring night was crisp and cool and the stars shone brightly. Each time there was no disturbing sound to mar the deep stillness that greeted her, and after listening awhile, she went again within doors and sat down by the fire.

The night slowly wore on as she sat there listening, almost in the same spot where the

Squire had sat ten or twelve years before, as he, too, listened anxiously to hear the approaching hoofbeats that would advise him the Night Riders were on their way to attack the New Pike Gate, and that the desired capture of his nephew was but a matter of brief delay.

On the third or fourth trip to the front door, Sally heard the sound of approaching horses, not the ones that Milton and his men had used for the hauling of the tobacco, but a small cavalcade, coming rapidly down the road. There was a certain familiar ring of the iron shoe on the hard surface of the pike, that struck a sudden key-note of fear in her bosom as she listened. She remembered that ominous sound as she rode alone to the old stone quarry the night that Milt was put on trial as a traitor. Perhaps the band was still inclined to look upon him as one, although the evil influence of Jade Beddow was no longer to be feared.

Sally found herself mentally tracing the approach of the cavalcade along the public highway from the direction of the hill country whence it came. Now the horsemen were gal-

loping along a level stretch of road some distance away, then there was a curve and the sound diminished, and presently almost died away as a deep cut in a hillside was reached.

Again it grew clearly distinct, increasing as the horsemen drew nearer the avenue gate. Would they pass on by? The listener fervently hoped that this might be the case, but no, close upon the hope, there was a brief cessation of hoofbeats, then she heard the click of the avenue gate-latch as the cavalcade came through. The Night Riders were again a thing of actual reality. Her first thought was one of thankfulness that Milt with his rash impetuous nature was not there to defy or enrage them, her second a regret at her own utter helplessness. She closed the door softly, locking it, and went into the room where she had been sitting. She remembered also to close the door between this room and the smaller one beyond, in which the children were soundly sleeping, then she stood still waiting.

The subdued sound of horsmen coming down the avenue and circling around the house reached her acute ears, and soon upon this came a clear sharp "Hello!"



THE TOBACCO NIGHT-RIDERS CALL ON MILT DERR.

She went slowly to the window, and raising it, partly opened a shutter and looked out.

"What is wanted?" she asked.

"We want Milt Derr. Tell him to come out."

Sally was on the point of saying that her husband was not at home, when suddenly there flashed into her mind the thought that perhaps she might be able to pacify them and send them away before Milt should return.

"What do you want of him?" she asked.

"We want to talk over the tobacco question."

As Sally glanced back into the room and saw Milt's coat lying on the floor where it had dropped from her idle fingers, a scheme quickly popped into her head that she resolved to put into execution.

"All right!" she answered, "I will call him and have him dress and come out."

Some minutes later the front door opened and the muffled figure of a young man in a large overcoat, and with a hat slouched over his face, stepped out into the starlight.

"Show us your tobacco beds," a voice demanded.

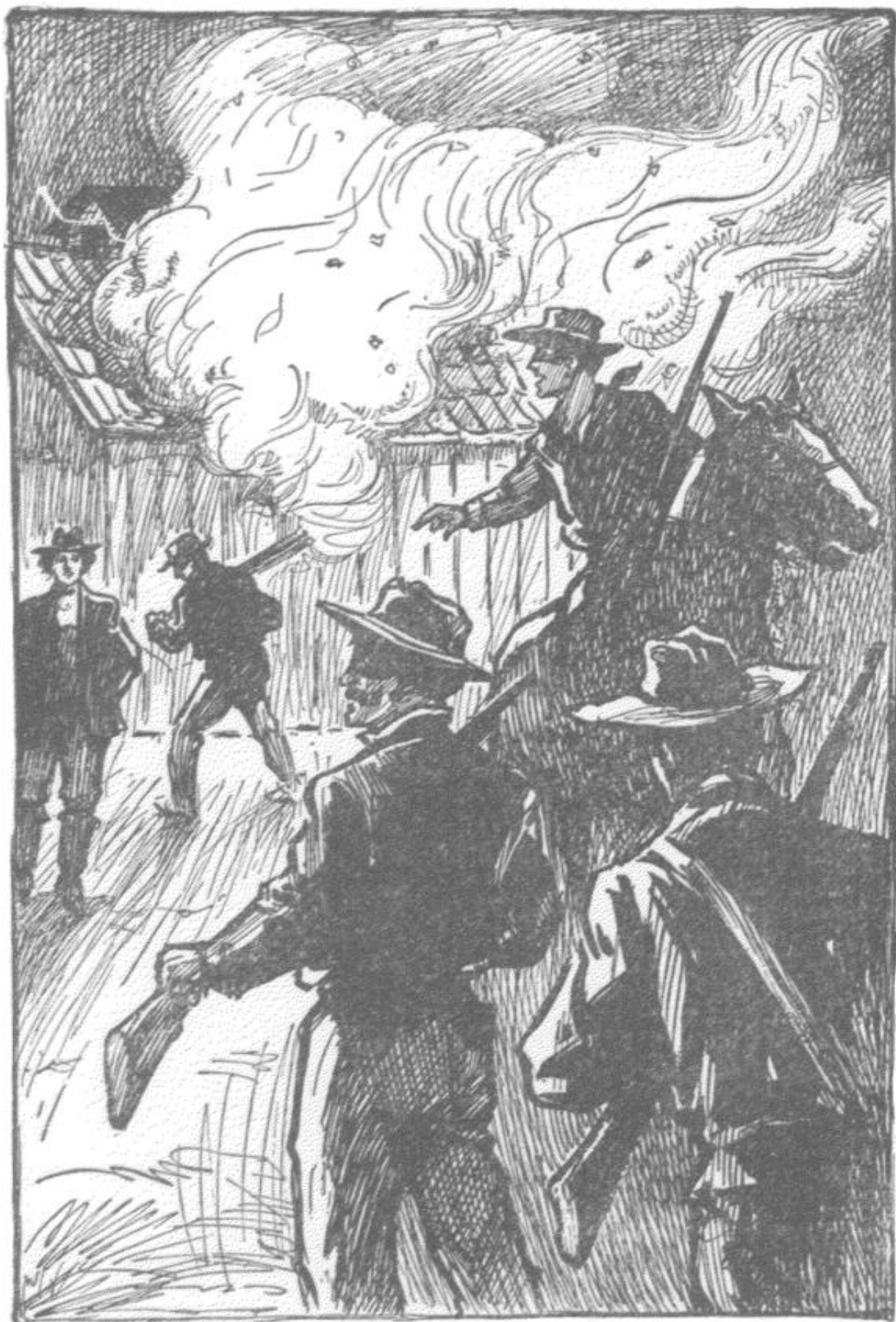
The figure nodded assent and went slowly in the direction of the garden, while several of the masked horseman followed close upon its footsteps.

When the garden-gate was opened, the figure silently pointed to a long white stretch of canvas running the length of the north boundary fence, and protected by it.

"Tear off that canvas!" demanded the leader, and as the covering of thin cotton was stripped from the bed, two or three of the horsemen rode up and down it, crushing the young plants and grinding them into the yielding soil, then a portion of the frame of the bed was dragged the entire length of the bed, scraping from its surface whatever plants had escaped the trampling iron hoofs.

When this had been accomplished, the torn canvas was gathered up by the horsemen, and the silent guide ordered to lead the way to the tobacco barn.

On reaching it, two of the riders dismounted and went within, carrying the cloth with them, but soon they reappeared.



**DRESSED IN HER HUSBAND'S CLOTHES, SHE LED THEM TO THE
TOBACCO BARN.**

"The barn is empty, the tobacco has been removed," they announced to the leader.

"Empty, is it?" he answered with an oath, "then fix it so it will not shelter another crop."

The men went inside again, and soon a dull light began to glimmer through the cracks between the boards, rapidly growing in brightness as the flames began to fasten over the dry surface of the wooden framework, aided and fed by the tobacco sticks that were being piled like fagots high upon the spreading blaze. Short tongues of flame leaped upward, and crept out here and there along the blazing walls, while spirals of copper-colored smoke began to uncoil into the night like fiery serpents, scattering myriads of sparks in their trail.

The scene began to light up weirdly, throwing a ruddy glow against the sky, and bringing into sharp relief the surrounding objects. The horses and their masked riders stood boldly out like statues of ebony from the background of bright light.

"Boys, give the dumper twenty-five lashes!" cried the leader.

The two men afoot, who had fired the barn, started toward the motionless figure that had looked on helplessly and silently, keeping as much in the shadow as possible. Almost at this moment a slight commotion was heard in the direction of the barn-lot gate, and several masked men came through the gateway, bringing with them a prisoner.

"Here is the dumper who has sold his tobacco!" they cried. "He is just getting in from delivering it. We took him off the wagon just now."

"What fellow is this?" demanded the leader looking in the direction of the shrinking figure the two riders were about to lay hold upon.

Sally, throwing back the heavy coat and pulling the slouch hat from her head, answered:

"It is I. A woman."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

For a brief while only the crackle of the flames, eating their way through the dry oak framework of the barn, disturbed the silence that followed this unexpected declaration, then a murmur of surprise ran from horseman to horseman, while Milt broke into astonished speech:

“Why, Sally, what are you doing dressed up in my clothes?”

“My fear for you made me bold. I didn't want them to know you were away delivering your tobacco, for fear they would follow you, and so I tried to make them think I was you,” she answered falteringly, and then, her courage ebbing low, woman-like she began to cry.

Whether the sight of her tears, or the pluckiness of her attempt at passing off for her husband appealed the stronger to the leader of the Night Riders I cannot say, but the captain of

the band turned suddenly to Milton Derr and said:

"I think we have shown you in strong enough terms that we do not approve of the stand you have taken on this tobacco question, and have made it perfectly clear that there must be no more tobacco crop grown by you this coming season.

"The crisis in the tobacco situation is near at hand. If all the growers will agree to control the production and pool their crops they can soon control the prices as well. It is such dumpers and renegades as you that have delayed the victory this long, but despite your stubbornness and the many difficulties you have helped to throw in the way, the victory will surely come, and the long down-trodden grower will conquer.

"For the sake of your wife here, we are going to omit a part of the punishment you deserve, but I cannot promise as much if we have to pay you a future visit. ¶ To your horses boys!"

The men afoot quickly vaulted into their saddles, the little cavalcade wheeled about and



"REVENG IS SWEET!" SAID DERR. "NO, NO, MILT! YOU ARE UNHARMED, THAT IS ALL I ASK."

like shadows, horses and riders soon faded into the night, red-tinged with the glow of the burning building.

As the ring of hoofbeats grew fainter and fainter along the highway, Milton and Sally, hand in hand, stood watching the fire gradually die down, and the swarms of sparks grow less and less as they floated off into the darkness, then the two slowly went to the house.

"The villains! I'd like to hang the last one of them!" cried Milt in a sudden outburst of wrath as the full extent of his losses dawned upon him.

"Hush! Milt, I am more than satisfied that things are no worse," answered his wife gratefully.

"But my barn is burned and my plant bed destroyed!" exclaimed Milt.

"You are unharmed, and that is all I ask."

"I'd like to get even with them for this night's work, and I will," he announced vindictively.

"No! no! Milt, you must do nothing of the kind," declared Sally. "Let the matter rest just where it is. Remember, you are looking

from just the opposite standpoint from which you looked a few years back. It is now *your* property that is being destroyed, and not other people's. This makes all the difference in the world. You must not be too severe on these Night Riders, for my sake, if for nothing else. You see," she added coyly, "I married one of them myself."

THE END.

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