MISTRESS HETTY

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MISTRESS HETTY.

To

William H. Thomas,

with the affectionate regard of the author,

this volume is dedicated.

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CHAPTER I.

THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE.

The old Oranaug Inn stood hard by the road leading through the ancient village of Woodbury, and was about the first building approached by the traveller from the south. It seemed, and seems to this day, to stand like a sentinel guarding the long, tree-embowered street of the town, for, as one goes up by the way of the Southbury road, which is over the old Indian trail, once leading from the Housatonic river north to Bantam, the line of demarcation betwixt the open country and the village is sudden enough to cause surprise.

And if abrupt to-day it was far more so over a century ago, as, to the south, for many miles, lay a semi-wilderness broken only by the river and the clearings of the yeomanry who had chosen for their homes this fair valley of the Pomparaug. Like all Litchfield

county it is a lovely country, passing from ruggedness of outline (as though nature had placed a perpetual scowl upon the land) to the lapping of low hills, soft valleys and exquisite distances, as if the same mighty power was begging forgiveness for its sometime harshness.

With the frown of a towering height of forest-clad rocks on one side the smile of the wide meadows of the Pomparaug on the other, silent and sleeping lay the town of Woodbury on a night in the early spring of 1775. Through the length of the black street the Oranaug Inn was the only building showing a light that might prove a guide or an invitation to hospitality for the possible wayfarer. The wet March wind, softened on its journey from the south, yet with a shivering chill in it, sounded a diapason through the barren elms about the door, violently swung the creaking sign-board on its twisted iron bracket as though it would drive the painted image of the old sachem, Oranaug, from its frame, and then went howling up the wide highway. Great patches of sodden snow showed like ghosts in the hollows and to the north of every obstruction, while in the lee of houses and where the woods were thick they wasted themselves in wreaths of vapor that blew away like

smoke. The rotten ice crashed under foot, and on the southern slopes of the roads the mud was deep and tenacious.

As though in protest against the comfortable rise and fall of the fire, the light of which shot through the small panes of the coffee-room or bar of the tavern, the wind banged the ill-fitting doors, rattled the casements and roared down the immense chimneys like a veritable evil spirit.

In common with most taverns of the day, especially those throughout Connecticut, the bar of the Oranaug Inn was comfortable enough at all times, but doubly so on a night like this. The fire in the cavernous chimney threw its light on the conventional array of pewter pots and platters ranged over the bar, each piece winking in the rise and fall of the glow; while the two candles which were supposed to illuminate the immediate vicinity of the "tap" well-nigh shivered themselves out as their flames shook in the searching draught. The high-backed settles were drawn close and the table placed between them; the tall clock clicked with a tick that could be heard above the noise of the wind, and the black rafters of the ceiling held mysterious depths of shadow in their courses.

In ordinary times the tavern would have been deserted long since, for to the steadygoing New Englander the hour was late. But to-night the room had held a sprinkling of inmates, as the post had been hourly expected from Hartford, the old Indian trail being a fairly direct route from that town to New York. Grave matters were afoot and every eye was turned toward Massachusetts Bay, where the political pot was boiling hard and in momentary danger of boiling over. As the hours waned without the appearance of the looked-for messenger, one by one the sleepy farmers had withdrawn until at last there remained only Squire Strong, the chairman of the "Committee of Inspection," and a few of the younger element of the town, held by patient expectancy and a desire for sensational news.

The squire, by reason of both age and his office, sat in solitary state on the end of a settle, armed with a long pipe and a glass of spirits. Lounging on a small bench, somewhat removed, were three of the aforesaid sensation-seekers, great, strapping specimens of the rising generation, while in his own particular chair, tipped back against the woodwork of the bar, with a hound lying at his feet, sat old Tobey, the host of the Oranaug, fast asleep, his snores keep-

ing admirable time to the swing of the clock's long pendulum.

It had been tedious waiting. The committee itself had given over hoping for the post, and leaving the chairman to represent them in case it should arrive, had retired to their homes and beds, and now, but for the wind, the clock, the snoring host and an occasional whisper among the trio on the bench, all was silent.

Though his eyes were closed, the chairman was not asleep. This was seen in the energy with which at intervals he pulled at his pipe as though troubled in thought. And the squire was troubled in thought—indeed, he was trying to untie the knottiest problem of his official life. The "Committee of Inspection and Observation," picked by the town from among the most solid men of the valley, had been empowered and directed by the "High Court" at Hartford to weed out the royalists of the township and see to it that the heresy of loyalty to George III. of England did not spread. The committee had done its work well, using star chamber methods in its proceedings, and without fear or favor had swung the club of its commission over each suspected household. Even Jeptha Beacon of the "holler store," the wealthiest

and most influential merchant in the colony, had fallen under the ban of the committee, though to the disgust of its worthy chairman, who had vigorously pressed the charge, he was acquitted of disloyalty to the colonies, the only thing found against him being the fact that he had been shrewd enough to buy all the salt for sale for miles about and had been holding that indispensable commodity at an exorbitant figure. The most the committee could do in this case was to decree a certain fixed price on salt and compel the old gentleman to sell to all comers on specified days.

This failure to convict was, to the energetic chairman, a source of great annoyance, but it was a small matter compared with the case now confronting him. The Rev. Archibald Challiss, of the Episcopal church, had appeared in his pulpit after a short absence from town, and had openly prayed for the king in the face of his having been warned to forego that portion of his ritual. During the following week he could not be found, though the next Sunday saw him in his chancel, where he again not only asked the Almighty to bless his sovereign, but to bring confusion on the traitors who were trying to disrupt the kingdom.

The town was aghast, but the then existing laws

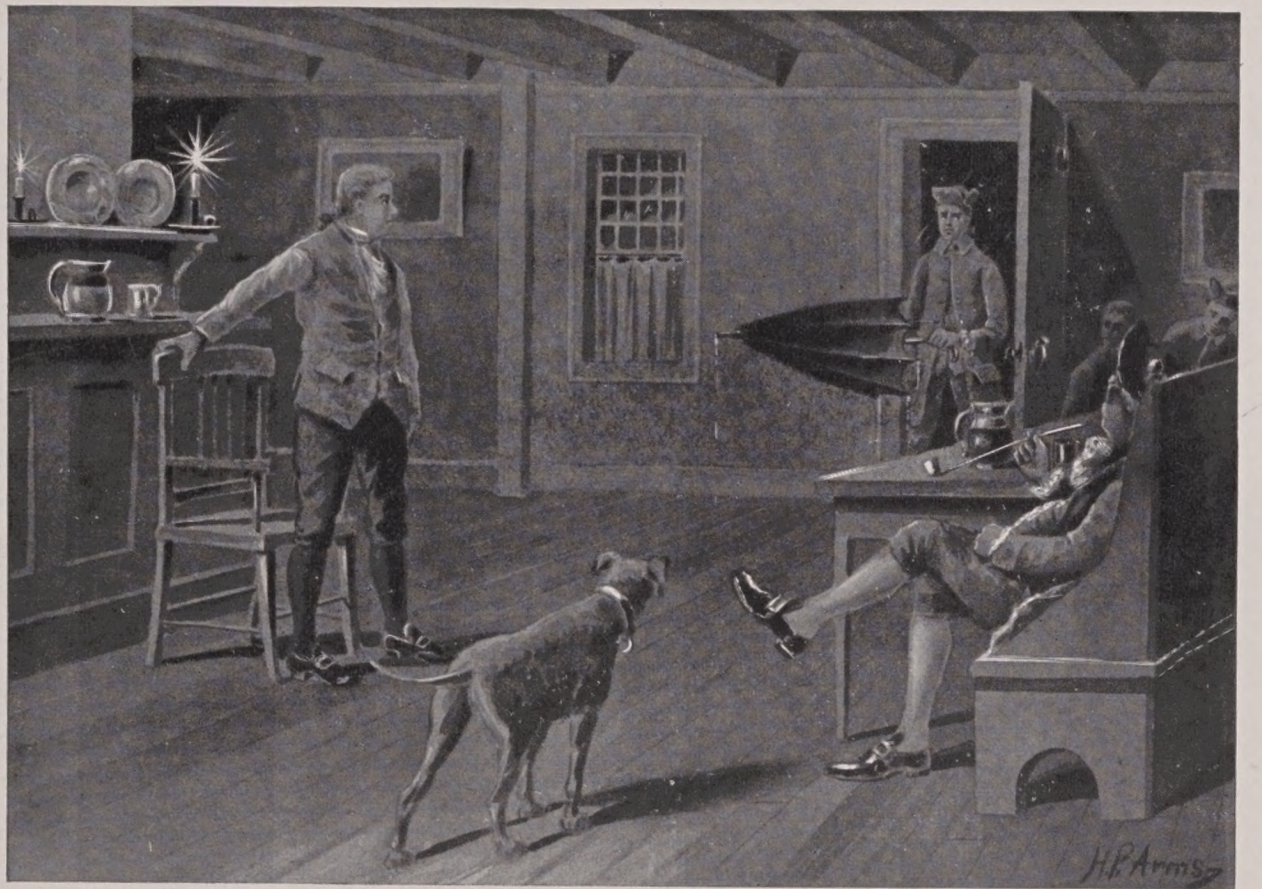
of Connecticut forbade a minister being molested on the Sabbath on any pretext, and the committee's hands were tied for that day. On Monday the Rev. Challiss seemed to have melted into thin air and had continued to remain invisible, though he was seen to enter the Glebe house, which on being searched failed to discover a sign of his recent presence, and its inmates professed a profound ignorance of the whereabouts of the rector.

It was this matter which was now disturbing the chairman. A stern faced man, severe—even fanatical—in both politics and religion, it irked him sorely to be thus defied by any one, especially by a representative of the Church of England, and his usually genial temper was soured as he brooded over the manner in which both the town and the committee had been flouted. As it was, his present displeasure was shown in low mutterings and such violent puffs on his pipe that at times he was shrouded in a thick, blue haze.

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW-COMER.

The clock was just beginning to whirr preparatory to striking the hour of ten when a noise was heard without and the hound bounded to his feet with a short bark. At the same instant the door of the room opened, admitting a fierce blast of wind, which hurled the sand on the floor half-way across the apartment, and with it came a man whose appearance indicated that he was at least one remove above those on the bench. The salutation greeting him, however, showed he was no one of importance, and, simply ordering a glass of rum from the now aroused landlord, he walked across the room with a lurch which betokened slight intoxication—no great sin in those days—and seating himself on the settle opposite the squire, stretched his legs to the fire, first carefully depositing against the wall an immense green cot-



"The door opened, admitting a fierce blast of wind, and with it came a man." See page 16.

ton umbrella, then a recent innovation into the colonies. He was a young man—not above twenty-three. His face was not prepossessing nor was he in rude grace, strength or figure the equal of any one in the room. But if Nature had failed to greatly favor him in these respects, he was not repellent. A quick, though decidedly furtive black eye, delicate hands, showing him a stranger to hard, manual labor, and a clean-cut look about him gave him individuality enough to place him somewhat in contrast with the others. His dress, too, was a shade less rough than the coarse garments of the rest, and his hair, of an inky blackness, was queued and beribboned with the greatest care. The fact that his umbrella was the source of a rivulet of water which trickled along the floor, and that his small-clothes were soaking, showing that the weather was growing worse as the hours progressed. As he received his measure of rum from the landlord he broke the silence sharply.

"The post has come and gone, Squire Strong. He left his packet at Deacon Walker's, together with his horse, and then took himself off afoot."

The burly figure of the squire straightened with surprise as he asked:

"Did ye see him?"

"I did not," was the short reply.

"And when did he arrive, good Master Cyrus Bent?" asked the squire, with a slight knitting of the brows at the idea of the committee having been thus ignored.

"Some two hours agone," was the rejoinder.

"What?—and hast thou loitered for two hours?" demanded the squire as he rose to his feet. "Dost think I have the patience of a setting hen to await the whim of a boy? Two hours—and I——"

"So please you, sir," broke in the young man, apparently abashed, "I little thought the committee would be in waiting on such a night—I little expected to find you here at this hour. I was acting as escort to Mistress Hetty Wain and only dropped in here for——"

"The Glebe House lass, ha!" interrupted the squire, not mollified at this reference to the subject of his recent thoughts. "And 'tis Mistress Hetty who may account for that frivolous green tent ye brought hither! Where got ye that abomination? Has the rain ceased to fall by the Lord's will that ye seek to hide from a wetting? 'Tis against sense and reason!"

"'Tis somewhat aside from the subject," returned

the young man, looking up with a smile that was almost a sneer; "but on that footing, and with due respect, you had better take the roof from your house or stand yourself and family outside to meet the next storm. Why do we seek the shade in summer or the fire in winter?—the Lord holds as one both heat and cold!"

"He has ye there, Squire," broke in the landlord. "Faith, I think the new notion o' carryin' a roof wi' ye is none so bad a one—albeit it makes a man look like a toadstool."

"I tell ye, Cyrus Bent," said the squire, with an angry flush, ignoring both the landlord and the matter in hand. "I tell ye thy ways are well known and this hovering about the Glebe house savors of a desire for an alliance with Episcopacy. Mayhap ye have a league with the Domine Challiss and are used by him for traitorous purposes. Let me but hear the tinkle of the royalist about ye and I swear ye will smart for't. We like it not!—we like it not!" The old gentleman began pacing the floor. "And how now?" he continued, wheeling about, "What betwixt clarking it for Beacon, whose house lays but a stone's throw from the tory parson's, and dilly-dallying about the girl, have we not enough to warrant the probe being put

to ye? Does not the Glebe house an' the holler store hold enough of loyalty to the tyrant to make it worth while to suspicion ye? Fie on me, lad!" he suddenly exclaimed, lowering his voice, which had been raised until the room rang; "fie on me! I mean not to be overharsh wi' ye, but my bed has been waiting me these three hours an' I have the length o' the street an' a Noah's torrent to face. I doubt ye not!—I doubt ye not!" And with a quick transition of temper possible only in those possessing a soft heart, the squire turned and took down a heavy cloak hanging on a peg in the back of the settle.

Under the lash of the squire's tongue and the but half-concealed grins of the three sitting against the wall the young man hung his head, though the baleful light in his eye plainly indicated his unforgiving temper. He held himself well, however, and as the old gentleman flung his cloak about him, said: "I am sorry you are so put out by my delay, Squire Strong, and to shield you from the Noah's flood you fear I will loan you that same green tent to ward it from your venerable head."

This was spoken with such a show of seemingly genuine humility that the slow brain of the elderly man failed to catch the disrespectful import of the words.

"Nay, lad," was the kindly answer of the squire, as he carefully knocked the ashes from his pipe lest its long stem should be broken, and settled his three-cornered hat more firmly on his head. "Ere I would crawl along Woodbury street like an overgrown turtle under an ill-fitting shell, the drops might be buckshot. Good-night to ye all."

But Cyrus Bent was in a peculiarly defiant mood. What with the recent small clash of words in which his superior logic had failed to make him appear the victor, and what with other matters bearing on him, he had no intention of letting the squire depart just then. For an instant a gleam of venom shot from his black eyes (venom being largely mingled with his nature), and as the chairman laid his hand upon the latch the young man spoke as though his remark was of the most commonplace character.

"By the way, squire, I saw the domine to-night."

The old man swung about as though on a pivot.

"The domine! The domine who?"

"The Domine Challiss, to be sure."

"And where saw ye the Domine Challiss?" demanded the old man, as he returned to the center of the room, profound interest mingled with anger showing on his broad face.

"At the Glebe house—or, if not within, at the door of the same."

"An' ye did not arrest the man in the name o' Congress and the committee!" gasped the squire, snapping the pipestem in his excitement; then, with great violence dashing the remains of the clay to the floor, "'Fore God! ye dullard, were afeared, or be ye hand in glove with his mouthings? Or are ye slow to know how he has insulted the town and openly blasphemed by asking the Almighty to damn a righteous cause? I think we may well suspicion ye!"

It was plain that Cyrus Bent had not looked for this outburst as a result of his attempt to hold the old patriot, for he appeared to shrink beneath the tirade. Gathering himself together, he glared back at his opponent, and, speaking deliberately, said:

"Why do you doubt my loyalty to the colonies, Squire Strong? I have openly exposed the presence of the rector, because—because—well, as for arresting him, he tops me four inches and outweighs me two stone; beside, there was his god-daughter betwixt us."

"Well, well!" returned the chairman, impatiently; "an' 'twas on account o' pounds an' inches an' yer lass that ye held yer hand, hey? Is that it?"

"Aye, certainly," came the ready reply.

"An' ye stand not betwixt the rector and justice. Am I right?"

"You have it precisely."

"Then, by the great Power, I'll put yer mettle to the test!" exclaimed the old man, with a change of tone. "An' ye have no love for the domine, go now with me, storm or calm, an we'll set the man under lock an' key in half an hour. He is at home—that I have yer word for. Are ye ripe for't?"

Well had it been for the young man had he then and there closed with the offer; but instead of leaping at this proposal to vindicate his loyalty to the patriotic cause he visibly quailed. He mumbled something under his breath, of which the words 'Mistress Hetty' and 'ingratitude' alone were heard, and, with a helpless look around, sank back on the settle from which he had risen, saying: "I cannot do that—indeed, I cannot do that!"

Then it was that the squire's temper came to a white heat. "I have ye now, my lad!" he thundered, walking up to his victim and snapping his great fingers in his face. "Ye flinch at the opinion of the domine's god-daughter if ye lay a hand to dig out the old fox, but willing enough ye are to mark the

burrow and have others bag the game. I tell ye now that ye be a coward an' unworthy o' the wench. Does the parson stand betwixt ye an' the lass? I fancy so! I fancy so! Now, listen! To-morrow the committee calls upon the domine on the strength o' yer information, an' mark it, ye shall be with them. Ye will make it plain then whether ye be for the colonies, the king or yerself only, so rest ye on that and hold yerself ready. In my opinion ye love yerself most, an' the king comes next. Hold yerself ready, I tell ye."

And with this the squire abruptly turned and left the room, shutting the door behind him with a bang.

CHAPTER III.

HIS OWN PETARD.

With the heavy, slouching movements of overgrown, muscle-bound youth, the trio on the bench gathered in their long legs and prepared to depart, the loud guffaw following the exit of Squire Strong showing at once the scant fellowship they held for Bent, as well as the restraint under which they had been placed by the presence of the chairman of the Committee of Inspection. With unconscious coarseness they jibed the young fellow on the settle with the "fix" into which he had gotten himself, advising him to take himself and "umbrell" to bed and hatch a scheme to get even with the "old man." With keen animal enjoyment they had witnessed his discomfiture, and as they plunged through the inky blackness of the street it was "admired" how the

squire "had skinned Cy Bent, who daresent be a-holdin' his nose so darn high arter this."

But, strange as it may appear, Cyrus Bent was not thinking of the squire, as he sat where he had fallen on the settle, but of the Rev. Archibald Challiss. It was he who had precipitated the trouble. In the slightly rum-fogged brain of the clerk of the "hollow store" there was an appreciation of first cause—Challiss—and all effects relative thereto sprang from the rector. By far too conceited to admit that his own blundering had aught to do with the more than uncomfortable position in which he now found himself, he went directly to first principles, for the sole reason that the squire had hit the nail squarely on the head—the rector did stand between him and Mistress Hetty Wain. Not that he was at all sure that had the obstacle been removed his way to win the hand of the girl was certain; but one stumbling block was there which he would be well rid of. His hot brain had taken a hold on two fancies—first, that the rector personally disliked him both for himself and his low social position; and, second, that he was casting something warmer than a fatherly eye upon his own god-daughter. That the man was forty and the girl but twenty had no weight in the moody, love-stricken

brain of Cyrus Bent. The demon of jealousy leaped at him and had sat upon his shoulder for weeks—aye, months; in fact, ever since that golden day when he had seen the girl come riding home from Hartford on a pillion behind her godfather. Since then his days had been miserable—his nights, hours of acute suffering. He saw what a foil the sprightly (and, to him), highly-educated beauty would make to the tall, handsome and dignified student of theology; a power in the church, an aristocrat to his fingers' tips. He saw, or thought he saw, something more than a fatherly solicitude in the rector's attention to the girl —something deeper than respect in her frank acceptance of the same. That her own father was also a tenant of the Glebe house brought no grain of comfort. "The devil might play fast and loose under the nose of Thaddeus Wain and he be none the wiser," was the comment of Bent. And to a certain extent he was right, for Thaddeus Wain had been cut down in his prime, and now, half paralyzed, more than half deaf and none too strong of mind, he was but little better than an overseer of home-lot chores, and passed most of his life smoking in the sun in summer and by the kitchen chimney in winter.

With a man possessing the nature of Bent the ob-

ject of his jealousy passed rapidly and by easy transition into the object of his hatred, and in just proportion as grew his love for the girl had grown a bitter, rankling, though secret, enmity to the man. His finer qualities were stifled under the mingling of these two overwhelming passions, which, God wot, have held the world in thrall since man began; and when, that evening, to his great surprise, he had seen the rector come to the door and receive his god-daughter without giving him the usual invitation to walk in himself, his brain conceived the weak plan of setting the committee on the track of the churchman who had so long eluded all attempts to arrest him, and, not dreaming that, as an informer, he would become implicated, had done so in a simulated offhand manner and with the foregoing results.

To meet Hetty Wain on the morrow would, under the circumstances, damn him forever in the eyes of that young lady. For her he had suffered much—from his standpoint. All the misery he had undergone appeared to him a sacrifice of self solely for her. His worship of this girl, shown only in affectionate innuendoes from which she appeared to recoil, only increased the debt she owed him. For her he had endured the merciless ridicule of the village on ac-

count of that green cotton umbrella which he had brought from Hartford to protect her pretty head, and for her, he protested inwardly, he was ready to die.

It occurred to him that he might warn the minister of the intended visit of the committee, but he saw the hazard of such an act as the absence of the rector would reflect on himself. He was the one young man in the village who had not been loud in the expression of his political opinions (if indeed he had any), there being too much on his heart and brain for him to take an interest in aught but the passion consuming him; and being both of English birth, a comparative new-comer in the town of Woodbury and without influence, the natural result of a failure to arrest the rector would be to put him in the light of a false witness and bring upon him the heavy hand of the committee. Public disgrace was an abhorrent thing to him. To him it meant jail in Hartford and a long absence from Hetty Wain.

His next thought was to have Hetty away from the Glebe house at the critical time, but even this being possible, it was folly to think that his part in the arrest of the minister would not be known far and wide. There were but two ways out of his

dilemma, and those—in some way to prove his high patriotism in the eyes of the committee, thereby leaving them nothing to doubt, or to warn the minister and take the consequences. The last would probably have been acted upon had not Fate seemingly put the possibility of the first in his hands.

In his deep perplexity the young clerk had twice gone to the bar and, in an abstracted manner, drank off two more measures of raw rum as though the liquor was a brain lubricant. The landlord, visibly showing impatience as his moody guest still lingered, was industriously covering the great backlog with ashes as a smart hint that he wished more for his bed than for the young man's custom, when the hound, now curled on the hearth, again leaped to his feet and growled a plain warning that a stranger was approaching.

As the landlord, still on his knees, turned to look over his shoulder, the door opened and, together with the new arrival, admitted a blast of wind that filled the room with its chilly breath. In a trice the guttering candles were extinguished, and the half-banked fire, now but a glowing mass of coals livened by the strong draught, was the only light in the large apartment.

With a muttered curse at the sudden darkness, the landlord hastened for a fresh candle, and by the time its feeble rays made the outlines of the room visible the new arrival had walked to the great chimney, thrown his soaking cloak across the settle, and, with his back to the fire, stood scanning the room and its occupants.

As the candle was placed upon the table and its light fell upon the face of the stranger, the half intoxicated man at the bar gave a lurch forward, then steadied himself as he gazed at the tall figure before him, for to all appearances there, in the flesh, stood the Rev. Archibald Challiss. Though the landlord did not appear to notice anything familiar about his late-coming guest, it might have been for the reason that the wick of the candle, being newly kindled, its light was none of the brightest, and the gentleman had the broad collar of his coat turned up about his ears.

As Bent gave a muttered exclamation, the stranger swung about to the fire, putting the breadth of his athletic-looking back to the room, and then all doubts vanished from the mind of the young clerk. It was the rector in person, the only differences noted being that his queue was tied instead of clubbed, and that

in lieu of his usual pumps he now wore heavy riding boots well splashed with mud. In his well-known and resonant voice the new-comer bespoke a bed which had felt the warming-pan, then, ordering a glass of spirits, sat himself down by the dying embers to await the landlord's return, gazing moodily the while at the faint blue wreaths of smoke drifting up the chimney.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ATTACK.

What the Episcopal rector could be doing at the Oranaug Inn at an hour close to midnight, asking for a bed when his own house was within rifle shot, was something more than a simple puzzle to the now addled wits of Cyrus Bent. Could it be that his enemy desired to escape from the town, knowing the danger that always threatened him was daily growing greater? If so, he would hardly have chosen the inn in which to conceal himself that night. What could have happened to render his hiding-place unsafe? It had recently held him securely enough.

Nothing to clear these matters presented itself to Bent, nor did he give the subject much thought. The one thing plain to him was that at the fire sat the rector, whom Providence had clearly placed in a position to be warned. The conditions appeared to be an answer to an unspoken prayer.

Casting a glance about to make sure he was unobserved, Bent silently crossed the room, and, stooping to the ear of the seemingly engrossed rector, whispered:

"Get from the town to-night, sir; you are in danger! The committee is going to the Glebe house tomorrow morning. I heard so not an hour since. I tell you this at great risk to myself."

For an answer the sitter turned about suddenly.

"The devil it is! What has any committee to do with me, and how am I in danger?"

As the supposed divine thus spoke he came to his feet, throwing down the collar of his coat as he faced Bent, and that young man staggered back as he saw the stranger's face now full in the stronger glow of the candle. If it was the Rev. Archibald Challiss he had grown a small, brown, military-looking mustache within a few hours, but aside from this novel addition to his features and a change in the cut of his black clothes, it was the minister. There was the same figure, the same dark eyes, the same straight nose and facial contour, with its strong and handsome outline of chin and forehead. The voice was the same, but the manner was totally different. The action was too quick, and lacked the quiet dignity of the rector,

and without a doubt the stranger was much younger —in fact, not over thirty years of age. For an instant Cyrus Bent blinked at the man before him, who, in turn, tried to look through his sudden and unwelcome disturber; and then, finding his voice and his wits together, the clerk stammered:

"I—I took you to be the—the Domine Challiss! Are you—are you his ghost?"

"Challiss! Challiss!" broke out the stranger, impatiently. "Well, I suppose I do look like Challiss, nor have lacked being told the same, times enough. Where is Challiss, in the name o' God? Have I not been pounding at the Glebe house for an hour past? The place is deserted."

"Nay, he was there to-night!" answered Bent, recovering himself.

"There to-night and allow a man to stand outside! I tried each door and window. The place was as tight as a fort and as silent as the pit!"

"Like as not," was the answer; "but he is there—or was. What would you have of him?"

"And is Hetty—I beg her pardon—is Mistress Wain with him?" asked the stranger, with something like interest taking the place of the disgust he had shown.

Bent gave a gulp. "I think she is," he answered, slowly and suspiciously, just as the landlord re-entered the room. Then, as an idea flashed on him, he continued with a decided raise of voice: "I think she is; but, sir, the times are a bit twisted, and as you are a stranger it behooves me, a man loyal to the cause, to inquire what business you have in the house of a pestilent Tory, and that, too, late on a stormy night!"

The landlord stopped in his progress across the room, while a broad smile broke over the face of the new-comer. For a moment he silently contemplated the clerk, and then said:

"My young friend, you have hardly the girth of groin or depth of chest to make personal demands, unless you can back them with something stronger than your body. What is my business to you?"

"It ill becomes you, sir, to slur the body God gave me," answered Bent, slightly pot valiant and strengthened by the thought which had leaped to his brain a moment before. "My demand is one no honest man need fear, and my backing what every traitor to the colonies may tremble at!"

"By my faith!" ejaculated the stranger, turning to the landlord. "Yon fellow is a free-booter in politics

and hot on the trail of both friend and foe. To what breed does he belong? At one moment he whispers in the ear of a supposed pestilent Tory, taking me to be your Rev. Challiss, to beware of a danger, I know not what; then, by the grace of your appearing, he holds aloud for the colonies. Take him off! Is my bed yet ready?"

"Your honor must have misunderstood," returned the host of the Oranaug, hovering betwixt the fear of offending his guest and the result of abetting him, at the same time plainly showing astonishment as he looked at the speaker. "'Twas easy to mistake you for the domine!" he concluded.

"I misunderstood nothing, neither have I anything to conceal," returned the guest, impatiently. "He did mistake me for the domine. I am lately from England, and am brother—or half-brother—to your rector. Am I plain? I bear certain papers to him. Mistress Hetty—but that is beyond the matter. All I would like to know is, what danger my brother can be threatened with that he must be warned against it as I was warned by this young man when he mistook me for him."

"Sir," said the landlord, "I was not present when he spoke such words of warning. I cannot vouch

for what he said. Master Cyrus has not been long among us, but I deem him not double-faced. The fact is that your brother is to be called upon by the Committee of Inspection to answer to a charge of treason to the colonies, Master Cyrus having pointed out the fact that he was at home at last."

"And has he been away?"

"Nay; who knows but perhaps the young lass of the Glebe house or her father? Withal that he is in danger of the tar-barrel if he is caught, he seems to go and come as he lists, yet none can unearth his hiding-place."

"The devil you say! Does this not jump with what I was telling you? So this same Master Cyrus has discovered my brother to your committee, and yet he would warn him."

"I know naught of the warning, sir; 'tis hard to believe." And the landlord looked from Bent to his guest and back again, while the stranger bored the young man with a look half angry, half contemptuous.

While this conversation was going forward the clerk's mind was in a whirl. He had made a tremendous mistake, and saw it. With the landlord's last implied doubt ringing in his ears he felt, however, that he might plunge through this self-made net by

" Bent staggered back, until the settle, catching him below the knees, tripped him." See page 39.

a total denial. His own bare word against that of the rector's brother—doubtless a Tory, also—would be ample to clear him. Here, too, was a chance to show his patriotic quality, having the landlord as a witness to his valor. With a somewhat cloudy conception of how to start in the right direction, but with a tongue that was clear enough and seemingly under command, he broke out:

"Hard to believe! It is impossible to believe! Look, Tobey! If we have missed the domine, here is game wellnigh as high—a man who bears papers to a traitor. And he has the effrontery to stand there and tell you that I warned him! It is monstrous! He lies, and he knows it!"

He drew a long breath and was about to proceed, but was interrupted. The new-comer took three steps toward his traducer and smote him heavily in the face with his open palm. Bent staggered back until the settle, catching him below the knees, tripped him. He fell across it, carrying it with him, man and settle going to the floor with a crash. Turning on the fairly frightened landlord, the stranger thundered:

"And is it thus ye allow a guest to be insulted in your house? Be ye in doubt as to my word? Damn such a hostelry! If your bed is no better than your

reception, my stay with ye will be short enough. Show me to my room."

The host of the Oranaug, mightily impressed by the commanding air of his guest, as well as by his prompt retaliation to insult, muttered a stammering apology as he took up the candle and led him from the room, leaving the man on the floor to gather himself together in the darkness as best he could.

CHAPTER V.

HETTY WAIN.

Hetty Wain stood at the door of the Glebe house looking up the road. It was a beautiful morning. The storm of the night before had gone, and now the sweet west wind was blowing a gentle gale, bearing with it a hint of the wonderfully forward spring of 1775. By leaps and bounds the warm rain had drawn the frost from the ground, and the air was full of the smell of the earth. The sky, soft and tender, was dappled with cottonlike clouds that drifted lazily across it, and the wide blue seas between the sailing islands were of wonderful depth. The naked trees in the yard whispered a tale of the coming season, and in the lulls of the wind the girl could faintly catch the roar of the swollen Pomperaug and the grinding of the hurrying ice.

The maiden herself was a fair type of the morning,

full of the flush and vigor of youth; gentle in breeding, beautiful in figure and lovely in face. Life seemed to spring from her, and the very doorway of the homely old house lost something of its square and uncompromising character as it framed the picture. Her clear, blue eyes were as deep as the velvety sky above her, and her whole being—from the end of her coarse shoe to the top of her pretty head—betokened the richness that goes with young womanhood alone. It was the bursting of the bud—the rush of early summer—the glory of the rising sun.

And yet, withal, there was a touch of something softly serious in the droop to the corners of her sweet mouth as she shaded her eyes with her small hand—a hand slightly calloused in the palm—and looked east. Under her eye and near the turn of the road she saw a crowd of people gathered about the front of Beacon's store, and for a moment her brows contracted. "It must be salt day," she murmured; "I hope it's nothing worse—and it's very late!"

And for the inmates of the Glebe house it was very late. The night before had been one of alarm, for the house had been beset by some one, doubtless in quest of the rector. Each door had been hammered upon and each window tried and tried again for the

space of an hour. Plainly enough the girl could see the prints of boot tracks in the soft loam of the yard, but of the number who had come with the hope of dragging the rector from his bed she had no idea. Daintily lifting her skirt of homespun, she stepped out. She might have been a scout in a hostile country, so carefully did she go the rounds of the premises. It was for more than eggs she was looking as she climbed the mow after probing the stall with its single fat pad and opening the cowpen. It was for more than to figure the remainder of the diminished woodpile that she peered into the recess of the shed. Even the pigpen partook of her scrutiny; and then, with a little nod as though of self-approval, she returned to the house. Soon after the back door swung open, and the solid wooden shutters of the lower windows were thrown back, letting into the long, quaint kitchen the slant of the brilliant morning sun.

As she hastened to prepare the breakfast—a simple enough meal in the Glebe house—there was no song on her lips, but, instead, a constant watchful shifting of her gaze through the window that looked east and toward the hollow store! Until the night before the house had not been visited by any one more formidable than Cyrus Bent for three days; but for the

young girl the strain of anxiety had hardly been less on that account. She knew that danger threatened her patron and godfather, and, womanlike, her fears became magnified at every unusual event. The group that hung about the door of the store might mean that it was the day upon which the townsfolk were at liberty to buy salt at the price fixed by the Committee of Inspection, or it might be that something untoward was threatening the rector.

For herself there was no fear. The hatred shot at the Glebe house had not been aimed at Hetty Wain. For her faith she was pitied; for her beauty admired and envied. Through the rector's Toryism she suffered a species of social ostracism, but it was not strongly marked and troubled her not the least. Against herself nothing was said. The superior attainments gained in her Hartford education, which ran from housekeeping to the high accomplishment of being able to play the harpsichord, and sing to it, to boot, prevented contempt, while her politics—presumably antagonistic to the prevailing spirit—was a matter of no moment, she being a woman. No one, not even the rector, had ever heard Hetty Wain open her lips and express an opinion as to the rights or wrongs of the existing stupendous agitation. No

one asked for her ideas on the subject; she was prejudged. Was she not an Episcopalian and an inmate of the Glebe house? And was that not enough? The girl had no intimates, nor did she seem to regret it. A few old ladies comprised her visiting list; but of the society of the young, with the exception of Bent, she had little or nothing to do. She was as one in a transitory state, hoping and waiting; yet waiting for what?

It might have been that hope, long deferred, or it might have been anxiety for her godfather that was dragging down the sober corners of her small mouth or throwing a shadow over her brow that morning. Be the cause what it might, it was not intended for other eyes, for as she laid the last pewter dish on the table the shuffle of a feeble step was heard on the back stairs and the door opened to admit a man whose loose shamble and nerveless movements betokened the cripple, and on the instant her face cleared. Hetty went up to her father and kissed his stubble-grown cheek, at the same time shouting a "good-morning" in his ear.

"Good-morning, child! Has Jake done the chores?" he asked, in a tremulous voice.

"He won't be here until noon to-day, daddy!" she

screamed back. "He filled the woodbox last night, and now there be only the pigs to feed. I let the cow out. Is god-dad stirring, do you know?"

For an answer the old man—though he was scarcely fifty—only shook his gray head, and, sliding with difficulty into his chair at the table, proceeded to eat his meal with that slovenly carelessness which marks the weak in mind. With the tenderness of a thoughtful and loving woman, Hetty attended to her father's wants, which were few; nor were they satisfied ere the sound of a man's heavy footstep was heard on the barren back stairway, and it was just then that the girl cast one of her numerous glances through the window. To her surprise the black crowd about the store had become active. A large fragment appeared to have detached itself, and was coming down the road toward the Glebe house. Both instinct and reason told the girl that such a gathering of men could have but one object in view. With a quick exclamation she flew to the stairway, crying:

"They are coming again, god-dad!"

The steps ceased.

"How many this time, Hetty?" asked the rector, his sonorous voice sounding rich and clear.

"Oh, ever so many! And you with little sleep, I

warrant, and less breakfast! Stop a moment—here!"

She ran back to the table, seized a loaf therefrom, laid upon it a generous lump of butter and returned to the door. "Go now," she continued, "and pray the siege will be neither protracted nor bear fruit. Don't come near me—I mustn't see you, god-dad! My eyes are tight shut! Hurry! hurry!"

"Hetty, my girl, act no lie in that manner!" said the minister, as he advanced into the room and laid his hand upon the latch of the parlor door. "What have I to fear from this mob? Cannot one bear persecution for a righteous cause? I would be unworthy of my office were I not willing to suffer for my king! I would willingly meet them were it not that you——"

But Hetty was in no mood for delay. Laying her hand on his arm, she urged him into the parlor and closed the door between them; then she hastened to the table, snatched up the third plate with its knife and fork, and thrust them into the cupboard. It must not appear that the minister was within the house.

In the mean time from the parlor sounded the steps of the rector as he crossed the floor. There was the noise of a latch, of a tumbling woodpile, and then a crash as though a heavy timber had fallen.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SEARCHING PARTY.

The sound of the falling timber was that of a signal. With a lightness and swiftness of motion known only in the young, the girl took from its nail a coarse broom and hastened into the parlor. It was a cold and cheerless apartment. The fire was laid ready for the brand, but it had not been kindled for many a day. On either end of the high chimney shelf was a massive silver candle-stick bearing an unused candle, the space betwixt them being filled with autumn boughs, their leaves now withered crisp and brown. A single mahogany table, three heavy chairs and a fine harpsichord against the wall comprised the furniture. The only relief to the desolate stiffness of the room lay in the newly laundered surplice that hung like a ghost from a peg in the wall. In the broad radiance streaming through the window the foot-

prints of a man could be seen on the sanded floor, their direction leading from the kitchen door to the closet by the chimney side. To this closet the girl went. Save for a pile of logs within, it was empty, but without a moment's hesitation she shifted the wood, throwing it against the rear wall in a disorderly heap; then, with a few passes of the broom, she obliterated the marks on the floor and ran upstairs to the rector's room.

In her desperate hurry, methodical withal, it was but a few moments ere the bed was remade, the room put in order, and every trace of its late occupancy removed. Then she placed her hand over her small bodice and looked from the window. The crowd had stopped midway in the road and was clustered about a common center as though engaged in consultation. Hetty breathed hard; then, with a heightened color born of haste and expectancy, but lacking another sign of her inward perturbation, the young girl returned to the kitchen and, with forced calmness, seated herself at the table.

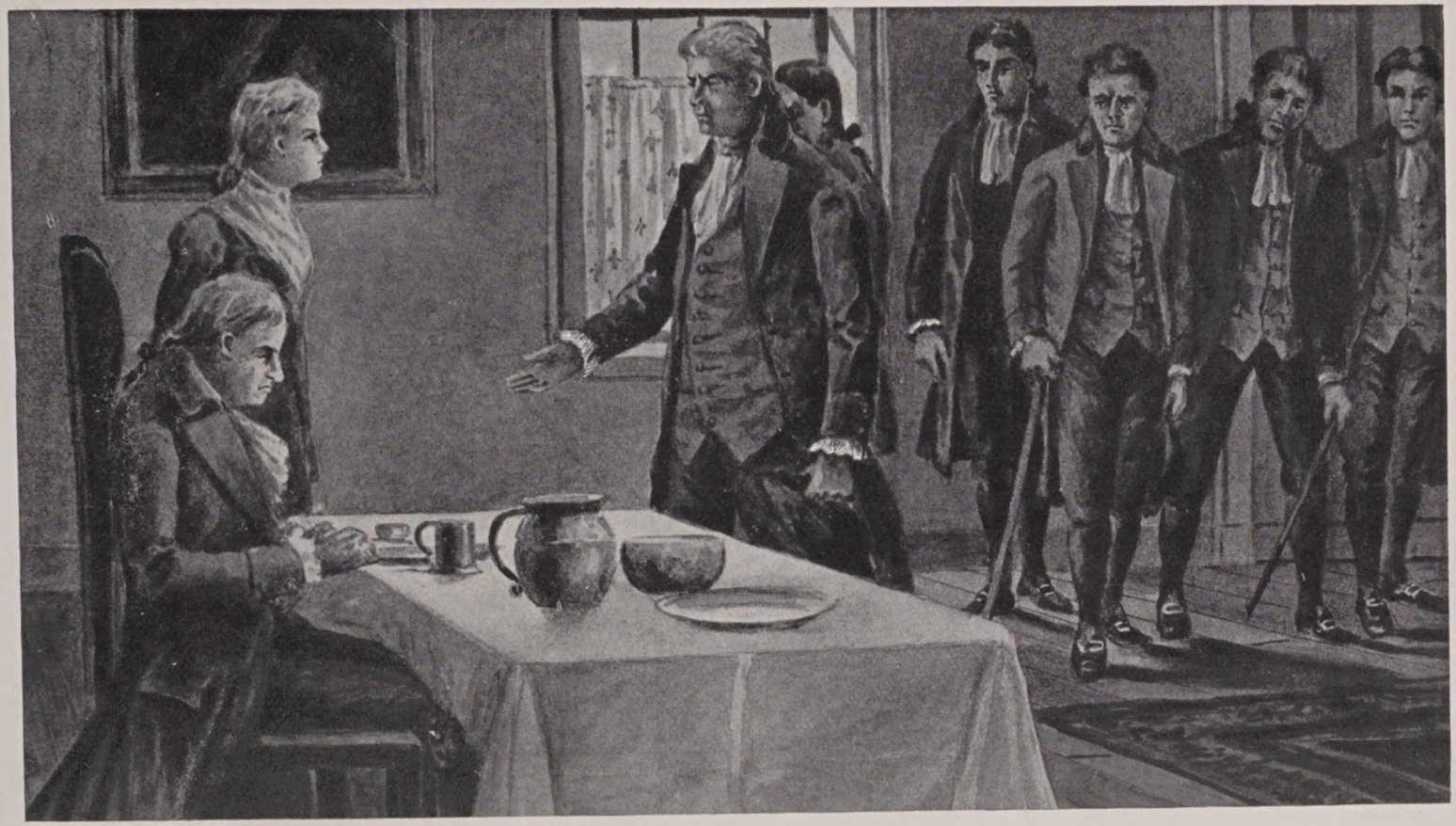
So rapid had been her movements that she waited fully three minutes ere the shuffling of many feet and sound of voices was heard from without. The noise was but a preface to the loud knock at the door,

which, without invitation, was immediately opened, and there walked into the kitchen the Committee of Inspection, headed by its redoubtable chairman, Squire Strong, the accompanying crowd of followers blocking the doorway, though they made no further move to invade the privacy of the house.

With well-feigned astonishment the girl arose from her seat, courtesying to her guests, and without further civility or pretense toward hospitality, remained standing, her eyes wandering from the squire to each of the committee in turn, finally resting on the face of Cyrus Bent, who brought up the rear and had sidled to the flank of the group farthest from the chairman. With something of wonder she marked the violent red welt that lay across the left cheek of the young man, though the rest of his countenance wore an unusual pallor; his eyes she did not meet, for he looked persistently at the floor. For a moment there was an awkward pause, then the chairman, clearing his voice as though to break the ice of the situation, spoke loudly:

"We wish to see the rector!"

Hetty walked from her chair to where her father still sat eating, he having apparently taken no more notice of the entry of the invaders than though their



" We wish to see the rector." See page 50.

advent was an hourly occurrence. Laying her hand upon her parent's shoulder, she answered:

"I am afraid you cannot see him to-day, Squire Strong. You see he is not here."

"He was here last night, miss," was the sharp rejoinder, "and he cannot be far off. Ye will bring him before us!"

Cyrus Bent looked up in time to catch the glance the girl gave him. To his surprise there was neither scorn nor anger in her face, but instead a smile, though whether of pity or amusement he could not determine, for at once she redirected her attention to the speaker and answered:

"Indeed, Squire Strong, I am not my godfather's keeper; besides, sir, I would not produce him if I could! Why do you persist in persecuting a man—a minister of God—who does but follow his conscience, as doubtless you do yours, sir? In what has he harmed any one?"

"Do not question me, girl! We are here in the name of the law to arrest a Tory dangerous to the State!" answered the squire, with a wave of his hand that indicated the entire committee, as he knitted his brows and showed his displeasure by an irritable raising of his voice. "This young man vouches for his

presence here last night. Will ye tell us where he is?"

"I will not! Do you expect me to be an informer?" was Hetty's retort, as she dashed another look at Cyrus and set her red lips tight. Then she continued, breaking out suddenly: "You have but two things to do—you or the committee, or whomever you may hire for the work."

"And what might these be, young woman?" asked the chairman.

"Search the house as you did before, and then, finding your searching useless, arrest me for a contumacious person and leave my helpless father alone to get along as he may. This is the most you can do, and I am ready. I am ready for anything but this continued persecution. If my godfather is but in danger through me he was never so safe!" Here she drew herself to her full height, her anger making her magnificent, and patted the invalid on the shoulder as though she petted a child. The paralytic looked up wonderingly, but immediately relapsed into seeming stupidity, while the squire, seeing no hope of bettering himself in a war of words with such a spirit, turned to his fellows, who had stood, hats in hand, and began a serious consultation.

There was much nodding and shaking of heads, whispered suggestions and pursing of the lips; but as the committee had laid out the plain plan of breaking up the royalistic nest which was sheltered by the roof of the Glebe house, they were not long in coming to a conclusion as to how to act in the case of the maiden of the rectory. The chairman, still as spokesman, stepped forward, his fine old face hardened by determination.

"Young woman," he said, "it has become our duty to act upon the suggestion ye have made. We believe ye to be standin' betwixt the domine and justice, and therefore are ye dangerous also. Your father will be taken care of; fear naught for him—an' it is for ye to make yerself ready an' follow us after we once more go through this building. It may not appear well to ye, but we think the High Court at Hartford may make ye a little less downright to those who only do their sworn duty to the colonies."

Hetty quailed inwardly at the unexpected result of her bravado, though she held herself erect, and, except for a lightning-like change of color, was apparently unmoved. Not so Cyrus Bent. His knees visibly smote each other. With something between a cry and a groan, he broke out:

"No, no! you will not do this! I will not have it so! Has not your cursed committee enough to do without hounding women?" Then, as one overwrought, he staggered against the wall.

What the immediate result of this outbreak would have been it is hard to determine, but at that instant there came a diversion. A noise of voices and scuffling, with a well-rounded oath or two, was heard from the yard, and a moment later a man elbowed his way through the throng which blocked the door, scattering it right and left. Like one in authority he strode into the room, with the exclamation, "What is all this about?" but, catching sight of the young girl, whose cheeks were now the color of ashes, he sprang toward her with the cry of "Hetty!" Like a frightened child she stepped from his outstretched hands, her eyes glowing strangely as she looked at him, her lips apart; then, with an hysterical laugh, which ended in a sob as her nervous tension gave away, she ejaculated:

"Sir! sir! Oh, Talbot! they are persecuting us!" and sank into a chair.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. TALBOT MARCY.

The advent of a total stranger occasioned something of a shock among the committee. His face and figure, so strikingly like the rector's, would have been enough to stir them; but, coming on top of the surprising explosion of Cyrus Bent, it created a sensation and a situation highly theatrical. The sturdy townsmen, variously swayed by their emotions, stood for a moment openly wondering at what to them was in the nature of an apparition, while the crowd without pushed and struggled for a coign of vantage at the door and window. But ere one of the inquisitors could gather his wits to cope with the new situation the stranger had wheeled about and confronted the group, his eyes ablaze, and, with a voice like a trumpet, he vociferated:

"Persecution! Thunder and devils! In what

manner and by what right do ye persecute a damsel? Are ye the worshipful committee of whom I heard last night? And, failing to find my brother, do ye think to vent your disappointment on her helpless head? Expound, in the name o' God! My patience is none of the fairest!"

"Your patience has little to do with us or our duty!" broke in one of the lesser lights, at which there came a shout from the yard, "Tar the Tory!" and "Pitch him out to us!" "Jail him!" and a variety of other cries, which were suddenly silenced by Squire Strong striding to the door and closing it in the faces of the throng without; then, coming to the front, and with a voice trembling from anger, he shouted in turn:

"Who be ye that dare to come betwixt us an' our actions? By the brand on ye we have yet another to deal with! A fig for yer interference! We be determined to catch the domine, an' 'twill be strange if ye be not shaken up in the same basket! This young woman knows the whereabouts of her godfather an' refuses to reveal him; therefore we commit her for trial as a person dangerous to the interests of the colonies. I tell ye we have our duty to perform, an' performed it will be! An' ye openly call

yerself his brother? Ye look the breed! By what right do ye break in upon us in this manner?"

"He struck me last night when I called on Toby to help arrest him! He bears papers from England to the domine—he confesses as much!" broke in Bent, who had recovered himself, and now stood pointing at the man upon whom all eyes were fixed.

"He does? An' why have ye kept this back from us?" demanded the chairman, without softening voice or face; but before an answer could be given the newcomer spoke.

"You are a lot of sheep with wolfish instincts!" he began, with a total change in his address. "Strike him? Aye, I struck him for the insult he gave me. He is naught but the whistling wind—he is of no moment—his actions of no weight! Listen, you sirs! I lack no respect for your office, but I question your right to hound a harmless gentleman whose sole faults are praying for the king and eluding you—the latter, I fear, troubling you more than the offence. Ye be good, God-fearing men, doubtless, and will not question the Christian spirit of my brother; why, then, does he do harm in praying for the king? Are ye not taught, and do ye not teach others, the lesson of love to enemies? Can prayers for your enemies

make them powerful against the right? Is your church for the Sabbath alone, that ye play with the devil and his passions for the rest of the week? Shame on ye!"

The presentation of this mixture of applied Christianity and sophistry took the committee somewhat aback. Even the face of the squire lost its angry cast and bore one of doubt. But it was not for long. With a natural instinct toward self-justification, he answered:

"We have the authority of the high court at Hartford, and, though your words, sir, be fine——"

"Authority for what?" interrupted the stranger.

"Authority to suppress treason in every shape an' arrest all treasonable persons!"

"And since when has it been treason to pray to the Almighty—even for the king?" came the sharp retort. "You forget yourselves, sirs. Your authority refers only to what the court would call overt acts—assistance to the enemies of the colonies or the giving of information to be used against them; and prayers are not interdicted, nor is private opinion. Nay, more—George of England is yet your king! I know of no act which has cut the colonies from the mother country, nor do ye. Has war been declared? It is true

that Congress is preparing an army for the struggle that must come; but your dignity would suffer less were you less ready to use your strength on an innocent man and a helpless maiden!"

"Sir, who be ye? And from where do ye hail?" demanded the chairman, visibly impressed both by the authoritative manner of the speaker and the undoubted truth of his statement regarding the relations betwixt colonies and king, but without abating his tenacity of purpose in the slightest degree. "Would ye argue that we lie still till there be a British dragoon in each house, and then follow our instructions? We expect as much from ye—by yer looks; but we happen not to be here to split words with a stranger—an enemy to liberty whose strength lies in a smooth tongue! We follow our commission, an' 'tis our intention to search this house. Failing to find the rector, we will hold the damsel for trial at Hartford."

"Ye will?"

"We will!"

"Well, your force is somewhat too much for my single arm, but at Hartford I shall be! Will ye not take me as a prisoner also? Am I not as dangerous as the maiden?"

"That we will, too!" vociferated the old man, walking up and thrusting his face into his opponent's. "Who be ye, I say, who dare bait this committee in this unseemly fashion?"

Instead of the wrathful explosion which might well have been expected, the stranger smiled broadly.

" 'Tis but fair to put ye in the light," was the ready answer, given in an easy, good-natured tone. "I am Talbot Marcy, late colonial commissioner to England, half-brother to the man ye are hounding, and colonel, by commission, in the Colonial forces now being raised by Congress. A week agone I left Boston as a dispatch-bearer with a dispatch to Governor Trumbull from Dr. Warren. From your governor I bore a packet to Deacon Walker, of this town. On my way I overtook the post and bore hither his dispatches for him, his horse having given out. Gentlemen, I am at your disposal for further inquiries."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PROTEST.

Had the platoon of British regulars made their appearance and placed the inmates of the house under arrest, the consternation could not have been greater than at the words of the stranger. There was not a man but who had heard of Commissioner Marcy, only one who doubted the truth of the statement, and not one who was willing to openly recede from the position taken by the chairman, who, on the foregoing announcement, had stepped back as though in fear of assault.

There was no spirit of subserviency in the breasts of our forefathers. Had the man before them suddenly discovered himself as George the Third, in person, there would have been no precipitate apologies or servile bending of the knee. The names of Warren and Trumbull had fully as much potency, but the hard-headed, hard-fisted sons of New England were

as loath to abandon a theory as to run from its consequences.

This mixture of respect and stubbornness had the effect of silencing all parties for the moment—all save Bent, who hung on vengeance against the man who had struck him, and whose brain (subtle enough at times) clearly foresaw that by the turn of affairs he was likely to be made the scapegoat of the day. No one would lift voice or hand to protect him, but he conceived how he could protect himself. He saw it all clearly enough now. That the minister was within the house at that moment he nowise doubted. He had no well-defined plan of action until the newcomer seemed to open a way. He would clear himself by finding the Rev. Challiss, and, according to the words of Talbot Marcy, if indeed it was he, the court would acquit the minister. It would at once determine his political position to the satisfaction of the committee, nor would it be a difficult matter to afterward explain the act to Hetty, that all might appear consistent with his love for her, and then——

But he went no further into possibilities. Raising his voice as though he had been the victim of an outrage, he cried:

"I protest! I protest to one and all! Let not

that man cajole you into leaving the house unsearched. You brought me here that I might be cleared or condemned, and if you depart without taking action I demand an acquittal. I tell you the domine was here last night, and is here now, and I can find him. Mistress Hetty Wain has neither heart nor hand in his coming or going, and, moreover, it would be a foul thing to do if you visit the shortcomings of her godfather on her head! The man before you has papers on him! Who knows him to be Commissioner Marcy? Are you to be blinded by a bald statement?"

He stood forth, his hands stretched out in appeal, and, his words ringing through the silence, variously affected his hearers. Hetty, who from the time she sank into her chair had kept her face buried in her hand, raised her head and said: "I thank you, Master Bent, for your defense; but your statement is hardly true. I know, or think I know, the whereabouts of the rector. Nevertheless, I thank you."

The voice was kindly, and the clerk's heart responded to the first words that might be construed as considerate he had received that day; Marcy scowled as he listened to the protest and rejoinder, while the chairman seized upon the opening offered.

"There is justice in the lad's words," he ventured. "'Tis but fair ye prove yerself, and, having done so, ye are bound to help us, for not only has the domine prayed for the king—which may or may not be an offense—but, by the Lord! I had well-nigh forgotten to tell ye that from the pulpit he has the same as openly damned the colonies, which, I take it, cannot be smoothed over!"

"Is it so?" said Marcy, with the same easy humor he had assumed. "Then has the study of theology addled my brother's judgment. Mistress Hetty, have you the smallest objection to their searching the house?"

"Not the smallest," replied the girl, looking away from him.

"Then off with ye on a fool's errand!" cried Marcy, turning to the committee. "As for this lady, ye may leave her under my guarantee."

"And of what value is your guarantee?" asked Bent, encouraged both by the way his words had been received by the girl and his apparent victory. "And by what right do you thus take charge of her?"

"Aye, aye! The lad is pointed, though somewhat heady!" broke in the squire. "Have ye aught to prove yerself?"

"Little enough, I fear me!" answered Marcy. "And for that, I will take all consequences. As for my vouching for Mistress Wain, 'tis but fair that she be allowed to speak for herself in the matter. Hetty, is the right mine?" His words were like a caress.

For an answer the blood leaped to the girl's face and throat, and as quickly receded, leaving her pale again. Her large eyes grew larger as she looked at the man before her as though to read his soul; then, without a word, she bowed her head and left the room, from which were heard her steps as she hurried up the stairs.

"I am not denied, at least," he remarked, quietly, though with a new expression to his countenance as his glance followed her. "As for myself, perhaps these will show; they are but letters from Dr. Warren whilst I was in London, and papers relating to the death of my mother, wherein we are told of our inheritance. This latter was my business with my brother."

Bent's spirits sank dangerously low. With the keen eye of a lover he had noticed the light in Marcy's face as well as Hetty's agitation as she tacitly acknowledged his right to protect her; but of the nature of that right the clerk had no idea. It was

enough for him to mark the stranger's evident power over the girl, and more than enough to see the ease with which he was clearing himself from suspicion. The hatred the youth bore the minister was being rapidly transferred to the brother, and in doing this he was very human. The fact that but little notice had been taken of his duplicity the night before was small comfort to him. It gave him no sense of safety for the future, and in fact he thought but little of it, so thoroughly was he aroused by the perception of an unknown relation between his love and this, to him, total stranger. He was swayed by an internal passion, of which nothing was discernible in his bearing, and as through a fog he saw the papers offered by Marcy pass from hand to hand, and heard without heeding the questions and answers given and received. A clutch seemed to grip his throat and hold him speechless. The sunlight on the floor turned to a blood-red patch before his eyes, and he felt an insane desire to fly at his smiling enemy, who did not even deign to notice him. At last he was brought to himself by hearing Hetty's name as the committee came to its conclusion. It was the squire's voice that roused him.

"We will leave Mistress Wain under your guaran-

tee for a space, sir, until we can have the sense of Deacon Walker on the matter. I have small doubt of yer credentials. Come, Master Bent, make good yer boast. Neighbors, the morning somewhat wags; let us get through the house."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SECRET OF THE HOUSE.

Bent drew himself up with the air of a man aroused from sleep who suddenly realizes he has a serious duty to perform, and there was an ominous setting of his teeth as he followed the throng from the kitchen to the parlor. From here, without the slightest system, the hunt began, each man taking his own direction and searching after his own fashion. In half an hour the house had been gone through from cellar to attic. Not a cranny had been left unscrutinized. Every chest, press and closet that could have held a boy was examined. Even the empty cider barrels in the cellar were probed through the bungholes, and this with as much earnestness as though it had not been tried the week before by the same parties.

Every man had looked up the throat of the great

chimney, but the arch of stone which covers its top prevented the light from penetrating from above. As a last resort the fire was lighted on the parlor hearth, and there was an air of the ridiculous in the expectant attitudes of those who stood about it as they watched to see the rector tumble from this, his last possible refuge, fairly smoked out. As the flames grew in strength so did the disappointment of the searchers, and when finally it was declared that the rector could not be beneath the roof of the Glebe house, one by one the disgusted farmers dispersed, taking with them most of those who still lingered about the dooryard, yet leaving within, beside the regular inmates of the rectory, Colonel Talbot Marcy and Cyrus Bent.

This latter individual had searched with more method than the others, possibly because he had more at stake, and possibly because he felt sure that the Reverend Challiss had been bestowed so securely that ordinary means would fail to find him. The very willingness of Hetty to have the house gone over proved that much, but it nowise abated the young man's certainty that the roof then covering him covered the domine also.

He had seen nothing to lead him to suspect one locality more than another, but he had carefully

sounded every floor and the walls of every closet, doing his work so slowly and thoughtfully, yet so hatefully withal, that by the time he was about to attack the attic the rest of his fellows had finished their tasks and returned to the parlor, where the final act of burning out the chimney was in progress.

The attic seemed a most natural place for a refugee, and for that reason Bent thought little of it. He had determined to go to it, however, and was about approaching the door of the rector's bedroom, through which he had gone most carefully, when he caught sight of Hetty standing at the head of the front stairway, listening with the greatest attention to the sounds that came from the parlor. So absorbed was she that it was plain his presence had not been noticed, and the clerk, halting like a hound at point, watched her a moment with his soul in his eyes. Then and there came to him the conviction that the rector was hidden somewhere downstairs—the rapt attention of the girl to things below assuring him of this more than possibility.

The passionate determination of the youth made him clear-headed in one particular at least. He saw that a precipitate betrayal of his suspicions would avail him nothing at the present time; he saw, too, that the

fox would finally unearth himself and that he might be a witness. Quickly stepping back, he looked about him for means of concealment. He fairly reckoned that as soon as the searchers left the house his quarry would be forthcoming—and not before; in the meantime he himself must disappear. At the end of the room and facing a desk or heavy center-table strewn with papers and books stood a large clothes-press, the doors of which had been left ajar by some searcher a few moments before. To this he crept quietly, and, crowding himself behind the folds of a black Geneva gown, awaited events without the slightest doubt as to the success of his move, or the smallest stroke of conscience at his unfairness and lack of dignity.

Meanwhile Colonel Talbot Marcy was striding the kitchen floor as though a prisoner. The easy good nature that had marked his face during the latter portion of the conversation with the committee had gone, and in its stead was a fiery impatience. There being no place of possible concealment for the rector in the kitchen it had soon been deserted—even the old man at the fire having shambled out into the yard, and the walker was free to vent his nervous tension without witnesses. Now and again he opened the back stairs

door and essayed to go above, but at each attempt voices in the upper rooms showed the committee was yet unsatisfied, and he withdrew. There was no anger in his dark eye—only fierce desire held under control —a state more to be dreaded than the former when it meets with opposition, and far surpassing mere anger in lack of reason.

Presently the footsteps and voices of the searchers centered in the west room or parlor; then after an apparently interminable time the committee began leaving by the front door. As the last one passed out through the brooding silence that fell upon the house the man in the kitchen heard the light footsteps of the girl as she ran down the front stairs. In an instant he had dashed through the parlor and came upon her as she entered the opposite door. Without a word he caught her in his arms and kissed her on the lips, she struggling to undo his grasp as she turned her face from him.

"Talbot! Talbot!" she ejaculated; "let me go; let me go! By what right——"

"By what right!" he exclaimed, holding her from him, but not freeing her; "by what right? By the right of a famishing man! By the right I take! By the right you gave me less than an hour agone! Great

"'Talbot! Talbot! Let me go.'" See page 72.

God! have I hungered and thirsted for thee for two years to be denied now?"

"By the right of strength alone!" she returned, interrupting him as by a violent movement she twisted from his hold on her. "Hunger—and thirst! And have you thought naught of possible starvation for another? Am I to be denied all rights? Two years, Talbot!" she cried, pointing her finger at him; "two years; two deadly years of silence and then you burst upon me with a cry of your rights. You suddenly appear like one from the dead, and because, and when in terror for my liberty and your brother's life, I appealed to you as I would to—to any last resort, you take this advantage! Oh, but you are a man!"

"Two years!" said Marcy, amazedly, stooping to bring his eyes to the level of the flashing blue ones before him. "I wrote each month for a year, and without a word in return. Has my worthy brother converted you to his political creed? Dost love king so much that you have none for his enemy? I thought so, I swear, until you placed yourself in my hands an hour agone, and left the room."

"Art not ashamed, sir?" she cried. "What cared I for colonies or king when my heart was breaking? Two years agone I gave you my promise. You went

away on your mission, and from then until to-day I knew no more than that you were alive. Have I suffered nothing? and must I, on the instant, humble myself and submit to you because, forsooth, you so desire? You speak of rights; have I none?"

"And who told you I was alive?" asked the man, in a low voice.

"My god-father, with whom you probably corresponded without a message to me; that is, for aught I know."

"Good God! What treason has been played between us?" ejaculated Marcy fiercely, as he turned and strode across the floor, perplexity and anger taking the place of the passion that had flamed in his face a moment before. "You know that my priestly brother and I were never lovers—and yet, and yet, he could not have done this thing. I wrote him but once, I swear. When did you leave Hartford?"

"Some eight months since."

"Only that?" he interrupted.

"But that was far later than intended," she continued. "Talbot, you have the brain of your calling. You are a diplomat and would twist facts and fancies until——"

"Hush, Hetty. I begin to see! From the Rever-

end Archibald I had an answer bidding me shelter myself from the rising wrath of Britain; telling me that my errand abroad would but damn myself and those about me; also informing me that you were again under his care. To this place, to Woodbury, I sent my letters to you; not to Hartford. Have they been lost or forgotten and are lying pigeon-holed in some musty corner awaiting your call? Who holds the mail in this village?"

"I know not!" she replied, drawing herself to her height and following his steps with her eye as he still paced the floor. "I know not! Oh, Talbot! If you be deceiving me—lifting me by a hope propped with a lie, in the name of God stop before you do so hideous a thing. If, indeed, to possess me would be happiness, look to yourself. I will not be played with—not even by you."

"Played with!" he vociferated, wheeling about. "Dost know my nature so little, then? And yet, were I lying you would be justified in this. I tell thee, Hetty, I would have thee only in the light of truth; otherwise would you be but wife in name!"

She clasped her hands and looked at him, a glorious smile trembling on her lips, but ere she could speak Marcy continued, "And now where is my weak-spirit-

ed brother? Is it not high time for his return? This hiding without is but a matter of days; he will be finally caught. Yet I must see him at once, for there is little time to spare before I go."

"Go! When do you go?" she gasped, the smile vanishing.

"What boots it when?" he replied, "so that——"

"Well?"

"So that you go with me!" He turned suddenly and caught her in his arms again, but not until he had seen her sweet face turn crimson, nor was her struggle for liberty so fierce as to command his respect.

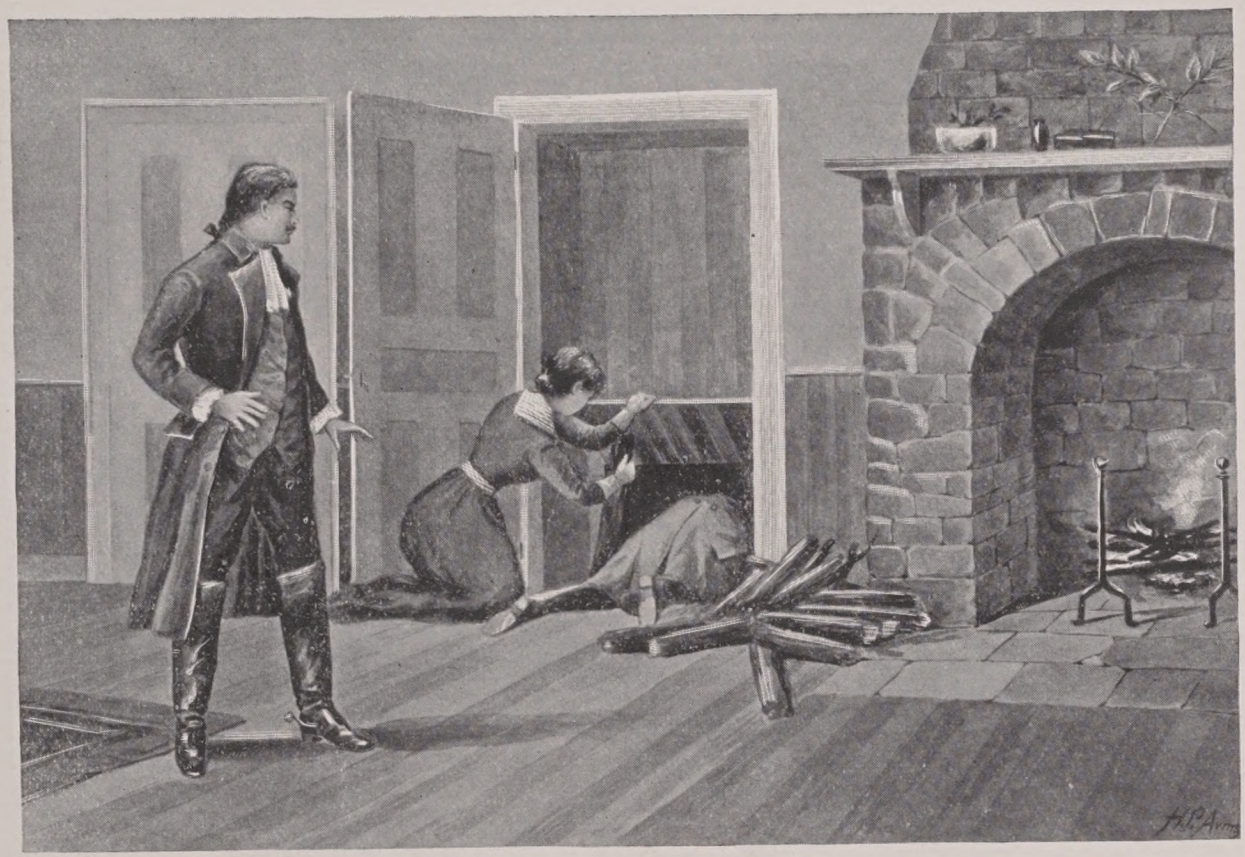
"But the letters—the letters, Talbot! I may appear weak, but I am—I am very firm!"

"Aye, thou art adamant, my sweet; but the letters —aye, the letters; but his lordship first, then Hetty, trust me, I will find those letters or raise the town. They cannot all be shipwrecked, nor is there an embargo on every port. Only if I prove the letters——" He hesitated.

"If you prove the letters! Well——"

"Then may I buy a pillion for my horse?"

She turned rosy again. "We will abide by god-dad for that," she answered, quickly, crossing the room. "Poor god-dad! He is buried alive, and I had about



"The space was filled by the body of the rector." See page 78.

forgotten him!" She went to the closet and threw open the door. "Would you know the secret of the Glebe house, and will you swear never to reveal it?" she demanded, archly.

"I will swear to anything your majesty desires," he returned, with a low bow of mock humility.

"Then unbend your dignity and pull down those logs."

He did so, leveling the pile she had hurriedly thrown up earlier in the day. "Now step to the window," she commanded, "and tell me if any people are about."

"Aye," he answered, after an instant. "There be three men under the butternut across the road; hobbledehoys, doubtleses, waiting for ploughing weather. They look harmless!"

"Watchers, perhaps—and more than perhaps. I fear them not. The hunt is cold for this day at least! Come—you wish to see god-dad! Look here!"

She picked a small fire stick from the floor and rapped three times on the rear wall of the small compartment, repeating the blows slowly. In a few seconds a slight noise was heard—a creaking as though from a swollen door being forced, and then, for two feet from the floor, the boards at the rear of the closet

suddenly sprung upward and outward, showing a hole well-nigh square and large enough to admit a good-sized man.* Hetty at once propped the open valve with a log, and the space was immediately filled by the legs and body of the rector as he backed from his hiding place.

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*The minister's hiding place still exists and is shown to visitors.

CHAPTER X.

BENT'S DEFEAT.

Marcy looked on in amazement as the soiled and cobwebbed covered refugee emerged into the light, but in an instant it was all clear to him. Then he advanced, and clapping the blinking man on the shoulder, exclaimed, with a laugh: "I arrest ye, Archibald Challiss, for high treason to the colonies, as well as for lowering the standard of the cloth. Ha! ha! My faith! How like the coming in of Caliban!"

The minister scrambled to his feet with the utmost alacrity, and turned on the speaker, only to meet the smiling face and outstretched hand of his half-brother.

"Talbot! Is it Talbot? I—I thought you in England!" he faltered without the least cordiality as he took his brother's hand and gave it a perfunctory shake.

"And rightly enough up to eight weeks ago!"

"And—so you have arrived again in America?"

"Astounding penetration! Yes—I think I may say I have arrived!" rejoined Marcy, the good nature fading from his face as from head to foot he slowly contemplated the figure of his brother.

"And you are quite well, we trust?" said the rector, shifting uneasily.

"Are you using the 'we' plural or the 'we' ecclesiastical? If you are inquiring in behalf of Hetty, she already knows of my state. Yes—I am quite well. I have nothing to complain of—physically!"

"That is good; that is well!" replied the rector, on whom the sarcasm of his brother's words appeared to be lost. "Yes—yes, Talbot, we are glad to see you! Hetty, my dear, I cut but a poor figure and am quite famished! Talbot, if you care to go up with me while I make myself more presentable I will be glad to talk with you! Hetty, have they quite dispersed?"

"There is little to fear from the committee for the rest of this day!" broke in Marcy, "and I will await your return; that is, I am going for my horse and we will enjoy each other's society somewhat later. You doubtless guess at the nature of the business between us."

"You refer to my mother's will?" ventured the rector, interrogatively.

"Our mother's will might be in better taste; yes, that—and matters in general!"

The rector bowed his head without further remark, and, laying his hand on the latch of the hall door, opened it and passed upstairs.

"Talbot," said Hetty, reproachfully, as the minister's steps ceased to sound, "I am sorry you do not love your brother. It is very strange; he is, and has been, so good to me."

"By my faith! what think you of his greeting to me? Cordiality in extremis. I know I little deserve the wealth of affection he has poured on my worthless head by being good to you. I am an ingrate and—good God! what's that?"

The exclamation was drawn from the man by a loud cry from the floor above, followed by the crash of overturned furniture, which shook the house like a small earthquake. One look at the girl's blanched face was enough for Marcy, and without a word he turned and bounded up the stairs. The noise of scuffling, together with muffled cries, directed him to the rector's room, and he threw open the door to see his brother, coatless and unshod, struggling to hold down

the lithe form of Cyrus Bent, who was twisting with an energy that made the task a difficult one, even to his powerful adversary. On the floor lay the overturned center-table, the contents of which were scattered widely about the room, its weight bearing witness to the violence that had caused its overthrow.

As Marcy entered the minister loosened his hold on the prostrate man and straightened himself, but on the instant his opponent leaped to his feet and, seizing the rector by the collar, shouted as well as his panting would allow:

"I have him at last!" Then, indicating Marcy with a look, he continued: "If you be a friend of the colonies, as you stated but shortly ago, I call on you to assist me to arrest this man in the name of the committee!"

"Talbot, unfasten this madman?" cried the rector, as he vainly tried to tear away the hand that had gripped him. "He was hiding in my clothes-press and attacked me as I opened it, driving me against the desk in his frenzy. He is the clerk at Beacon's store. How he came here and for what purpose I know not! I have done the lad no injury, nor do I wish to do it now!"

"Nor have I done you one, if you will look at it in

the right light!" gasped Bent. "I call on you to surrender, sir. Your case is hopeless until you are acquitted, and this man, your brother, avouches you will be! You see, I am more a friend than aught else!"

"Hiding—ha! I fancy I catch the lay of the land!" exclaimed Marcy, as he stepped forward. "This gentleman and I are old acquaintances He is a leftover from the worshipful committee and has the talent of blowing warm and cool at once. Drop your hand from that collar, sir, else I'll break your arm!"

"Instead of doing which," replied Bent, savagely, "I ask—I demand your assistance. If you deny me 'tis but to confess that you are a false man—a double-faced villain!" With a sudden lowering of his brow Marcy exclaimed, "Thou sneak!" and raising his hand he struck the arm which held the rector a violent blow just above the elbow. The young man's grasp instantly relaxed, his arm dropping limply to his side. Seizing the benumbed limb, Marcy bent it backward, and catching his victim by the scruff of the neck marched the helpless clerk out of the room and down the stairs, his protests, now mingled with oaths, being no determent to his relentless captor.

Down past the parlor, in the open door of which stood Hetty, her hands convulsively clasped, the

struggling Bent was partly pushed and partly dragged to the front entrance. With a sudden movement the door was thrown open, and through a final impulse from behind the clerk was shot out before the astonished eyes of three men who were lounging under the butternut tree directly opposite.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DEMON OF REVENGE.

If iron can find the soul of man it found that of Cyrus Bent's as he picked himself from the muddy sward and fully realized the indignity to which he had been put, and that, too, under the eyes of his love. To him that moment seemed the climax of his existence, but, in fact, it was not, the difference being that his desperation was born of anger and not of despair. With eyes ablaze, and controlled by nothing more potent than the white heat of hate fed by pride, he ran across the road, and facing the three, who stood in mute wonder, shouted in a frenzied tone: "I have found him! He's there—the domine—and he was helped by his brother! I was beaten by treachery! Go back with me—you three or any of you—and help me take him before he gets away! Force to force—

force to force!" He paused for breath, his wild eyes running from one to the other of his listeners.

"Faith, I take it ye are a bit stumped an' have been manhandled!" said one of them. "Ye look as though ye had found the devil!"

"Nay, the minister is within the house, I tell you!" cried Bent, beside himself with eagerness.

"Then ye had better be tellin' th' squire an' goin' a bit slow! Goshermity! do ye take us for three fools to follow a fourth an' break into th' Glebe house? How came it ye stayed behind? Jest stand ye on one foot a minnit an' get ye yer wind an' yer wit! Nobody's goin' to run away right off—not us, anyhow!"

Thus abjured, Bent gasped out his story disjointedly enough, and with more or less accuracy as to detail. He calmed himself somewhat as he progressed, coloring the story as best suited his already injured self-respect and concluding with the statement that to tell the squire would avail nothing, as he had in mind that both glory and revenge would be denied him. As he proceeded a new interest held his hearers, their heads closing together, and at last, after having apparently arrived at an understanding, they walked slowly up the road, still talking, until on arriving at the store Bent left them.

There was little doing within. Jeptha Beacon looked askant, but said nothing as his disheveled clerk appeared only to pass through the back office and toward his quarters in the garret. The old man smiled grimly, doubtless comparing his own tact with his employe's lack of it; for the two precepts on which the proprietor of the "holler store" always acted and which had been such factors to his success, enabling him to die as he had lived—the wealthiest merchant in Connecticut—were "molasses catches more flies than vinegar" and "mind your own business."

Bent furbushed himself into shape and returned to the store, but the townsfolk on whom he waited that day got no more than monosyllables from the always taciturn young man. In no way ever popular, he was left to chew the bitter cud of reflection, save as at such times as his services were necessary—and his present thoughts were dangerous companions. Late in the day he saw Marcy riding toward the Glebe house on his recovered horse, and he set his white teeth into his nether lip until it bled. There was an air of impatience about him as the sun sank low, but this he fought against with some success. Three or four times during the afternoon he crept to the rum barrel and drank a stiff dram, which, beyond giving his black

eyes an additional sparkle, seemed to produce no effect upon him. As he was relieved by his fellow clerk, shortly after dark, he again repaired to his loft, stopping by the way to cut a dozen or more feet of small tarred line from one of the great loops of stuff that hung from a rafter. This he carried to his room and made into a small bundle. As he reached the head of the narrow stairs preparatory to descending he hesitated a moment, appeared lost in thought, then resolutely swung about and returned to his room. From a rough chest half-filled with his effects he drew out a pistol, tested the flint by snapping, loaded and primed it, and, as though afraid of himself, thrust it into the waistband of his breeches and hurried out. Ten minutes afterward he stood in the old town burying-ground under the shadow of a great hemlock close against the wall of the Episcopal church, and there waited as if by appointment.

"From a rough chest half filled with his effects, he drew out a pistol." See page 88.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HALF-BROTHERS.

Meanwhile, despite the excitement of the morning, matters had moved quietly enough in the Glebe house, the two brothers seeing but little of each other until they came together for the evening meal. The quaint kitchen was snug and homelike, for the air had turned chilly with the decline of the sun, and now the brisk firelight, the only means of illumination since the dishes were removed, danced through the apartment. From the spinning-wheel in its corner to the flashing diamond panes of the dresser, from the snowy curtains hanging over the windows to the clean, wing-swept hearth and swung-back crane, every article spoke of the hand of a perfect housekeeper. Hetty had retired to the parlor, from which, anon, came the sound of the harpsichord as she sat and improvised in the desolate room. She had been strangely silent

since noon. In the wood closet the valve was lifted ready for the minister at the first alarm. By the kitchen fire sat the deaf paralytic mumbling his pipe, gazing, as he had been most of the day, at the curling smoke, while on opposite sides of the kitchen table sat the two brothers.

Close together, the likeness they bore each other was not so strong as when apart, and yet the difference lay more in expression than in feature. The rector, pale and haughty, had the appearance and bearing of the born aristocrat, while the younger man, not behind his brother in either form or feature, showed mobility of countenance and an eye by far less calculating. Indeed, as he sat and scanned the minister by the jumping light of the fire, there was a look which might have been taken for amusement—an expression never seen on the face of the Rev. Archibald Challiss.

"And you, as a sane man, still persist in sticking to an empty form! Others have altered the ritual; why do you remain stubborn at your own risk?"

Thus spoke Marcy in return to some remark that had been made by the rector.

"It is of small moment to me how others may interpret their duty," was the answer. "I would be

unworthy of my cloth were I to back from the position I have chosen. I act on principle. When I took the oath of office in England I swore to uphold the ritual as it exists. It is not for me to break faith. You cannot understand this thing."

"Faith, I cannot! Indeed, I fail to understand how a man can be pig-headed over a matter that involves nothing, when by his stubbornness he risks his own liberty if not that of others. Have you thought of Hetty?"

"I have thought well of my god-daughter. She must pass under the rod!" answered the minister, wearily.

"She wellnigh passed under it this morning," replied Marcy, slightly raising his voice; "and had it not been for me there is strong likelihood that you yourself would now be starving in yonder hole, for I doubt me that you could have opened the valve while it was backed by a mass of logs."

"I have to thank you for it, Talbot; and yet—and yet it goes hard to think that we were rescued by one whose interests are traitorous. Regarding my danger from starvation, let me correct you. You know of my hiding-place, but you do not know that it communicates directly with the cellar by the mere

removal of a board. From it I could also reach the floor above and come down the back stairs to the cellar, and so out of doors. This latter egress, however, is of little use when the house is full of prying men, and I have closed the upper opening. Still, we are under obligations to you—both Hetty and I."

"In faith! Then you have ingress and egress by way of your hole to all parts of the house, and as freely as the rats!"

"Precisely; but the valve is by far the most convenient way."

"And have you thought of the end?"

"I have nothing to fear. It is you who should walk in constant dread. I do not comprehend how you can range yourself with this movement against your king. It is upon that subject I wish to speak, now that we have settled regarding the legal papers. Will you listen? What class do you represent? The lowest in the colonies—the peasantry of America—the canaille! They begin by rebelling; it may end in abortive revolution—abortive for the reason that the cause is unjust—more, ungodly, for they threaten to raise their hands against the rule of an anointed king! And what do you expect to accomplish? Where get a foothold? Does not General Gage hold

Boston? Is he in danger save from mob violence? Where are your forces? Where your system? It is all wickedness—wickedness and madness! For, with a regiment of infantry the country could be swept from Massachusetts Bay to the Hudson without the loss of a man, so terrorized would be your so-called patriots! Have you no political foresight? Can you not see that the patience of England is about at an end? Her armies will overrun the colonies, killing or imprisoning every rebel who denies the righteous authority of George the Third. And it were a well-deserved punishment! Shield yourself, Talbot, for when that day comes even I cannot save you from the result of your folly!"

The minister had grown earnest. Marcy listened to this exposition of Toryism with a curl to his lip that was not hidden by his small moustache. With a palpable sneer in both voice and manner, he retorted:

"Oh, thou worthy exponent of the Prince of Peace! You prated for principle a moment since, but now you cry for policy! Would you have me be false to myself? And are you so blind as not to see system all about you? What of the committee that has been hounding you, the counterpart of which is in every

town? What of the League? What of the ten thousand men now being enrolled by a weak Congress? Moreover, the king's authority is everywhere denied. To America he is but king by name. You are in error, my dear brother, and your greatest error is in thinking that a revolution started by the peasantry of a land—your so-called canaille—is ever—is ever unrighteous. It is a call for justice—for natural liberty—a protest against wrong! Are they the devil's factors? This land belongs to those who work it—not to England. Its fruits should be owned by the toiler, not taxed into the pockets of another; and it is this principle, born naked into the world as long ago as when the barbarians turned upon Rome—this principle which has now attained its youth and will grow to a giant's strength, which will sweeten the ages to come. We may fail; but you cannot force a truth to be a lie, batter it as you will! We may fail; but martyrs have marked the track of progress since the days of Adam! The cause of liberty, national or individual, will never die! Nay, nay, my worthy brother—you waste yourself on me! We are worlds apart, and, for God's sake, let us eschew politics! I have something in hand more to my taste."

The minister showed his white teeth in a depreca-

tory smile as he listened; but he assumed his old expression as he said:

"Well, what next, Talbot? Is the matter as easily pricked as the last could be?"

"It is about Hetty!" answered Marcy, with desperate firmness, folding his arms and planting them on the table as he looked fixedly at his brother.

"What of her?" asked the rector, shifting his eye.

"You are in danger, sir—that of her, since she is under your roof! I made light enough of the matter, perhaps; but the young man whom I put out of this house was right. He is both coward and sneak, but he was right in effect. You should surrender to the authorities; it is your safety! The committee would be helpless in the face of mob violence, and from now on your house is in growing danger from that source. I cannot allow Hetty to share this risk!"

"You cannot!" said the rector, sharply, stiffening himself.

"Excuse my abruptness, but time wanes. I will not!"

The rector's hands clinched involuntarily. "And by what right of effrontery do you dictate to me regarding my god-daughter? Do you doubt that Thaddeus Wain placed her under my protection?"

"I doubt nothing," returned the young man, warmly; "but as to my right—it is that of an accepted lover, as you have long known."

"God forbid!" exclaimed the minister, with something like anger in his raised voice, as he rose from his chair. "And do you wish to make me believe that my god-daughter is so lost to shame that she will renew relations with the man who deserted her and gave neither word nor sign for two years? You, who——"

"Stop, sir!" cried Marcy, his face flushing a deep red in the firelight as he sprang to his feet and held up a warning hand. "You are a minister of the gospel. God grant I am not saving you from self-stultification! Look at these!" he almost groaned, as he threw a packet of letters on the table. "Hetty found these while rearranging your overturned desk this morning! Archibald, deny nothing—admit nothing! I will give you the benefit of a possible doubt. Only this much more—for the subject demands brevity—your god-daughter Hetty and I desire to marry at once. You may gather something of the sweetness of her nature when I tell you that even now she would have you perform the ceremony. I have but three days to spare, at most."

The rector fell back a pace, and remained in a fixed attitude as though unable to absorb the full import of his brother's words. His fingers worked convulsively for a moment; then, without answering, he bent forward and seized the packet, stripped it of the bit of string that held the letters together, and bent low to the firelight that the writing might be clear. In the meantime not a movement was made by the other occupants of the room, nor was a sound heard beyond the snapping of the logs and the rustle of the papers turned in the fingers of the stooping man. For a moment the music of the harpsichord ceased.

Finally the rector became erect, and, like one weakened by a blow, spoke hesitatingly:

"Talbot, God only knows what these mean to me—you never can. But do not degrade me even by thinking that I have a hand in this. They are doubtless your letters to Hetty, but, before my Maker, I knew nothing of their existence in my house or elsewhere. I swear I——"

"How came they in your possession?" demanded the younger man, coldly.

"That is the least of it—the plainest of it, to me!" the rector returned, with the air of a man who simply

explained a fact regardless of its being believed or disbelieved. "Hetty remained in Hartford to complete her studies. I came to Woodbury to preach once in two weeks, then returned to her. There were many matters demanding attention. Thaddeus stayed here; the Glebe house was being repaired. It is all plain to me. These—these letters were collected by him and forgotten—just placed in the desk against our home coming—and forgotten. God help me! My brother, I know of no other way this could have happened!"

He spoke with a tremble in his voice—the articulation of a nerveless man or that of a strong one suffering from shock. Taking the letters loosely in his hands, he approached the smoker by the fire, and, placing them upon the shiny leather knee of the paralytic, asked coaxingly: "Thaddeus, do you remember these?"

The invalid took his pipe from his mouth, turned the letters over and over in his hands, and, casting a flat and bleary eye on the minister, answered:

"Aye, aye, Archibald; aye, aye! I e'en gave 'em to Hetty—gave 'em to Hetty years ago!"

The drooping lips had barely completed the halting sentence ere Talbot Marcy uttered an exclamation,

ran around the table, and presented his outstretched hands to his brother. In his generous nature the revulsion of feeling was total. At that moment the minister might have made a lifelong friend of this impetuous and demonstrative young man, but the chance passed. There was a ring of genuine joy to Marcy's voice as he said: "Archie, I have sinned against you, though in thought only! We were never so close as at this moment! Will you forgive me?"

The hands stretched out were not refused, but the chilly nature of the minister was shown in the way he placed his own in the warm palms that covered them. He withdrew them at once without a word in reply; then, turning, he walked slowly and unsteadily to the outside door as though stricken with pálsy.

His brother watched him a moment, quizzically. The slight hardening of heart at what was almost a rebuff to his late affectionate demonstration made him blind to the evident distress of the minister, and as the rector opened the door and passed into the outer air the younger man gathered up the letters, and, with a grim smile, turned to the parlor, from which was still heard the faint, sweet tinkle of the harpsichord.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GLEBE HOUSE YARD.

It was plain that the Rev. Archibald Challiss had received a blow of some sort, but it was equally plain that his was not the nature to expose pain, be it mental or physical, to a witness. The slight sign of bodily distress he had exhibited before his brother passed from him, and in its stead was that of clear soul suffering. He stepped ten paces from the door and stood still. He raised his hand to his uncovered head, his face upturned to the sky, still wonderful for its unseasonable tenderness. The gloom of the night was about him, and, save for the roar of the river, now plainly to be heard through the windless air, there was not a sound to mar the quiet.

In this position he remained for a moment; then he brought the fist of his right hand into the palm of his left with a force denoting both bodily strength

and mental pain, if not hopelessness; and, with the movement, he groaned aloud as a prelude to his half-whispered words:

"My God! my God! Must the loser still be the giver? Is it the law—Thy law immutable?"

That was all; but it was enough to lay bare the canker that had killed the rector's happiness. Had Cyrus Bent read himself and his interests as well as he had read the heart of the minister, he would have escaped being broken on the wheel of hopeless love.

It is doubtful that, for the time, the divine realized where he was. He had only been conscious that the house had suddenly become as hot as a furnace, and that his brother had flayed him alive and with a smiling face. He felt some comfort from the coolness of the damp air, but his senses were not acute at that moment, else he might have remarked the shadows of four men crouched on the inside of the rough wall bounding the east of the Glebe house home lot. If the rector saw anything it was only the deep and star-spangled sky above him, across which danced like a faint meteor the face of Hetty Wain. He certainly had no eyes for the shadows which were stealthily gliding to within striking distance, nor had he a conception of what a godsend his movement of leaving

the house had been to the would-be kidnappers who had determined to take him this night—one for a settlement of wrongs both real and fancied, the others for glory and a few slivers of silver and the love of an adventure from which no possible harm could come to them. A devil lurked in the heart of Cyrus Bent; the breasts of the others, according to the human standard, were clear of guile. There might be a struggle—they had anticipated as much—but what would even the powerful be in the brawny arms of the trio who were just then taking orders from Cyrus Bent? Nothing! And the scrimmage would be a fine thing to boast about in the bar of the Oranaug Inn.

The agony, the exquisite suffering, expressed by the rector during these few moments could not and did not endure. It was followed by self-accusations and masterful determination through which ran a current of pain. Then followed the most impassioned prayer that had ever risen from his heart.

While he was thus adjusting an armor of fortitude, and while, second by second, danger was approaching his person, Talbot Marcy was with Hetty in the parlor. To these two souls the last cloud appeared to have been removed—especially to the maiden, whose

faith in her god-father had received such a rude shock. It was all clear now. The picture she was drawing was rosy enough. With her lover, true at last, by her side; with her god-father, true at last, to make and bless the union; with the end of two years of suffering; with a future brightened by the mystery which youth gives it, what more could she wish? There was not a blemish to mar the outlook.

Her thoughts were interrupted and her picture obliterated by the loud cry of "Help! Talbot—help!" that shot through the still night as plainly as the report of a gun, so clear, so trumpetlike in its intensity that the cry even penetrated the silence that muffled the ears of the paralytic, causing him to lay his pipe carefully on the floor and gather himself for rising just as Marcy, followed by Hetty, tore out of the west room on their way to the kitchen door.

Both the young man and the maiden had instinctively fathomed the significance of the cry, so that it was no surprise to either when they beheld a swaying group of men tottering over the turf of the yard.

With an oath, Marcy sprang into the fray just as old Thaddeus Wain appeared in the doorway bearing a flaming brand which he had pulled from the hearth,

and in its light, uncertain and fitful as it was, to the young man the whole matter was explained.

The rector was a muscular Christian, and at the outset had done for one of the enemy, who lay on the damp sod leaning on his elbow, completely dazed by the blow he had received from the ready fist of the churchman. The other two had him beset, and about his neck from behind hung the wiry form of Bent, whose plain intent was to handicap the rector from the rear while his fellows engaged him in front. The sight of the clerk's face was enough for the late commissioner for the colonies. The animus of the attack and its unofficial character were as plain to him as though they had been explained hours before, and as ready was his action.

With a cuff that was stunning, he struck the young man who burdened the back of his brother, and as, under the influence of the blow, Bent turned to meet the unexpected interference, he loosed his hold. Marcy seized him by the throat and hurled him away as though he was of too little consequence to chastise; then he sprang before the rector with a cry, taking the brunt of what had now become something of a fair fist fight, and urged him toward the house.

It would possibly have been well had the clergyman

obeyed and retreated to the kitchen, but he was not in the mood. The present line of action had been forced upon him when his physical being was at a low ebb—when his spirits were sunk in deep despair—his thoughts and heart far from a dream of violence. With the instinct of the purely animal he had thrown off the first attack. The swift revolution of thought and the tonic effect of strong muscular action lifted him like a stimulant. To him there now seemed a glory in force, and after his first call for help he fought silently and with such vigor that he scarce felt the weight of the young man who had fastened to his back. With the coming of his brother there came to him the ungodly desire for revenge on those who had surprised him. He felt that it was but justice—not only for the events of the night, but for all that he had suffered before—and therefore he refused to move from the field until it was cleared. So he fought on, yielding not a foot.

As for Bent, half stunned by the impact of Marcy's blow and driven into frenzy by the dizzy whirl which had ended by his being thrown to the ground, he got to his knees and pulled himself together just in time to see the rector's opponent pitch backward under a well-directed thump, scramble to his feet, and then

run into the road, where he disappeared in the darkness. He saw the two brothers now face to face with a single man. He saw the tall, thin figure of Thaddeus Wain standing in the doorway waving his blazing brand and shouting in a cracked voice as he marked the progress of the fight. It was gall to the clerk—more than gall; for by her father's side stood Hetty, bearing witness to his second defeat by the same man on the same day. There was a quick and painful snapping in his brain, a sharp sense of hatred that suddenly came to him, and was more like a tangible thing than like a passion. He recognized himself no longer. He had but one desire, and that —to rid himself forever from a possible sight of the handsome and triumphant face of Talbot Marcy. Love, hate, fear and all else sank from his sight. Still on his knees, he pulled his pistol from his waistband, and, deliberately aiming it at his rival, fired.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LOST SOUL.

Although so near his intended victim that the spurt of flame from the firearm singed Marcy's coat-collar, the aim of the madman was faulty, and the bullet missed its mark. It passed close, however, clipping away a lock of the patriot's hair, and struck the swaying figure of Thaddeus Wain, who stood in the doorway and directly in the rear. There was a shriek from Hetty, followed by a groan from the paralytic as he dropped his torch and sank down.

In the almost total darkness that ensued both Marcy and the rector sprang to the fallen man, while Bent, brought to a sense of the situation by the sound and shock of the explosion, and feeling the freedom of the moment, slid toward the blackness of the wide field which stretched betwixt the house and the river, with hardly a thought of what he was doing. The

madness that had beset him suddenly gave way to fear, and as he cleared the fence in the rear of the barn he was relieved to find himself in the company of a man—the first one to fall in the attack on the rector. But the relief was not for long. As the two strode over the wet land, neither saying a word, Bent's companion made a detour toward the high-road, edging away from his fellow, and from the desire for human companionship, if not sympathy, the clerk hung to him. They had reached the lift of land which, blufflike, marks the edge of the plain, when the man turned on Bent almost fiercely, and said:

"Keep off—keep off, gol darn ye! Do ye think I want to hang wi' ye? Don't ye foller me no longer—ye have blood on ye!"

The clerk stopped as though struck, while his erstwhile friend turned and sped into the pitchy night, leaving him staring at blankness—and alone. Then, for the first time, horror assailed him. The broad, black meadow suddenly held the width of an eternity of suffering. He was deserted; he had killed in cold blood—he had murdered an innocent man! His horror for a moment gave way to fear, and he sank down on the wet sod to conceal himself, as though the blackness of the night was not enough.

Not a sound came from the direction of the Glebe house, but into his morbid brain crept the thought that the very silence boded ill for him—that they were preparing for pursuit. As his panting ceased and he became aware of the wet that had penetrated his clothing from the reeking ground, his ear caught the roar of the river, and, rising to his feet, he turned his back on the town and walked or ran to the overflowed banks of the Pomperaug. There was something companionable in the heavy harmony of the rushing water. The minor key in which Nature invariably pitches her chords for a space almost soothed him; but memory jerked him back from peace. He was a marked man; he would be followed, taken and hanged. Fear, horror and revenge drove in turn through his brain, each being worse than, yet each relieving, the other; and, ere he was aware, he had walked into the shallow water that covered the edge of the field where the river had left its banks. The cold of it startled him, and yet it brought to him the first gleam of hope of escape. His tracks, plainly to be seen on the boggy sod by daylight, would point to the river and disappear therein. A natural supposition would be that, shocked at his own act, Cyrus Bent had destroyed himself.

He waded in until he felt the swirl of the current against his legs, and then he took his course northward. Several times he fell, through stepping into holes; but by the time he had accomplished a quarter of a mile, and was numbed by the cold of the river, he struck a rail fence which ran from the road to the ford—more a landmark or boundary line than a fence proper. As he climbed upon it he realized in a dull way that his right hand was troubling him, and so self-absorbed had he been that it was some time ere he came to his senses and found that his hand still held the pistol, and that, too, with a grip which had been so tenacious that his fingers ached.

With a curse he hurled the useless weapon from him, only to realize that he had thrown it on land, where it might bear witness against him. He groped for it long and faithfully, growing more and more fearful as the moments sped, and at last he stepped on it. It was a fiendish thing to him now, and he stamped upon it, finally throwing it far into the stream.

Then he suddenly became conscious that the tracks made in his search for the pistol would betray him. He almost screamed with nervous rage as he saw how useless had been all his care. His teeth were chatter-

ing with the cold, yet an inward fever began to consume him. His throat burned; his eyelids were hot, but in his limbs he felt the strength of a dozen men. With a despairing curse he shook his fist at the sod, as he had at the firearm, and ran into the road.

Cyrus Bent was now but a few hundred feet from the scene of the tragedy, but upon the opposite side of the Glebe house. He walked along the road in its direction, but, finding that there were a number of people gathered in the yard, he made a detour to the north and came into the road again very near his own quarters. In his walk he had formed the plan of gaining his room and changing his soaking clothes; but as he approached the store he heard voices and saw clearly the forms of two or three men about the door. He was also marked and hailed by one of them, but strode on until well out of sight, then took to his heels. The exertion warmed his body somewhat, and with a quick pace he doubled into the burying ground, and, going through its length, came again to the Episcopal church, where, some two hours ago, he had waited for his fellow-conspirators. He tried the church door, but found it fastened; then, beginning to shiver again, he crossed the main street, now deserted, passed between two dwellings, and

struck straight for the wilderness of the Oranaug Rocks, which, black, sinister and cold, towered above him.

In half an hour he had reached the shoulder of the first great tier of the remarkable geological formation, and stood on its highest point.* Still to the east of him lay the higher rocks—far enough to appear mysterious in the darkness, near enough for him to note the ragged sky line made by the black pines. Where he now stood the land lay almost open, and was without underbrush. The tops of trees growing on the terrace below came to the level of this knoll, which on three sides drops away precipitously. The odor of balsam, a sign of spring, came to the nostrils of the refugee, waking memories that seemed to be those of another life.

At this height there was a whisper of wind through the pine tops, but the sound, sweet though it is, became troublesome after a time; it was like approaching voices. Of his only real danger—that from a possible wolf—he gave no thought. He started to walk up and down the aisle of trees that crown the beautiful spot, not less lovely in this generation than

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*At about the site of Cothren's tower.

in that so long ago. He had a thousand fancies—and knew they were fancies, though he feared them. He had a horror of himself, and, time after time, held his hand close to his face that he might be sure there was no blood on it. He smelled it; he rubbed it on his rapidly-drying clothes and upon the earth. He knew he was going wrong in his head, but cared little for that if he could but warm himself outside and be cool within. His throat felt as though the hangman's noose had already tightened on it, and at times flashes of light appeared before his eyes. Cyrus Bent was spiritually, mentally and physically a sick man.

It was more or less fortunate for him that the night was without frost, else he must have perished from sheer exposure. As it was, his sufferings were keen enough. All that night he tramped up and down, with his ear pitched for every unusual sound, with an eye abnormal in its watchfulness. Once or twice a slight delirium seized him, but he shook it off. Frequently before him he saw the face of Hetty Wain flit by. He tried to seize and detain it, but it would vanish, only to reappear later.

As the dawn broke it discovered the pitiful wreck of Cyrus Bent straining his vision over the expansive view commanded from the natural platform on which

he stood. Below him lay the town, still wrapped in darkness, but beyond, for mile upon mile, the land rose fairly visible in the reflection from the east until it met the sky line at the apex of Good Hill. The distance beckoned him. Beyond the far ridge there must be safety, coolness and rest. He would go there; his crime could not follow him so far.

By noon the fever-stricken and guilt-harassed man had progressed but a fraction of a mile. He had gotten as far as the abrupt lift of earth and rocks on which now stands the Masonic lodge, and over its secure ramparts feasted his hot eyes on passing humanity. He was now within two rods of the main road, and from his hiding-place he had fairly before him both the Glebe house and the store in the hollow. He saw groups coming and going between them; the life of the town seemed centered about them on that day, and he knew (and quailed at the knowledge) that it was about him they were talking and wondering—and cursing, doubtless. He had no craving for food, but he was plagued by intolerable thirst. If he could only drink; if he could but get cool, and if the land and sky would not swing together in such a sickening way, he would be comfortable enough in body. If he could get beyond the ridge of the distant hill he

would be safe, but he dared not cross the road nor take to the highway until dark, and even then he doubted his having strength to perform the journey. His vigor of the previous night had gone.

Had the darkness been late in coming the young man would have risen and proclaimed himself. His sufferings had sapped his power of resistance. As the dusk settled into obscurity he scrambled from the elevation, and, in a straight line, made for the river. He must drink. He cared little about being seen then. He would take all chances, face all dangers, fight to the death for a long draught of pure, cold water; and, with unsteady steps, he went down the hill to the hollow. It was his adverse fortune to meet no one, and Cyrus Bent progressed to his fate unmolested, even unseen.

His road would take him past the store and the Glebe house, but he made no detour to avoid either. The road was the shortest way to his goal—the river—and beyond that lay safety, he thought; so along the road he hurried. As he approached the Glebe house he marked the light which streamed from the windows of the west room. A new feeling leaped upon him—a fascination first, then a loud inward demand thundered at him to again look upon the scene of

his crime. With the senselessness of a horse dazed by fire, he swung from the road, then into it again, and finally halted under the butternut tree beneath which he had first met the three men who had witnessed his indignity. Was it but yesterday? It seemed years ago! He tried to move on, but his limbs refused him. He leaned against the tree and riveted his eyes on the light, which, from its steadiness, he knew came from a number of candles. He was in an exposed and dangerous position, and he knew it. He was dying from heat and thirst, but he felt that he could never get beyond the house until he had looked into it once more. It was the call of Fate. It was the last straw.

He tiptoed across the road as though he feared the sound of his own steps. By catching the sill with his hands and being half supported by the rough foundations of the house, he silently drew himself up to the level of the partly-open window, and looked in. In the center of the room stood the minister, clad in a white surplice, and in his hand was a prayer-book. He was as pale as death. Before him knelt Hetty Wain and Talbot Marcy, with joined hands, and by their side was the burly body of Squire Strong with something akin to a smile on his countenance.

Had Cyrus Bent taken the west window instead of the one facing the north, he would also have seen the figure of Thaddeus Wain seated in an easy chair with his arm in a sling; but, as it was, the latter individual was beyond the clerk's vision. The doomed man glared at the sight before him as though it were a dream he was trying to grasp, digging his nails into the wood and his toes into the cracks of the foundation. He heard the minister's voice, but the only words that came clearly to him were: "Let no man put asunder," and, with a groan of genuine agony, he slipped from his slight hold and fell backward.

As the sound penetrated to the group the rector ceased the service and listened, but, nothing reoccurring, he resumed the ceremony which had broken the heart of the hopeless man without, and was well-nigh breaking his own.

As for Bent, the sight and sound and fall shocked him into reason, banishing his physical suffering for the moment. In an instant he was on his feet, and, turning, fled on limbs that felt as light as feathers. Up and away from the river, through the burying-ground once more, and into the main street of the village; but now, instead of making for his former

refuge, he kept straight northward on the old Indian trail.

In something more than a mile from the village the road comes to the Sprane River just before that stream empties into the Pomperaug. It being a well-traveled way, a bridge was thrown across it, and upon that ancient wooden structure Cyrus Bent stopped. He could go no further. He leaned over the rail and panted from weakness. The black water swirled away beneath him, its depth and force apparent in the flat whirlpools that spun in the starlight. He looked at them a moment, raised his head and tried to penetrate the gloom about him, then bent his ear to the harmony of the river's roar. The gloom showed him but one picture—the sound was but the voice of the rector—"Let no man put asunder!"

He pulled himself erect, swung his arms aloft, then crouched. There was a splash, and the bridge was empty. The black river flowed on as ever—as it flows to-day.

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Two days later, and at almost the exact hour in which Hetty rode away on a new pillion with Talbot Marcy, they found the stranded body of Cyrus Bent. He lay where the receding waters had left him, on

the meadow in the rear of the Glebe house, at almost the very spot where he had first entered the river in his hopes of escaping. The history of the old town tells how the rector gave himself into the hands of the committee, who, far from dealing severely with him, only put him on the limits of the town for the period of the war. The Glebe house still stands; it is still useful—but it has had its day.

PATRICE

PATRICE.

I.

Patrice Riley stood at the door of the shanty she called home, and, shading her eyes, looked east and up the well-marked trail leading to the "State road," the only official thoroughfare from San Antonio to the mysterious "great northwest." The soul of a woman, the love and anxiety of a woman, were in her nineteen-year-old bosom, and dominated her as she stood like an arrow in the doorway. Her dress was the poorest of the poor, the faded calico skirt, long outgrown, falling but little below her knee, and showing a limb and ankle turned to perfection. The dry air of the climate and the sun had failed to leatherize her complexion or give her hair the haylike color and crispness common to the native Texan. There was a vigor and freshness about her that defied climate, and as she threw back a wealth of brown hair with a

toss of her head and gathered her fine brows in a mute expression of disappointment, there was a petulant beauty about her in striking contrast to her dress and immediate surroundings. She stepped into the open, that her vision might not be crossed by the clambering rose vine that covered one side of the cabin and hung over the decaying porch, as though it would hide the loose boards of the structure. As she turned her look westward she marked two horsemen coming across the then fenceless country, and, with surprised interest, she watched them until they were within a hundred yards; then, having a full appreciation of the conditions surrounding her, she stepped into the house, and, taking a Winchester from its slings, returned to the door.

It was a lonely spot, with the indefinite boundaries of a poor squatter's ranch. The country spread away in a billowy softness of hill and hollow, the higher lands capped with a wealth of timber. The insistent green of mesquite grass, scattered live oak and forest dominated all other color, though the sun glittered from a cloudless blue, and the land was strewn with the lush growth of flowers that marks the Texas summer. Through the gaps in the woods the girl could see, here and there, a "bunch" of cattle silhouetted

against the sky line, but not a house was within the ken of her vision. The late afternoon Gulf wind hummed over the lovely prospect and scattered the spice of the coast as it passed; but beauty of landscape and fragrance of breeze were lost on the maiden as she watched the riders.

As they came up and reined in, one of them addressed her with the easy familiarity of the time and place.

"Hullo, Pat, my gal!"

"Evenin', Mr. Sheriff."

"Where's Monkey?"

The girl stepped back into the shade of the doorway, and, though she answered the sheriff, her gaze was fixed on the officer's companion, a man of thirty years or more, who sat on a great, white horse. The maiden's eyes were wide with a mixture of curiosity and something akin to criticism as she replied:

"Dad went down to San Anton' with a load of posts five days ago. I'll allow he'll be back at any time. I was looking for him now. He's late."

"Are you not afraid of being left alone, my child?" asked the stranger, as he bent down with a look of open admiration in his fine eyes.

"No, I ain't, and I ain't alone—and I ain't your

child!" was the quick retort. "I don't want nobody's protection. I reckon nobody'll rope me!"

The sheriff laughed.

"No patronizing here, Doc!" Then he turned to the girl. "I hope you're well fixed, Pat, an' Monkey will get home all right. I rode around this way just to tell ye——"

"What?"

"Bill Crystal's loose."

The pink that had come to the girl's cheek at the stranger's remark faded, and left her deadly pale as she brought her hand to her bosom and leaned forward.

"Bill—Crystal—loose!"

"Aye—pardoned; an' he's down to Boerne fillin' up. I heard him swear he'd cut the heart out o' Monkey, just as his brother has got it in for the judge that sent 'em up."

The girl gasped.

"Well, what are you settin' there for? Can't you do somethin'? Ain't you an officer?"

"What can I do, Pat? Chris is still jugged, an' Bill ain't done nothin' but shoot off his mouth. I can't yank a man for talkin', an' besides, this is my last day in office. I've resigned, an' am goin' north to live."

He laughed again. "I don't know if anything'll happen to Monkey, or if Bill is only blowin', but I just thought I'd put you an' Monkey up to him, so you won't have the claim jumped without warnin'. Where's Bob?"

"Inside," said the girl. "I ain't afraid for Bob—I ain't afraid for myself; but if Bill should meet dad——"

Something seemed to catch in her throat, and her eyes melted in the tears that welled up but did not overflow. There was no response, and in a moment she continued: "Bob is all right—but you know Bob, an' you know dad. I wish I could be a man for about a week!"

She dashed the back of her hand across her wet eyes with an impetuous motion, and at that moment there came from within the house a person at the sight of whom the man on the white horse showed undisguised astonishment.

He was a youth, and so startlingly like the girl that the stranger uttered an exclamation. Save for his dress and his shortened hair, the newcomer appeared the exact counterpart of the maiden by whose side he stopped. The two were evidently brother and sister, and twins at that, for in detail of feature and

coloring they were as alike as two daisies. But in the youth there was an indefinable something lacking. As he greeted the sheriff there seemed to be an air of timidity or bashfulness more in keeping with the nature of a woman than a man, and the light breath of femininity clung to him and was suggested in every movement. Yet there was nothing indicating a lack of physical strength. As he leaned against the doorpost he appeared to be under the influence of deep mental retrospection, and, after his brief "Good evenin'," kept his eyes dreamily fixed on the girl. It was evident he had heard nothing of the conversation, for he made no reference to it, neither did he appear in the least interested.

The sheriff made no further allusion to his errand, and, as though he had finished doing what he perhaps considered a disagreeable duty, abruptly turned his horse and looked at the westering sun.

"Well, Doc, we can't help matters. It's fifteen miles to Boerne, an' it'll be black sundown afore we make it. Let's be off. My dooty to Monkey, Pat. I guess he'll keep his eyes open. Come on, Doc."

The man addressed was so lost in contemplation of the two in the doorway that his companion had crossed the low creek that ran past the rear of the

shanty ere he appeared to gather his wits together. He seemed about to speak; but, instead of doing so, lifted his hat with an instinct born of his education, and, bowing, shook his horse into motion and joined the officer.

The boy turned to his sister.

"That's the Yankee doctor down to Boerne fer his health. Reg'lar tenderfoot. Looks like he thought a heap of himself. Don't act like he knew much, either."

The girl looked after the well-proportioned figure as the stranger sped up the hill. "I don't know," she said, half-aloud; then she put her mouth to her brother's ear and raised her voice. "I wish dad would come," she cried. "Did he say he would go through Boerne either way?"

"Reckon he will; but he oughter be this side by now," answered the youth in the monotonous cadence of the very deaf. The girl made no answer, but with a wistful glance after the retreating horseman turned into the house.

The doctor reined in as he reached the sheriff's side.

"Who are they?" he asked, abruptly.

"Monkey Riley's gal an' boy—only they ain't. Ever seen Monkey?"

"No."

"Regular ape-faced Mick; a pore, no-'count squatter, without a cent outside what he gets haulin' cedar posts to San Antony—an' that's mighty little. An undersized, meek-spirited runt; that's what he is. Wuthless cuss!"

"Tough?"

"Tough? No. He hain't got no sand."

"Are those his children?"

"No. Ye see, when Monkey—we call him Monkey from his mug—when Monkey came to this section, sixteen or eighteen years ago, he started to look fer the lost San Saba mine—same as some fools are doin' now. He was a sure-enough tenderfoot them days, an' 'twan't long before he got muddled on the llanos an' went clear out o' reckonin'—clean lost an' most crazy. One sundown he hit onto a wagon trail when he was nigh desprit, an' was follerin' it up when he came across them two children, settin' between the wheel tracks. They were both half-starved an' the boy was blubberin' and nussin' on his sister's thumb. They couldn't ha' been more'n two years old. 'Cordin' to Monkey, he almost went daft from the joy o' findin' a human in that frightful waste, an' he feeds them an' packs them onto his horse. All he could

get was from the gal, an' all she could say was, 'Ize Patrice; him's Blob'—Bob, she meant. Well, Monkey hadn't gone more'n two sights an' a yelp further—perhaps eight miles—when he comes onto a prairie schooner that had made the track. It was in ashes, Doc, an' among them ashes Monkey found the bodies of two men an' a woman—scalps clean gone an' the ground covered with empty cartridge shells. They had made a fight for it. That settled Monkey. He'd heard about Apaches, an' didn't want to know any more. He lost interest in the San Saba all of a sudden; his duty looked plain an' he drew a beeline fer the east. Lord knows how them children got on the track so far away—nobody but the Lord ever will know. Funny, wa'n't it? Boerne was the first place he struck after that, an' he settled down, took up a piece, an' went to nussin' them babbies. He act'ally told me that God had shoved them at him, an' he wa'n't goin' to kick against His doin's. Curious cuss!"

"And you call him worthless?" asked the doctor.

"Well, no—not wuthless. He did good by them. The boy ain't got no spirit—not a bit—never drinks nor nothin'—only likes to hang around the hotel an' watch people talk. He's deafer'n a post; never says

anything; just tolerated, that's all; might as well be a chair—or a yaller dog. Pat ought to have been the man. She's brighter'n a milled dollar. Monkey broke himself buyin' books—regular school books—for her; an' it's a fact that somehow she's grown up clean—like a lily out o' the mud. She's got the spunk o' the outfit, an' she just dotes on Monkey an' the boy. She's a good gal. I don't think she was ever in Boerne in her life, nor ten miles from the shack since she was a kid; but she knows a heap about things—between me an' you, a heap more'n I do."

The doctor made no immediate return to this, being seemingly lost in thought, but later, as the two were walking their horses up a slope, he said:

"And what about Crystal?"

"Ever seen him?" asked the sheriff.

"No."

"Well, I'll bet you will know enough of him if you stay here. The trouble between him an' Monkey is about the matter of the killin' o' a man—a stranger; shootin' him in the back. Monkey was the only witness. Bill would ha' plugged him, too, just to keep him quiet—he's equal to it—only Monkey is so meek-like that Bill thought he daresn't open his mouth. But he did, an' Bill's got it in for him, that's all. Bill's

popular with the boys. He's a great coward, really; but he's free with likker, an' when he's full he's equal to most anything. If there's going to be trouble I ain't sorry to be out of it—an' I ain't sorry I put Monkey on guard, either."

Again silence fell between the men, the doctor making no comment, though the glance he flashed at his companion was not complimentary in its scornful expression and was not seen by the other, for the sudden gloom that follows the Texas sunset was over the land.

II.

While the two thus made their way toward the distant settlement the girl went about her simple duties with a heart like lead. An unfulfilled prophecy seemed to hang over her, quenching her natural lightness of spirits and causing her steps to drag as though from physical exhaustion. For a time the boy looked at her dreamily as she moved about the room; then he seated himself on the doorsill, his face toward the trail, his eyes fixed on the distance.

The blackness and silence of the moonless night fell together. As though each was in fear of what the other would say, neither brother nor sister broke the spell that appeared to bind them. It was nearly ten by the rude clock that stood on the ruder shelf when the maiden heard the noise of coming wheels. The boy suddenly disappeared. There was something in

the character of the well-known sound that caused the girl to catch her breath, stand still, and, with her hand pressed to her bosom, listen intently. Her foster-father never came dragging home in that fashion. With trembling hands she lighted the well-guttered candle, and, holding it above her head, stepped to the door just as the vehicle stopped before it. The youth stood by the tailboard motionless, his hands outstretched in a gesture of mute horror. The girl hurried out. The seat of the wagon was vacant, but on the bottom of the crazy structure, with his apelike face upturned to the velvet sky, Monkey Riley lay dead, the bullet-hole in his forehead proclaiming the manner of his taking off.

With a cry like that of a stricken wild animal, the girl pushed her brother aside and leaped in beside the prostrate man. Taking the homely head on her lap, she kissed it and talked to it, throwing over it the wealth of her long hair, as though to hide it from all but herself. In an ecstasy of grief she rocked her body to and fro as she petted the inanimate form, but not a word of either wonder or threat fell from her lips. When, finally, she had calmed herself, she was as white as the dead man, her beautiful eyes were like stones, and she looked about her as though the land

was strange. The boy was weeping like an abused child.

This tragedy created but little stir in the settlement. Violence was too common an occurrence to arouse the communal blood. The mystery of Monkey Riley's murder was a passing wonder, and, except by a few, the matter was forgotten in less than the proverbial nine days. If there were guesses at the cause of the palpable outrage, such guesses remained unexpressed in public; it was courting a similar death to accuse a man rightly or wrongly. There was certainly no proof against any one, and twenty-five years ago the criminal laws of Texas were unadministered save when those in high places were struck, or great commercial interests endangered, or the offense was open and flagrant.

Strange as it may appear in these days, in the case of Monkey Riley nothing was done. He had not been a popular character, or one who would be missed from the community, and his poverty had been too absolute for his memory to command respect. Of much more general interest than the murder of the obscure Irishman was the news that the recently liberated convict, Mr. William Crystal, had suddenly disappeared.

To the doctor the information of the death of Riley came with peculiar force, though why it did so was a puzzle even to himself. He correctly interpreted the general silence and lack of interest, and, being powerless, shrewdly held his tongue, though at the first opportunity he rode out to the ranch for the sole purpose (he explained to himself) of offering sympathy and help to the stricken family.

The doctor was not a man given to self-deception. He frankly admitted that the story of the children interested him as things of more importance had failed to do, and he was thankful for the fact that it had interested him at all. Having been brought low through the stunning shock of the loss of his father, mother and sister by the sinking of an ocean steamship, he had gone south as much to escape from maddening and persistent condolences as to get into new scenes and regain his health, which had been shattered by the blow of his loss. For him the flavor of life had gone. Great events, and even self-interest, failed to arouse him, and the only thing that had saved the man from a deadly and unnatural ennui which might have ended in suicide was the practice of his profession—a practice carried on through sheer scientific enthusiasm alone, he being far beyond the

need of pecuniary reward. His sight of the girl—a unique figure, even in that unique country—had filliped his dead curiosity, and the sheriff's subsequent tale roused his lethargic interest and surprised him by so doing. When the news of the murder came to him, he was both impressed and mildly elated at the fact that within him there woke a sense that somehow he was closely connected with the event. It was a spark of interest that, as interest, was so new and so entirely refreshing that he had hopes for himself. It appeared to him that the struggle he had made—a struggle to lift himself above the crushing weight of a sorrow that had paralyzed mental reaction—was beginning to bear fruit, and upon this he hung a hope which, as hope, was still further a stimulus. Therefore, to him the so-called "incident" of the shooting of the poor squatter held an interest beyond its mere fact; and it was with a definite feeling of mildly rising spirits that he rode out to the ranch. It had been more than a week since the tragedy.

He found the girl alone. Save for a sweet seriousness in her face, he marked no change in her appearance. There was about her a natural courtesy that astonished him, inasmuch as he had expected the curtness experienced at their previous meeting. Had

the maiden been born and bred to the purple she could not have held herself with more grace and dignity than when, after hearing his words of condolence, she looked at him steadily, as though weighing his sincerity, then invited him into the house and gave him the details of the tragedy so far as she knew them. Not a word did she drop concerning the possible murderer, nor did she threaten, or complain of the laxity of the law which had failed to probe the outrage. Her unexpected calmness, her entire lack of embarrassment, save for the trifle of color that came to her face, and which impressed the man as apologetic for the poverty of her dress and the rude interior of the house, attracted him out of proportion to the circumstances. Her mode of expressing herself was a shock to his fastidious and educated ear; but so little did it lower her tone or his suddenly increased respect for her that ere they had talked five minutes the doctor felt how utterly impossible it would be for him—a stranger—to offer her pecuniary help without insulting her. His most delicately put questions concerning her needs were met with a little look of wonder, and turned aside in a manner that showed him she did not consider the affair as his. She was not overcome by his presence. There

was no hesitation to the easy flow of her words, though her expression outraged all the laws of syntax.

"Have you no friends?" finally asked the doctor, feeling that he was not making much headway.

She was sitting on a stool by the puncheon table, her small feet crossed, her fingers laced together. She smiled a trifle wearily, and there was a weariness in her voice as she answered:

"Friends? None, I reckon. Lots of folks has been here, an' they look around an' allow they're sorry for dad." Her blue eyes filled with tears. "That's all. I reckon they just thank God they're better off'n me an' Bob. Dad don't need pity—now. He didn't get it when he wanted it, an' I don't want it, an' I don't want friends. You don't understand what I mean, an' I can't tell." She threw back her heavy hair with a quick and graceful toss of her head. "I—I'm afraid that if I had 'em they'd go back on me when I needed 'em most, an' that would hurt worse than not havin' 'em at all. I don't want to feel like Jesus felt when Peter went back on Him."

The doctor was a little startled and somewhat impressed. He arose to go, and held out his hand.

"Nevertheless, Miss Patrice, I would be your friend

—so far as you will allow me," he said, and his feeling was manifest in both voice and manner. The girl was touched. Her eyes were still wet as she put her hand in his, but she shook her head doubtfully as she answered:

"No, sir. You're different from anybody I've ever seen, but you had better not tell me that. You don't know me—much, an' I don't want to drag you down."

"I fail to understand."

She smiled through her tears.

"Well, you won't fail—not always. Good-evenin'."

There had been no sprightliness to the interview—nothing attractive throughout, save the girl's beauty of face and figure, a beauty filling the man's eye. Yet he found, for the nonce, he had completely forgotten himself, and that, too, for the space of a full half-hour.

A few days later he went to the ranch again, attracted by he knew not what, though he pretended he was but passing on his way homeward from a distant patient. The maiden saw him coming and ran into the house. When, after a short delay, she presented herself before him she was clad in a woollen dress that fell to her feet, covering them, and her brown hair was coiled in a loose knot on top of her

head. About her round throat was a cheap white ruffle, and in lieu of a brooch a pink rose from the vine lay pinned on her bosom. If admiration for physical beauty ever shone from a man's eyes, it did from the doctor's, but the conversation was no more satisfactory to him than it had been before; and when the young physician rode homeward he carried with him a sense of disappointment and rebellion against an indefinable something he could not recognize, and to which he had hitherto been an utter stranger.

III.

Again and again he went to her, cursing his own folly even while explaining to himself that he was only making an interesting study of a most anomalous character. It was not long ere he confessed that, notwithstanding his ideas of individual superiority, the girl was his equal in all but education and wealth; that she was a neglected exotic; and also there was forced on him the evident fact that such refinement of feature, such natural dignity and grace of poise and movement could not have originated in common stock, or be the outcome of her uncouth social surroundings. This started him looking for a clue to the identity of her parents, but the trail soon led him against the dead wall of ignorance. There was not a scrap of evidence on which to base a first step.

As for himself, he seemed to have risen from the dead. Life's flavor had come back to him, and

brought a sweetness it never held before—a sweetness tempered with bitterness. For he was forever at war with the unwritten social law of the fitness of things. He was perfectly frank with himself at last. By the time the Texas summer had waned—a summer that brought but little change to the land—he acknowledged that from the tiny seed of desire had sprung the small shoot of affection, and this had grown from an insignificant blade to a plant too mighty to uproot and whose fruit he dared not attempt to pluck. He had fallen madly in love with a woman who, though mentally and physically his equal, was socially in the depths and far beneath him. He was a moral coward, and he knew it.

But he was not the man to permit himself to be forever torn by such an internal conflict. Betwixt the passion that had grown in him, and now dominated all else, and a sense of the social degradation from which he must take the girl if he wished to possess her, he was in a state of continual unrest that at last became unbearable. He passed the winter in this state, each day being worse than the one before, and the early spring found him desperate. Then there came a time when, putting aside doubts and fears, and with a feeling of emancipation from social bondage,

the doctor mounted his horse and started for the ranch. He had struggled and won.

It was a glorious day—a day when men look abroad and thank God they are living, so gracious was the air, so entrancing the prospect of the land. As the doctor rode by the tavern in Boerne he saw Bob Riley sitting on the steps in the listless attitude which was so characteristic. A few chronic loungers were gathered on the broad piazza in boisterous confab, but the boy sat in utter neglect. His likeness to his sister was so startling that in his present mood the doctor's heart leaped. To what a new world would he lift the unfortunate when he had the right! He was about to ride over and speak to him when he was himself accosted by a Mexican, who wished his immediate services, and he turned back with his patient—a fateful hour, as, had he gone his intended way, this tale would scarce be worth its telling. As the doctor went in at his own door, Bob Riley got to his feet, mounted the miserable brute he called a horse, and started homeward, moving in a manner that showed an entire lack of interest in life.

A little later Patrice was standing on the bank of the run in the rear of her house, filling the pail she had carried to the brook. She drew herself up and

let her gaze rove over the bit of ploughed ground that stood for the garden, then looked up the trail with an expression of disappointed expectancy in her eyes. The country about was charming, but not more so than the face of the girl. Her petulant beauty had gone, and in its place was a settled melancholy that had refined her features, though it had not weakened or marred them. Instead of the defiant compression of the lips, there was a slight droop to the corners of her small mouth, and her sweet eyes held a far-off, yearning look that is, in a woman, of more potency than the flash of mere vivacity. As she bent to lift the full pail she became aware of the presence of a man, who had stepped from the tangle of chaparral beyond the brook, and who now stood with but the little stream between them.

He was a burly individual of about fifty, obese in figure, and his coarse face was rendered coarser by the gray stubble of a beard three days old; but there was nothing forbidding in the smile he gave the girl when he saw he was recognized. He was dressed much the same as the cowboy of the period, save that his immense hat of heavy, white felt was bespangled and besilvered after the fashion of the Mexican. Over his arm was thrown the bridle of the horse he

had led through the thicket, and plainly in evidence was the everlasting Winchester hanging in its case on the saddle. A heavy quirt, or hip, hung by its lash, which was wound around the pommel. The person of the man appeared to be unarmed.

As Patrice caught sight of the ponderous figure that halted as she turned about, the pail dropped from her lax fingers; then she stiffened, and her eyes widened.

"Bill Crystal!"

"Aye, Pat; who did ye think it was?" he said, dropping the bridle and striding across the water. There was no answer, and, approaching the girl, the man continued: "I bin watchin' ye dream fer ten minutes. Ye be prettier'n a picter—prettier'n ever. I kem up to——"

"Stay back! Stay away from me!" The girl recoiled a pace.

"By G—d! Ye be sassier'n ever, too! I thought ye'd be different," he returned, standing where her words had halted him.

"What do you want?" asked the girl, who seemed to grow taller as she stood still and measured the fellow with an eye from which all softness had disappeared.

"Want? Why, I reckon I wanter see you. I heard as how Monkey was dead, an'——"

"You knew he was dead!" broke in the maiden.

Something like confusion flashed over the face of the man, and his small eyes sent out a spark as he said:

"I knew! I bin away! How did I know?"

"Because you shot him, you skunk!" replied the girl, turning as pale as death.

"By G—d! It's good fer you you're only Pat Riley, an' not a man!" returned Crystal, lowering his voice, though not disguising the threat in it. "Who told ye I shot him?"

"Who needed to tell me?—you coward! I know it! Who else cared for dad—loved him or hated him —'cept me an' Bob an' you? Who else but you said he'd fix him? Who else wanted to fix him?"

She looked down on him, magnificent in her hot anger. The color that had returned and glowed on her cheeks spoke of the depth of her feeling.

"That ain't no proof," was the somewhat easy return of the man, as he forced a laugh—a laugh of apparent relief. "I allow I didn't have no love fer Monkey. He went back on me. I don't see why ye cut up so about him. Wot sort of a father was he

to you two kids, a-keepin' ye in this hide-out? He wa'n't yer real paw, anyhow. I come to do the right thing by ye, if ye'll let me. I'll make a leddy of ye. I'll fix ye so's to knock out all the wimmen around these parts—knock 'em puffectly silly! Come, I'm on the square now, anyhow. Don't get cantankerous till ye hear me through, Pat."

"Go on."

"When I was jugged my woman skipped off with a greaser an' ran down Mexico way. Then I thought o' you; I allus thought a mighty lot o' you, Pat. I got a pot o' money all at once, an' now I want a proper figgerhead fer my place. Ye'll never 'mount to nothin' here. It's the best chance ye'll ever have. I'll treat the boy white, an' ye can swing the whole ranch."

"You mean you'll marry me?"

Had the man possessed the least discernment he would have seen danger in the slightly-quivering body of the girl.

"Wall, I don't know as I mind if ye insist; but I'm afraid it would be no go—with the woman a-livin'. Wot's the difference? Wot do ye say?"

For an answer the girl looked about her in wild hopelessness, the red of her cheek again giving way

to the pallor of intense passion. Her hands clinched and unclinched, and as her eyes caught sight of Crystal's horse, which had fallen to cropping the mesquite across the creek, she turned and, with a bound, cleared the narrow run and was at the animal's side. With a quick movement she drew the rifle from its case on the saddle, and threw up the hammer.

"What do I say?" she vociferated, her ringing voice sounding like a clashing bell. "I say I would welcome hell sooner than a touch of your finger, you cur! Oh, you hound! An' I won't say no more. Get onto this horse, an' if you're not out o' shot in half a minute I'll put a bullet through you, so help me God! You loafer!—you coward!"

The man stood for a moment too astonished to move, then his broad face turned red. Like one accustomed to the situation, he threw his hand to his hip, but the pistol he had considered as unnecessary in his love-making pilgrimage was not in its place. As quick as a flash the girl covered the great figure with the rifle, and as the man marked her cold eye glance along the barrel his pudgy hands went aloft.

"Hold on, Pat! Ye have the drop on me. I'll go, all right; but it'll be a sorry day fer you! A nice return for a fair offer nine gals out o' ten would jump

at! I know wot's the matter. I heerd. It's that damned doctor! Put down that iron—I ain't got a gun." He coupled a vile epithet with his words, and moved toward his horse, the girl's eye following him as though she feared treachery. No further words passed until Crystal climbed into the saddle, his weight making the animal lurch as he hung in the stirrup. When settled, he cast a venomous look at the girl as he said:

"I'll see his water is dammed fer him, the sneakin' tenderfoot!" Then he moved off on a walk which, as quickly as hurt pride would allow, gave place to a canter. And so he went up the trail.

The girl stood like a statue, watching him. She saw him top the brow of the hill and suddenly rein in, blocking the passage of another horseman who appeared, and whom she instantly recognized as her brother. The two were plainly silhouetted against the pale blue of the lifted horizon. For a moment they seemed to be holding a colloquy, then the big man bent quickly toward the other and struck at him. The girl could see the thin line of the heavy quirt handle as it descended on the boy; she could see the arm thrown out to avert the blow. The next instant her brother's saddle was empty, and Crystal had disappeared over the crest of the upland.

IV.

When, in something like an hour later, the doctor reached the ranch he found the youth moaning on his bed, a deep gash in his scalp, and a terrible contusion on the arm that had been the ward which had saved his life. That no bones had been broken appeared miraculous, but the young man was low through fright and shock. If the attack had failed to kill, it was not through lack of purpose.

The girl moved about like a graven image. Her face was set in dumb agony, but there was no outburst, no denunciation; and the doctor received but a bare recital of the facts as she had seen them. Of Crystal's call and interview with herself she dropped no hint. She appeared to be half dazed, though perfectly calm.

With professional instinct the physician saw his duty, and did it gently and quietly. There was a

great tide of indignation swelling within him as he worked over the boy—an indignation mingling with a greater pity for the woman, and a something else that showed him his power of repression had reached its limit. He must dare the world—his world; and if he had come hither with the hope to temporize still further, he now saw how impossible it would be. He must take or leave.

When, after quieting the youth, he drew the girl aside, he marked no lifting of the dumb protest in her face when he assured her the brother's hurts were superficial in themselves. They stood together on the little porch, the roses flinging themselves in the wind and scattering perfume. She looked at him steadfastly, as a woman looks into the eyes of a man she knows well, and she knew him well—now. She was perfectly impassive. He approached the subject surging within him by saying he would at once lodge a complaint against Crystal; but she stopped him with a quick, impulsive motion that appeared to arouse her.

"No, no! Not you—not you! Didn't I tell you I wouldn't drag you down? You must not tell. If you did you would have to——"

"Well?" he said, waiting for the final moment.

"You'd have to go. He or his pard would kill you if you didn't leave the place."

"Well, and if I did leave?"

She made no answer, save what he thought he read in her sudden paleness and quick upward look; then he rushed madly to his fate. Every consideration save that of love he flung to the winds. He would go if she would go. He would provide for her and for her brother. He would educate both; there was time—she was young. He would marry her now, then, or at any time. He prostrated himself in all but body. The passion and truth of the man flashed from his eyes; his words fell in a hot torrent of promises and proposals interspersed with endearments that must have caused the girl exquisite joy, even while they cut her to the core. She waited without a word, without a look at him, then drew from the embrace in which he had caught her and stepped away, her face so suddenly changed that he was startled.

"When a man talks that way he must have an answer," she said, with a semi-defiant movement of her head, though her bosom heaved as though she needed breath, "and my answer is—no, not now!"

The doctor's heart contracted. He swayed a little. He had never doubted for an instant.

"Not now! Not now!"

"Not now."

"When?"

"I don't know. Perhaps never. Oh, for God's sake, go away! Can't you see you are killing me slowly? Don't come back here ever—till I say you may. I will speak when the time comes."

"Patrice! Patrice!" he exclaimed, leaping forward as he saw the wonderful lovelight in her eyes—a light strong beyond hiding.

She twisted from his attempted embrace, and, with a cry, ran out of the room.

Like one partly stunned, the doctor stood for a space and looked at the door through which she had fled. He laid his hand on the rude table as though needing its support; then, as though moving in his sleep, walked out, mounted his horse, and rode away.

It was six weeks before the boy was seen at the tavern again, and the erstwhile black waxy of the road had turned to gray powder under the heat of the sun and grind of hoofs and wheels. Little attention was paid to the youth, although the sling in which he carried his left arm evoked a meed of minor curiosity. He was soon left untroubled, for, as a person harmless and of little force, he was of no interest,

and appeared to hang around the piazza for the sole purpose of being near humanity. No one cared how he lived. He was wont to ride into town on his old horse, sometimes with a string of game, presumably brought down with the Winchester he had inherited, the game being exchanged for a meal. Little could be gotten from him in the way of words, and the element hanging about the place treated him with plain contempt because of his moody and unsocial nature.

It might have been chance that made Crystal disappear again immediately after the assault. No one dared aver that anything but business was the cause of his sudden departure, but perhaps that gentleman thought that the local authorities might become interested in the matter if the boy died, and probe the animus of the act. At all events, it was now whispered that Crystal would be back shortly. None noticed that when the youth heard the rumor his fair face lost a shade of its color, his faultless mouth turned a trifle hard. The expected arrival was hailed with free expressions of joy by most of the characters making the tavern their headquarters, and on the great day of his looked-for advent there were a number of his ilk assembled to receive him, lounging in tilted-

back chairs on the broad piazza and out of reach of the blazing sun.

For it was a fiery day when at last Crystal drove up in his dilapidated buggy, the ragged top of which seemed to curl in the fierce heat. The man's great body nearly covered the tattered cushion of the seat. The crowd rose en masse when he appeared—all save Riley's boy, who sat apart on the floor of the piazza, drawing through his fingers the silky ears of a hound that had walked up to him. His depression was extreme. As Crystal was hailed, he waved a fat hand to the waiting company, and reined in down the road to speak to the blacksmith, who had run from his shed, and in the commotion of expectancy no one noticed Riley's boy lift his eyes.

They did not see him lift his eyes, nor did they see the sudden pallor on his face. They only knew that as they waited to welcome their popular companion there came the report of a rifle from the end of the piazza, and Bill Crystal leaped to his feet with a forty-four calibre ball in his great abdomen. The boy was standing quite still, his Winchester in his hand, smoke still oozing from its muzzle and smoke hanging over the youth's fair head.

The wounded man swayed on the floor of the

buggy for an instant, then, with the roar of a bull, leaped from the vehicle and ran into the blacksmith's shop, where he fell on a heap of cinders, and, grovelling like the coward he was, cursed, prayed, wept and begged for the doctor.

For a moment no attention was paid to the boy. As the crowd left the piazza with a rush and surged through the broad door of the shop, the youth walked to his horse, mounted it and rode toward the river, the few who noticed his act not having the courage to thwart a man well armed and evidently desperate. He crossed the Sebola, pressing his horse through the ford, and so went into the lower town and drew up in front of the house of the doctor.

That gentleman was in no enviable state of mind. For six weeks he appeared to have fallen back into his old state of lethargy, a fact that caused consternation in the broad bosom of his housekeeper. But the doctor was not lethargic. The old numbness was Elysium compared to the feeling now possessing him, but he was not one to wear his heart on his sleeve. The dead level of an ennui against which he had been wont to struggle did not trouble him now. He was alive, painfully alive, to the keenness of his agony. Hurt pride, fast-falling hopes, desire unsatisfied and

suspense make a poor bed for any one. He dared not intrude on the woman who, he knew, loved him, yet sent him from her. He dared not leave the place, though he felt that his mission in Texas had about ended; yet he was impelled to fly from this galling sweetness as he had once fled from the galling numbness of grief. He had disobeyed the girl in one thing, however. He would not let the brute who was about to return to Boerne go unpunished, and at that moment there sat in his study the new sheriff, to whom he had just finished retailing the facts relative to Riley's death and the subsequent assault on the boy. He was willing to brave the consequences of this, and waited for the official's opinion in the matter. The opinion was not held back.

"If Bob Riley had any sand he would kill that sucker. It is the best way to get rid of him. There ain't a jury on earth that knows the man but would acquit him with a jump. But I tell you if it is just a trial for assault—for the murder can't be proved—you'd better make yourself scarce if you lug your name into it. I'll nip him when he comes if you just say so; but so long as he lives after that your hide's not safe from a sudden ventilatin'. You'd better let summun else do the business."

The doctor looked at the man. He sat still a moment, running his fingers through his hair, then he said:

"You know that I can do nothing, not being the one aggrieved. You are an officer of the law. I give you your cue; act on it if you dare—it's your business. The girl—the children are afraid; the man a menace to society. Don't try to protect yourself by attempting to protect me. Use my name in any way you like."

The sheriff ejaculated the word "hell" as a preface to more; but he was interrupted by a light footfall, and in the open door of the shaded room, to all appearances, stood one of the subjects of their conversation. The officer, being in a distant corner, was not seen by the intruder, but the doctor sat where a shaft of light from the fiery sky came through the half-closed blind and fell on his white face. The figure glided into the room and stopped before him.

"I've shot Bill Crystal! I had to! I did it to save me an' Bob an'—an' you!" There was a slight tremor to the voice as it hesitated, and then broke out: "Will you have me now?"

Before either man could get to his feet the Winchester fell to the floor with a sharp clang, and was

followed by the speaker, who pitched to the carpet unconscious.

The sheriff stepped to the window and threw wide the blind. The doctor stooped beside the fallen figure, then arose trembling like a leaf.

"My God! It's Patrice!"

His companion looked down on the prostrate form and chewed on the end of his cigar. He was not a man easily shaken.

"Well, I'm eternally cussed! She's cut the knot, an' the deal's up to me!" Then he went out.

It was an hour before the girl regained her senses, but when she did she found the doctor sitting by her side. One of her hands was imprisoned in his. As for him, there was no need for questions. He read through the history of the weeks, and now knew the mind of the girl as clearly as he knew his own. As she came to herself, she looked into his face a little wildly, then suddenly drew herself upright on the sofa, pulled away her hand, and tried to get to her feet. The doctor passed his arm about her.

"I—I remember now," she faltered. "I—I didn't mean to faint. Let me go."

"Where will you go, Patrice?" he asked. "Why would you go?"

She swung away from him with a little of her old spirit.

"You—you ought to know. I—I said something when I came in here, an' you wouldn't answer me—you never answered me."

"My poor, brave darling! Did you need an answer—from me?" he said, and clasped her tightly.

Then she broke into a storm of sobs.

. . . . . .

The trial of Patrice Riley for shooting and killing William Crystal is an old story in Texas. The result was an acquittal, and more—it was a clamorous justification, an endorsement of her act and spirit, the jury not considering it necessary to leave their seats. For a time the girl was the heroine of the county, the neglect in which she lived giving place to profuse offers tending to her future prosperity. But both she and her brother suddenly disappeared. As for the doctor, it is well known that he left Texas immediately after the trial. It is also well known that in a northern seminary there was a young lady of striking beauty and great spirit whom he married on the very day of her graduation.

MR. SIXTY'S MISTAKE

MR. SIXTY'S MISTAKE

I.

Cocky Smith leaned pensively on the single rough plank that formed the bar, apparently intensely interested in the deep purple of the sky, which reflected its hue on the narrow, snowclad valley beneath. A few early stars winked in the velvet overhead. The peaks to the east were yet broadly flushed by a yellow light, the pointed pines showing against the snow, step upon step, like lace upon a white pillow. It had stopped snowing and cleared at noon, and now the valley—narrow for a valley, yet broad for a canyon—was covered to the depth of a foot or more, though drifts like small buildings blocked the stage route and made travel for the time impracticable, if not an impossibility.

For a wonder Cocky Smith was sober. Had it been otherwise, he never would have worn the abstracted look of a poet or an artist, though his make-

up above his shoulders was not altogether unlike the conventional dreamer. A long and glossy black beard, a pale, thin, dark face, topped by long and glossy black hair, might have deceived the casual glance unless it caught the glint of his eye, and then one knew that Cocky Smith was no dreamer—in fact, no ordinary man. Little was known of him save that Smith was not his true name; and, though familiarly known as "Cocky," a soubriquet derived from the fact that his eyes became "cocked," or crossed, in a degree which advanced with his intoxication, when he was sober no one looking at him would think of approaching him with any other title than that of Mr. Smith. To-night his eyes were straight and singularly mild.

His dress was that of all station-men of the day—half cattleman, half hunter or miner, the inevitable leather hanger depending from his belt showing the protruding butt of a revolver. There was none of the slashed finery of the Mexican about him, neither did his walk betray the half-stiffened bow legs of an habitual horseman. No one around the station knew what he had been, all that was certain being that he was then the company's stage station-master, and that he had come from a distant mining camp, where he had presumably "killed his man." The last was more

than a rumor, and Mr. Smith ruled by right of rank and prowess the five men detailed by the company to protect the stage station and blockhouse of Pleasant Valley.

In their own peculiar ways, all of the men were fond of Cocky, and so addressed the master when he was half intoxicated—his usual condition; hated and feared him when he had been made ferocious by deeper potations, and respected him for his plain mental superiority while he was sober.

The civilization of the small community of Pleasant Valley was not high. Thirty-five years ago there was no house nearer than the next station, fifteen miles away; and the half-dozen that protected the interests of the stage line in this oasis of the Rocky Mountains had been drawn from all parts of the States—drawn or drifted thither—each with a history checkered enough to make sharp contrasts between the brightness of a virtuous youth and the blackness of subsequent vice, if not actual crime.

Once in two days the stage passed the station, going east or west, and as often came the "freight," with its dozen spans of mules, the tall, canvas-covered leader, swing and trailer winding into the valley entrance with a long stretch of graceful curve that

presaged the sweep of the railroad which has since followed.

Cocky dropped his eyes from the sky and scanned the rocky pass that, like a gate, opened to the outside world eastward, and then turned his attention inward. The fire in the enormous box stove was sinking, the hot embers making a small track of light across the rough flooring and on the log walls of the room as they shone through the draught holes in the door. With something like a sigh, Cocky went to a corner, and, selecting an immense log of pine, threw it onto the fiery bed, opened the damper, and, lighting the single lamp that was fastened to a ceiling beam, disappeared into the room behind the bar.

The station-master was in an uncommon mood. If his companions could have seen him, there would have been furtive nudgings and winks, but no questions—Mr. Smith not being a man to be questioned on personal matters while very sober or very drunk. Once in his room—a barren log apartment, with a single bunk built against the rough boles of the wall—his air of depression grew with the rapidly-increasing darkness. Seating himself on the edge of the rough bed, he gazed out of the small window for a time, then, fumbling through a box which he drew

into the field of dim light, pulled out an old newspaper wrapped about the photograph of a woman—a young woman—a girl, in fact, well dressed, well favored in feature, with the ghost of an unretouched dimple, and a sweetness yet firmness of mouth and chin that would have attracted the second glance of the most casual observer.

For at least a quarter of an hour Cocky looked hungrily on the portrait, then, tenderly replacing it in the box, opened the paper with the directness of one who knew where to find that for which he was looking.

"Five hundred dollars reward for information of the whereabouts of William Lewis, of Greene, Chenango County, New York. The above will be paid on receipt of satisfactory evidence given to the sheriff of Chenango County, or to Messrs. Blythe & Hill, attorneys, Greene, New York."

The paper bore a date five years old.

The mood which had held Mr. Smith in thrall for an hour or more changed as ice changes on a hot stove. The depression fell away from him in an instant. With a curse he flung the paper into the box, closed it, and, kicking it beneath the bunk, opened the door to the bar just as the men from the stable

and blockhouse entered the room.

It seemed evident that the life of Cocky Smith contained a romance, and one not possessing the charm of novelty. Of the scores of blacklegs infesting the great West in those times, at least every other one might have looked tenderly on the portrait of some woman who had entered their lives in bygone days, or cursed at the printed evidence of an old crime. In nine cases out of ten the past was irredeemably dead. With Cocky Smith it was not; but when he re-entered the bar he was, to all appearances, the same sober, distant Mr. Smith that the gang had left two hours before.

I.

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on the shelf.

"No freight, consekently no whis
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room; and again silence fell.

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"If Marve should tell the truth it would be about desartin' from th' Confederacy," piped in Sixty, with a wink at the rest. "Wot was the last war news, hey? Wot a pair o' legs fer runnin'!"

"You be doggoned, Mr. Sixty!" retorted Marve, good naturedly joining in the laugh at his own expense. "Bein' you air not a provo marshal, I'd as lief allow it as not; only I never desarted. Co'se I never desarted. 'Cause why? 'Cause I was drummed out. Say, fellers, pitch onter Sixty fer the truth, an' I'll bet four bones o' red eye—when it comes—that you'll get a sweet scented lot o' information as to what's the best way ter jump jail to prevent hangin'."

"Wot if he did, Marve? Wouldn't you stand by him if he was threatened ter be took?" asked Feathers, as the laugh died away.

"Co'se I would—to Sixty; but not to any other man fer murder, I reckon. Sixty's too much fun. I reckon 'twan't nothin' worse nor horse stealin'; was it Sixty?"

Sixty smiled feebly, and withdrew from the contest. Had an outsider thus impugned his honesty and standing in society it would have been a serious matter, for, though this crestfallen, overgrown child was as supple as a wand among his companions, he would have resented to the death any insult from a stranger.

"I'll tell you what, boys," interrupted the blacksmith, "it's a d—n good game to play—fer a change—this here game o' truth—only you don't play it right!"

"As how, then?" queried Bishop.

"Why, ye pile hands, ye know," he explained, directly ignoring Sixty and addressing the others; "an' the bottom hand pulls out and puts on the top, an' ye keeps doin' it till a set signal, when the one that's on the bottom has ter swear by the bones of his defunct great-grandmother an' the Bible—jest as they do in court, ye know—that he'll tell the truth to any one question arsked, no matter how deep it cuts; the loser ter stand treat. Now, I'll swear ter gosh I'll tell the truth if it comes ter me, an' perhaps we'll find out if Sixty be a jail bird or a horse thief, as Mr. Tuttle insinerated."

"I'm blowed ef I'm afeered! I don't reckon any on us is afeered," said Tuttle, always ready for the simplest entertainment or the most foolhardy adventure. "Will you come in on it, Mr. Smith? There ain't nothin' better in sight!"

The temerity of Tuttle caused the rest to look toward Smith, who had been listening to the coarse badinage as a schoolmaster listens to the folly of children,

but, to the surprise of the group, he laid his hand on the bar with the words: "Come on; only this is to be above board, boys. The man who will lie after swearing on the bones of his great-grandmother deserves horsewhipping, and he'll get it if he's found out."

A dozen rough hands were piled on the plank of the bar, the men jostling each other and laughing as they entered into the spirit of the, to them, decidedly novel game of "Truth."

"Wot's ter be the signal?" asked Feathers, as he topped the pile with a hand like a small pillow.

"Somebody fire a gun!" suggested Bishop, an idea at once rejected, as it would be necessary for one hand to be withdrawn, besides throwing out the question of chance.

"Let it be third crack of the stove," said Smith, and the sextet fell into silence as the master withdrew his hand from the bottom and placed it on the top.

The twelve rough paws moved quickly, and the pipe gave a decided crack before the sixth man had shifted his hand.

"One!" said Mr. Smith.

A dead silence, save for the muffled shuffling of horny palms.

"Two!" he marked, ten seconds later, and then

there came a long pause, during which the hands fairly flew from the bottom to the top, each man more anxious to avoid the penalty of being indebted for drinks to the crowd than for any desire to evade the pain of telling the truth.

"Three!" shouted Bishop, as the pipe gave a prodigious crack. The movement stopped instantly. Mr. Smith's hand rested on the counter, held down by the pile above it.

Instead of protesting at his bad luck, the station-master seemed relieved. Perhaps this reticent man had his weak moments, as we all have, and a partial unburdening to the jury before him, a jury predisposed in his favor, might lift, to a slight extent, the matter which in his sober moments lay like a load upon his soul. Collectively, his rough companions made a strange father confessor for a man of his stamp, but he knew that each man of them, uncouth, uneducated, a mere pariah in society, had a sense of justice and a large ability to make allowances as well. Yet woe to him who struck the wrong chord while appealing to their mercy.

Mr. Smith emptied his pipe and entered his sanctum for a new supply. Instantly five heads drew together, and when the master returned Feathers was

coughing in the embarrassment of having been selected spokesman to put the question.

"Well, lads, what is it to be?" asked Smith, as he struck a match on his buckskinned thigh.

Feathers coughed again and spoke out. "We hain't had long to consider the matter, Cocky—I mean Mr. Smith—but we decided that we had best know who ye be rightly—where ye comes from an' how comes yer."

The agent's eyes gave a snap inward, but they immediately became clear and mild as he gazed at the speaker. Slowly walking behind the bar, his usual position, he rested his elbows on the plank, and said:

"There was no bargain for three questions, my man. I'll not lie, but you'll not get either my name or where I am originally from. The truth of what brought me here you may have, if that will be satisfactory; in fact, I feel it would do me good to stand and deliver, and when I'm through you will all know why I withheld the rest."

"That's fair enough," returned Feathers, appealing to the others by a glance which comprehended the party; "then let's have how ye come to drift to this bloomin' hole."

"It's enough to know that I am from the East," began the master, "and that about five years ago, in

a fit of drunken madness, I killed a man"——

"I bet he war a skunk and desarved it!" broke in Sixty, with a fine show of tactless patronage.

"Shut up!" came in full chorus from the others, and Sixty, again defeated, sank back.

Mr. Smith took a long breath, not so much in anger as relief, and continued, without noticing the interruption. But he was no longer the Cocky Smith known by his fellows. His gaze became intense and fixed beyond his audience, as though he was looking at a vision which had appeared on the rough wall of the barroom. He spoke more to himself than to the group before him.

"I killed a man, and, though I was to suffer in hell for saying it, no man deserved it more."

Sixty made an effort to speak, but his better judgment prevailed.

"God knows there was neither cold blood nor fancied insult," the master continued. "I was drunk —crazy drunk—but the drink only made me callous; it was not the cause. Had I been sober I would not have done it, and then would have cursed myself for weakness. There are some crimes the law cannot punish without punishing guilty and innocent alike. I killed him! I killed him, and before God Almighty

I believe I was only a tool sent to do justice to a low, cowardly, lying blackguard, who had almost wrecked my life and was trying to wreck my heart with it. Damn him, I say!"

Mr. Smith stopped, lowered his voice, which had been raised to a shout, seemed to return to his surroundings, and then proceeded.

"I came West, escaping those the law put on my track, and took to mining. You know how Watts shot at me in the back up at the camp; he paid for being fool enough to miss me. The court acquitted me, so my hands are clear of him. Well, the stage company wanted pluck, and I had half a name for that, so here I am. It don't do for one to blow his own horn, but you all see to what a state injustice may drive a man; and though I have smashed clean through the law, I still defy it to hold me to account for that one piece of business. Before I would submit I would stand at bay and die; but there is small chance for that, my men; I am dead to them, lads—dead. That's all! I feel better!"

"I said he war a skunk!" blurted Sixty, past all restraint. "Say, partner, is there any objections to sayin' who that devil war?"

The master was walking up and down the limited

space behind the bar. At the question he raised his head, stopped abruptly, and shot out two words:

"My brother!"

Then he turned, crossed the floor and entered his own room.

A long, low whistle followed his disappearance. For a full minute not a man spoke; then, with almost one accord, they went out. To these gentle savages it was one thing for a man to kill a man, but for a man to kill his own brother was beyond their simple comprehension.

The quarters of the stage gang was in the block-house. The building was unheated and terribly cold, and, though the hour was early, each one went to his bunk, the only remark referring to the late episode coming from Tuttle as he tumbled into his narrow bed:

"Cussed fine game—this game o' Truth. After that, lyin' 'll seem kinder wholesome like!"

III.

Near midnight Cocky came out of his room. He could not sleep. As he had said, he felt better. Though his guilt had not been abated one jot, there was off his mind the awful strain of secrecy, and it seemed to him as though a step, small as it had been, had advanced him toward light. He replenished the fire and went to the front door. The night was exquisite. The half grown moon had topped the eastern highlands, and its gleam shot off the icy peaks as though they were capped with polished steel. Over the snow the trees and buildings cast shadows as intense and black as if in the glare of an electric light. The wind had died to a perfect calm; not a cloud flected the blue, and the tremendous cold made the air so dry that he could almost hear the bark on the logs of the cabin crack and curl in the fearful temperature.

He had stood but a moment in the doorway when

his ear caught a sharp cry from far down the valley. The single sound had barely died away ere it was followed by a series of shouts and whoops that echoed faintly along the mountain sides. Cocky's mind was practical, albeit it was impulsive. Without wasting time to procure hat or coat, he plunged through the snow to the blockhouse, and, throwing open the unfastened door, shouted into the black interior:

"Up, boys! The Bannocks! The Bannocks!"

In five minutes every man stood outside with his ears strained down the valley.

"Never heered o' the Bannocks turnin' loose in dead o' winter afore," said Bishop, as a whoop as if from the combined lungs of a dozen warriors swelled up from below, followed by two or three pistol shots.

"Friz and' starved desprit, perhaps," suggested Feathers.

Mr. Smith was standing apart from the group. As the long barking whoops died with the shots a light broke on him. He said, suddenly:

"There are no redskins there, men; I was mistaken; it's the stage or freight in distress. Redskins never take midwinter for raids, or midnight for attacks. We have got to see what's up."

Smith had been right in his conjecture. The

freight had lost a wheel of the leader, and was stalled in an immense drift. The four men attending had raised the alarm to attract attention, but it was daylight before the wagons and teams had drawn up to the station.

"We've got a case o' freeze out in the swing, yonder," said one of the teamsters, as the train pulled up in front of the blockhouse. "I almost forgot him. The stage didn't try to get beyond The Dives, but this here bloke said he must get on, an' so we let him in. He's a sure enough tenderfoot, an' the cold an' whiskey has laid him out."

Mr. Smith parted the canvas cover of the swing and peered in. On a heap of freight lay a slight man, whose features were not discernible in the gloom of the early morning, and, giving directions to have the half frozen and more than half drunken stranger carried to a passenger bunk in the stage room, the agent superintended the unloading of the boxes, bales and barrels consigned to Pleasant Valley. These contained supplies for the station, and by the time the repaired freight train had departed Mr. Smith was comfortably intoxicated, and had gone to his bed toward noon to make up for lost time. With him had gone a two-gallon demijohn, and by night he had made up

for lost time; he was drunk, very drunk, and his eyes, which the evening before had gazed squarely and even kindly upon his companions, now looked like gimlets, and each bloodshot ball turned sharply inward. Not a soul had seen him since morning, and now, in Western parlance, Mr. Smith was "very fit."

In the stage room the stranger lay looking at the slab ceiling, marking the shadows of the coming night creep downward. He was very comfortable, and hated to move. The ice had been thawed out of him, and the effects of liquor dissipated by his long sleep, but the way his breath distilled moisture on his beard and moustache told him of the frigidity of the outer world, so he cuddled into the warm bunk and felt willing to let time drift. He had decided that haste was not always speed. He would wait for the stage due the following noon.

By and by the men came in for supper. Two of the freight teamsters had "laid over," their places having been taken by Bishop and Pink, and as the five discussed their meal, there was a repetition of the tale of the game of Truth, and the information which had been drawn from Cocky Smith.

The single candle in the large room did little more than light up the hairy faces surrounding it, for, with

the completion of making coffee, the great fire at the end of the apartment had died too low to be more than a dull red eye in the distance. Therefore, no one noticed that in the middle of the conversation the stranger had risen on his elbow, and, with his hand to his ear, was drinking in every word. The vernacular is difficult to the uncultivated, but his acquaintance with the ordinary idioms of the West, though short, had been sufficient to enable him to winnow out the fact that the station-master had come from the east five years before, after having killed his own brother in the rage of drunken craziness.

The stranger lay down and breathed hard as the story ceased, and the gang shuffled off to the more comfortable precincts of the bar and its fresh store of whiskey. They had hardly closed the door behind them before the sick man was out of his bunk, attempting to get his legs into his icy boots. He was very weak, and had but just succeeded in stamping one foot into its place when Sixty re-entered the room. Sixty was fairly along in liquor himself, but on a nature like his alcohol only increased his simplicity and garrulity. Childlike and even tempered, Sixty, with his high and thin voice, was the butt of the station, a fact which, like a child, he resented in spirit,

though not in action, holding only the desire to "get even" some day; but how, he had not the wit to fathom, and circumstances had as yet given him no chance to be distinguished above his fellows.

Passing to his bunk on some private errand, Sixty threw a greeting to the stranger, and then joined him that he might give rein to his loosened tongue, feeling that here was a pair of ears that would listen, and here a man who would not dare "sit on him." But he was not prepared for the first words from his hoped for audience.

"Say, my friend, did you hear that story last night?"

"Wot ef I did?" was the answer.

"Well, every word of it was true—except one."

"Watcher talkin' about?" asked Sixty.

"About the story told by Bill Lewis—his name's Lewis, not Smith!"

Sixty's small eyes expanded.

"I knowed it wan't Smith; an' now who be you, an' where is the lie ye air so glib about?"

"Well, I didn't mean a lie—only he didn't kill his brother, though he meant to and thought he had; his brother's alive to-day. Pity somebody didn't kill him. Sit down, and I'll tell you."

Sixty gave a sucking noise meant to be a whistle,

and concluding it by damning his eyes and seating himself on the edge of the bunk.

"Say, I don't know you, but I want you to tell Lewis, or Smith, to come here quick," continued the stranger, dropping his voice and growing confidential in manner. "I want to see him. He ran away from a shadow, and we've hunted for him and advertised for him until we came to believe he had joined the army and was dead. He's a free man to-day—in the law—and pretty well off, too, and I want to be the man to tell him. Say, hold on; sit down; help me on with this boot; I'm as weak as a cat!"

During this hurried recital Sixty's mouth had opened proportionately as wide as his eyes; that is, to their furthest extent; but, loyal to his superior, he was not prepared to accept all that he had heard. A glimmer of suspicion glanced athwart his slow brain, and his jaws shut like a trap as he bent forward and glared hard at the stranger.

"Who in h—l be you, anyhow? An' how do ye know that Smith is the man? Air ye meanin' fair, or be ye trumpin' up some game to git hold o' him if he is Lewis? Drop that boot an' tell me plain!"

"Why, man, you don't think half as much of Bill Lewis as I do!" came the ready answer, as the speaker

looked up, as though surprised that a doubt should be cast on his statement. "He was going to marry my sister when his brother tried to get between them in the dirty way he had—and then that thing happened. Bill's brother always hated him. Say, I'm Sheriff Blythe, of Chenango County, New York; elected a year ago, and I'm after a chap up in the mines. It was a godsend that I got drunk and was frozen out last night, and had to lay over. It'll be the making of Lewis—and me, too. Of course, it is possible that I am mistaken about the man, but, I take it, there were not a lot of men killing their brothers and running away at that time, an' I'll know him as soon as I put eye on him. This thing happened five years ago; isn't that right? Say! Hold on a minute! Where are you going?"

But Sixty had gone. Between the clear and concise statement, frankly and unhesitatingly given, and the matching of the links of evidence, all doubts as to the truth of the story had gone with him. Cocky Smith was not a murderer. He was a free man—and rich, too. Never in his life had Sixty felt so important, and though the stage room, which adjoined the blockhouse, was not more than three hundred feet from the bar, during the short journey Sixty's slug-

gish brain, aroused to an unusual pitch, had formed a plot in the realization of which he would shine as one of the lights in a grand, dramatic finale. Here was his chance at last. Would not Cocky forever be the friend of the man who first carried to his ear the news of his luck and immunity from the law? Of course; but Sixty would not be fool enough to blurt it out at once. Not he. This was a morsel to be worked up to a climax. The poor fellow did not use the word "climax," but the idea was expressed as he said to himself: "Yer got to knock a man down afore he knows how good it is ter stand up. I'll jest natchully blast the boys till their eyes hang out first; then I'll go ter work and brighten Cocky up. I reckon I kin do it. That other feller have the tellin' o' this yarn? Not much! It's lucky I went back an' heered it!"

If Sixty had not been so full of self-importance and whiskey, or had been possessed of finer mental qualities, he might have noticed the air of unusual constraint which pervaded his fellows as he entered the barroom. It was not because the men were silent; that they often were, and for hours together; but because of the fact that the attention of each man was intently fixed on Cocky Smith, who was in his usual quarters; that is, behind the bar. He seemed to be

making a critical examination of his countenance in a triangular piece of broken mirror nailed against the wall, stroking his shining black beard with his right hand, while his left held a tin cup half full of whiskey. His back was toward the door.

Certainly this was a great chance for Sixty. Here was a quiet audience ready to be waked up; here the unconscious hero. Hardly an eye shifted as the young old man entered the room and closed the door behind him. Advancing to the bar, he brought his hardened hand down on the plank with a bang, and blurted out:

"Say, Cocky, or Bill Lewis, o' the town o' Chenannygo County, o' the State o' New York, there's Sheriff Blythe, or some sich name, o' your place in the stage room, an' he's come arter ye—oh! my God Almighty!"

Mr. Smith had turned around slowly, and Sixty saw his face.

The agent's eyes were like coals of fire, the small pupils seemingly focussed on his nose, now thin and contracted. Mr. Smith was crazy drunk.

Sixty stood like one stricken with death, but only for a second, only long enough to see the quick sweep of the master's right hand from his right hip and the

sparkling of metal; then, with a yell, he dropped to the floor in front of the bar in time to avoid the spurt of flame and the bullet that buried itself in the opposite wall. The master replaced his revolver, smiled a satanic smile and quietly drank off the whiskey he still held in his left hand.

IV.

Five minutes after Sixty was the center of the circle that had gathered in the snow a quarter of a mile up the valley. He had scrambled to his feet after the assault, and fled wildly through the deep drifts, where he had been followed by the gang as much out of curiosity as fear. None of them was a coward, not even the poor butt who was at last the hero of a minute, but the suddenness of the affair had staggered them, and it was not considered conducive to longevity to remain in the society of a crazy man with a gun. If Mr. Smith, or Mr. Lewis, or whatever his name might be, was going to run amuck they would be prepared for him, and it was resolved that the party would arm and the stranger be placed on his guard. If left entirely alone, the master would sleep off his drunk by morning, and be amenable to reason. They were not aggressive, these men. No harm had yet been done and each of them "knew how it was" himself.

In the bleak stage room the stranger waited, boot in hand, for the return of Sixty or the coming of the man he so wished to see. The minutes dragged by, and no one appeared. It was fearfully cold, and, but for the light of the single candle, the darkness was intense. Once he heard a sound like a shot and some loud shouting, but he did not attribute it to its proper cause, and afterward the old silence came down like a blanket. He would wait no longer. Slowly he got into his remaining boot, and felt around for his heavy coat, which he finally found, threw it about his shoulders and sallied out. He saw but one building displaying light, and to this he went, stumbling along the rough, half trodden path. He had no eyes for the line of black specks moving over the snow in the distance, and with a mind bent only on seeing his old friend as soon as possible, he opened the bar door and entered. The room was empty.

With the departure of the gang, Mr. Smith walked up and down like a man asleep, only a slight occasional lurch betraying his condition. Presently he went to his room, and, leaving the door slightly ajar, seated himself on a log in a manner to command through the opening the interior of the bar. Drawing his revolver he waited, a devilish leer in his eyes

and his teeth set like the jaws of a sprung trap.

He did not wait long. Blythe came into the room and stood irresolute. Advancing to the stove, he turned toward the partly open door he saw beyond, and in a clear and hearty voice said:

"Is William Lewis, or Smith, inside?"

His answer was a deafening report, and the Sheriff of Chenango spun around as if on a pivot, and fell heavily to the floor.

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Late the next day Cocky Smith, or William Lewis, came to his senses. His head ached fearfully, and he discovered that he had retired with his hat and clothes on. He was conscious of having had a series of bad dreams, and the cold which had assailed his but partly protected body had stiffened him so that he could scarcely move. He dragged himself into the outer room. The fire was out, and on the floor was a slight splash of blood.

"The boys have been at it," he murmured. "I wonder who was hurt. I must have been very drunk not to remember."

The master was not yet entirely sober, but his eyes were almost straight as he hobbled behind the bar and poured out a morning bracer. The stage would be

along to-day surely, and he must pull himself together. He looked out of the window. The sun, which shone from a flawless sky, threw a blinding glare on the snow, and by its height showed the hour was past noon. As he glanced toward the blockhouse he saw Sixty, Tuttle and Feathers come out of the stage room door and advance toward the barroom, and it astonished him somewhat to observe that the three carried rifles. He awaited their advent wonderingly, for the fact that they were heavily armed and had stopped for a whispered consultation when within a few feet of the barroom made him suspect that something out of the common was afoot.

And there was. The sheriff lay in the stage room, dying fast. From the moment the day had dawned he had been calling for the man who had shot him, but not a soul had dared to awaken the murderer and deliver the message. By noon it was seen that the wounded man could not last long, and a pressure was put on Sixty, who had been the cause of the trouble, to take all risks. But this he flatly refused to do without an armed escort; hence the squad which approached and at length entered the bar, three sober, rough and determined men.

Sixty advanced, with his companions but a step in

the rear. As he saw the master standing in his old position behind the bar and marked the change in his face, a sigh of relief escaped him and the butt of his rifle came to the floor. The slight slant of the eyes that met his told him that Mr. Smith was not to be feared, and without preface he said:

"Cocky, he wants ter see yer. He's agoin' fast an' says as how he must see yer."

"Who?" asked the master, in genuine surprise.

"Sheriff, somebody o' some place; it don't much matter what he is, I reckon; anyhow it's the feller ye shot last night arter ye tried ter pot me. I war an ass to break on yer the way I did, but I didn't know ye war beastly paralyzed. It's tough luck fer all around. It's mighty bad fer you, Cocky—mighty bad—ain't it, boys?"

Cocky's eyes looked strangely at the trio before him, and with an exclamation his hand fell to his right hip with that peculiar shoulder motion so well known to those who "carry a gun." Instantly he was covered by three rifles.

"Hold hard, men! I understand!" he shouted, as he threw up his hands. "Come and take my gun, Sixty, I only wished to count the cartridges."

Sixty went behind the counter, took the revolver

from its pouch, threw out the chamber and discharged two empty shells, which he tossed on the bar. "One of them d—n things was fer me!" he said, laconically, "an' ye may find the lead around here summers."

"By G—d!" exclaimed the master, "I must have done some mischief last night. I thought it was a dream, but on my oath I know nothing about it. Take me to your man."

The sheriff lay in the lightest and airiest bunk in the room. His eyes were turned to the open door through which the sunlight fell in a great square that brightened the rafters and gave almost a look of cheerfulness to the barren apartment. As the shadow of the master darkened the door, the wounded stranger made a feeble attempt to raise himself, but fell back with a groan, though he stretcher out his hand to the man who walked stiffly across the floor.

"You are Bill Lewis!" he said.

The agent stopped suddenly, bent forward for an instant, and then, in almost a whisper, exclamed:

"Great God above me! It is Harry Blythe!"

"Aye, Bill—aye, Bill," was the low reply. "I didn't expect this yet awhile, but it has come. Why

did it come now? Never mind—only I wanted to see you and say I meant no harm to you. I couldn't. I had found you by accident—and everything was all right. Tom is not dead—you didn't kill him—and —and Lillian found out all about it and her heart has been eating itself away through longing for you, Bill, for more than five years. Oh, my God! old boy! Must I die and by your——?"

The man stopped without finishing the sentence, and Lewis seemed carved in stone as he sat on the edge of the bunk looking into the face of his old friend. Not a word in answer; not a quiver of his eyes, and they were straight enough and mild enough now. The blow he had received was worse to him than the bullet was to Blythe. He had found his hell.

One by one the men had gathered about, but there was no noise save the swish of the wind through the pines outside and the crackling of the fire that had been made in the great cavern at the end of the room. After a wait of a minute or two Blythe made an effort and continued:

"I saw how everything was going to be bright, and while I was walking up to see you, I thought of the letter I would write to Lillian—poor girl—and, Bill

—your father—died and you were fixed—and Tom went to Europe—and all rough places seemed smoothed over—and I was sheriff—and you could have gone back with me—and married Lillian. But now, Bill, what can you do after—this? Oh, God! you poor fellow, what can you do now?"

He had raised his voice to almost a shout as he spoke the last words. As he stopped he lifted himself, or tried to; sank back, closed his eyes, and thus died with his hand in the hand of his murderer, and without a word of accusation.

One after the other the men stole away, but William Lewis uttered not a sound. Apparently unmoved and certainly unmoving, he continued to sit in the same position until the hand within his was icy cold and growing stiff. Then he arose and returned to the barroom.

The men had gathered about the stove in which they had kindled a fire, and a litter of chips and pine needles covered the red spot on the floor. The master passed through the group without a word and entered his own room. His face was as pale as that of the man he had but just left, but it had an expression that none of the hands had seen before. As Tuttle remarked afterward: "I never seen

Cocky's mug look so kinder wholesome as it did when he slid by us."

Within ten minutes after the agent entered his room, there came a shot from within. Every man about the stove knew its import, yet for some time not one of them stirred. When at last they went to him they found that he had placed the photograph of a woman over his naked breast, and through it he had fired the shot which had reached his heart. Out in the barroom Sixty sat sobbing like a child.

THE END.