CHAPTER XXVI.

The course of Colonel Mansley was characteristic from the first. When he and his two friends rode through the little village of Aldine on their way home, it was in his power to brush aside every threatening cloud and bring peace and good will upon the excited community. He had only to draw rein and make known to the loiterers around the place that the genuine Hank Beyer had been arrested and was then on his way to the county seat in charge of the sheriff. The fact that his own father had recognized the scamp and refused to assist him would have placed the identity of the young man beyond doubt.

And yet the colonel resolutely refused to speak the word. Believing that I had taken refuge under his roof, he was eager to defend me, and, as he expressed it, meant to teach the boors a lesson they would remember all their lives. In his stern wrath he scorned to acknowledge the salutations of his neighbors, but rode forward, grim, determined and silent, to his home. To use a common expression, the veteran was spoiling for a fight.

As for myself, I should have been glad to withdraw when night came, and, mounted on a swift horse, taken my chances of escape—which were good—but I dared not propose anything of that nature to my host. He had laid out his line of action and would brook no interference from any one.

The warning whistle of Captain Warren had scarcely reached us in the stillness of the autumn night when he came in sight through the gloom, walking rapidly up the front path. Before he reached the porch he was joined by Captain Vernon, who opened the unfastened door and entered the parlor.

"Well," said the former, without the slightest agitation, "they are within 100 yards and coming at a fast gait."

"How many do you make?" inquired the colonel.

"It is hard to tell in the darkness, but all seem to be talking at the same time, and they are straggling along, apparently without a leader. There must be a score."

"No doubt Jim Dungan is at their head, and he is as brave as he is foolish."

"They need a sharp lesson."

"And will receive it. They will approach from the front," added the colonel. "We shall have a few words with them before the firing begins. Most of the men have seen service, and they will first summon us to surrender. It is policy to compel them to strike the opening blow. You three will station yourselves by the windows at the front of the parlor, with the sashes raised. When I give the word, we will all open fire together."

"We promise you that," assented Captain Warren, speaking for the rest of us.

"And don't forget that each of you has a repeating Winchester. Pump the shots into them as fast as you can. A battle is often won by its opening. It will be mercy to the survivors to pick off a dozen or so. The chances are that they will run after a reception like that."

"Perhaps to organize in larger force than before."

"What of that?" demanded the colonel as if he snuffed the battle and reveled in the intoxication it imparted. "Ah, there they are!"

Looking out from the darkened parlor, we saw a number of shadowy figures gathering near the entrance to the grounds. The night was like the preceding one, cool, crisp and clear, with only the star gleam to aid our vision. This was weakened by the shade of the trees that surrounded the house, but by looking straight down the wide walk there was little difficulty in making out the moving forms.

As nearly as I could judge there were twenty odd, so that the vigilantes of the preceding night had been augmented by others. They had halted at the entrance to the grounds, as if for consultation.

There were four windows at the front of the parlor, and three of us took our station there, each with a rifle in hand. Colonel Mansley, as our leader, remained in the hall near the front door, ready to receive the message which was expected from the mob. In the impressive silence I caught the sound of a light footfall at the head of the stairs. Miss Mansley had violated the command of her parent to the extent of leaving her room.

The minutes passed, and still none of the shadowy forms at the front of the grounds approached. In the stillness of the night we could hear the murmur of their voices. If Jim Dungan was the leader, he did not have his vigilantes under the best of discipline. Colonel Mansley grew impatient, for he did not understand the meaning of the delay, and Captain Warren, nearest me on the right, muttered:

"It looks as if their courage had petered out and there is none that dare show himself in front of the others."

"They may open fire from where they stand or pass around to the rear, where we shall have a poorer chance at them."

"They can't effect much at long range— Ah, there they come!"

Instead of one man two advanced from the group and walked up the path beside each other. As they drew nearer it was seen that each carried a rifle. While I was peering through the gloom, trying to identify them, Captain Warren said in a low voice:

"The one on the right is Jim Dungan."

"And his companion is Cy Walters," I added, easily recognizing the massive figure of the ex-soldier.

"You are right. It is he."

They came forward at a deliberate walk, apparently puzzled by the darkness and silence of the mansion, but they showed no signs of timidity. At the foot of the porch the two halted, and Dungan called in a clear voice:

"Hello, the house!"

Colonel Mansley instantly stepped forth and, advancing to the edge of the upper step, asked in his sharp, military fashion:

"Well, sir, what do you wish?"

The two men gave a salute by touching their forefingers to the fronts of their hats, but he stood proud and erect without acknowledgment.

"You have a young man in your house that we want to see," replied Dungan, who did the talking for his party.

"I have a guest here, but he chooses to pick his company and declines to have anything to do with you."

"Has he said so?" was the impudent question of the leader of the vigilantes.

"None of your business! I speak for him."

"I think, colonel, you'd better let that chap come out."

"It matters nothing to me what you think; you have my answer."

"Suppose we come in after him?"

Colonel Mansley held his temper better than I expected. There was not a tremor in his tones when he replied:

"The first one of you who approaches my door will be shot dead! We hold you and your mob in utter contempt and invite you to attack this house as soon as you d——d please!"

We three in the parlor were listening breathlessly. I was sure that Jim Dungan indulged in a chuckle, and fancied the ponderous shoulders of Cy Walters lifted once or twice as if he were laughing silently. Then the young leader leaned over and said something in so guarded a voice that none of us could catch the words. Looking toward the statuelike figure of the officer facing him on the porch, Dungan repeated, with a peculiar intonation:

"I reckon, colonel, you'd better bring that chap out."

"I have given you my answer. What are you waiting for?"

It seemed to strike the two that they were wasting time, for without replying they turned about and moved down the graveled walk to their companions. The conference there was brief. The

The two men gave a salute.

whole crowd came through the open gate and moved up the path toward the front of the house. Colonel Mansley stepped back within the hall, drew the bolt of the door and joined us in the parlor.

"There must be 30 of them," whispered Captain Vernon.

"I wish there were 100," was the grim remark of the colonel. "Were such infernal idiots ever created before?"

Arrived at the porch, the men arranged themselves with some regard to military formation, standing in a double row, facing the door and parlor, where four armed men coolly awaited the opening of the fight to the death.

Matters were in this tense state when Jim Dungan once more called out the name of Colonel Mansley.

"I refuse to hold any further parley with you," he replied from his station by one of the windows of the parlor. "You have my answer."

Jim Dungan now did a daring thing. Recognizing the point whence the answer came, he stepped upon the porch and walked to the window, where he and Colonel Mansley stood face to face within six feet of each other and with the sash raised.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"Colonel Mansley," said Dungan, "we want a word or two with your guest. I give you my pledge that we'll do him no harm while we're talking together."

The proposition was so unexpected that the colonel was puzzled. He had failed to note a significant fact which did not escape me. During the interview Dungan never once referred to me as Hank Beyer. Before the colonel could frame his reply I stepped through the open window and stood on the porch in view of every member of both parties.

"I am here, Dungan. What do you wish with me?"

The man took off his slouch hat and slowly bowed until his head was almost to his knees. Then, as he straightened up, he said in a clear voice:

"Mr. Edward Kenmore of New York city, on behalf of my friends and myself I offer you a humble apology and beg your forgiveness for the d——d fools we have made of ourselves. At our meeting this afternoon in Black Man's swamp we voted to have a medal struck for each member of our crowd, which he pledged himself to wear as evidence that he's the biggest chump in the whole state of Mississippi. Cy and me here are to have the biggest medals, each 'bout the size of a flapjack, 'cause we're the champions.

"It's onnecessary to go over the lively proceedings of the last day and night, 'cause I reckon your mem'ry don't need any refreshing as to the same. We all took you for Hank Beyer, which the same you shouldn't be 'shamed of, fur he's the best looking as well as the meanest man in the county.

"You know the story you told as how you bought the colonel's chestnut of him at the crossroads. None of us didn't b'lieve it, for which the same you are partly to blame, being as how you humored the idee that you was Hank. But it happened that when you bought that horse of him there was a man who seed you do it. He was out that day sort of prospecting like when he obsarved you two, and he hid 'mong the trees at the side of the road, heard what passed atween you and seed the money paid over. The reason why this spectator didn't mention the affair sooner was that he was afeard his presence in that quarter would throw 'spicion on to him as regards chickens, for the aforesaid gentleman was the darky Pete, where you spent a part of last night, and we've promised Pete not to ask him any troublesome questions on account of the service he's done to political econermy and good government, so to speak.

"Pete told his story to Cy here today, and we had a meeting in the woods to consider things. We was all as hotfooted as ever after you, for though Cy was present he couldn't tell what Pete had told him, 'cause he'd promised he wouldn't. When Cy seed as how there was no way of stopping us, he got Pete to tell the whole thing and throw himself on to the mercy of the court.

"Waal, that made music. It opened our eyes. We come nigh getting into a fight as to our claims as to which was the biggest fool. After a long argyment that come mighty nigh blows it was unanimously agreed that Cy and me wen the championa.

"That being settled, which I hope you won't dispute, we had another long talk as to what was the right thing to do. Finally we agreed that we'd come out here in a body and offer our apolergies, and here we are."

And Dungan again bowed low, Cy Walters imitating him to some extent.

"Have you it in your heart, Mr. Kenmore, to let up on us?"

"You were rather impulsive last night and made things somewhat unpleasant, but you have done the honorable thing, and I cordially accept your apology."

Dungan turned so as to face the crowd, and, raising his hand, said in a commanding voice:

"Gents, proceed!"

And then came the startling discovery that the only two men in the party who carried firearms were he and Walters. The others were provided with a bass drum and brass instruments, for, strange as it may seem, Aldine and its immediate neighborhood had after long labor evolved a brass band whose efforts were probably one of the reasons why no stranger had settled in that part of the country for several years.

The musicians were waiting for the signal, and instantly the crash came. The racket was deafening, and the worst of it was that while several were trying to play "Dixie" two others were splitting their cheeks with "Suwanee River," and the cornetist, probably in compliment to me, was going might and main on "Yankee Doodle," while the bass drum tried to keep time with all. As soon as Dungan could make his shouts heard he stopped the racket.

"Gents, I'm 'stonished and grieved. It was agreed on the road that you was to play them three tunes, but not at the same time. Try ag'in, but fix on the one that you want, so that the sweet music may befit the occasion."

The mistake was quickly rectified, and the lively notes of "Dixie" rang out on the night air, followed in turn by the two that have been mentioned. Perhaps it was because of the happy circumstances, but I am free to confess that never before or since that night have the melodies impressed me so favorably.

Colonel Mansley promptly accepted the situation. He compelled all to enter his hospitable mansion, where the servants were summoned and kept busy furnishing wine and lunch, and good wishes were profuse all round. I was toasted again and again until I began to ask myself whether it was not worth all I had passed through for the sake of learning what good fellows those men were. And yet there were some phases of those 24 hours from which I am sure I should have shrunk.

* * * * * * *

Last Christmas Colonel Mansley came north to spend the holidays, as is his custom, with his daughter and me. After his departure my wife and I were sitting alone, when I said:

"Esther, there has been a question in my mind that I have long wished to ask you."

"And why, my dear husband, have you waited to do so?"

"Perhaps because I feared the answer, and yet why should I? It is this.

"Gents, proceed!"

On that night, several years ago, when you came to the inn at Aldine and raised the window for me, were you surprised?"

"Surprised by what?"

"At finding the prisoner was I instead of Henry Beyer?"

She smiled as she replied:

"I had heard of the other charges against him, but he pleaded so eloquently and denied so strenuously that I almost—not quite—believed him. I thought he was abused and sympathized with him. Still there were times when doubts would come to me in spite of it all. Father never liked him. We were never engaged, though he often begged me to become so. When news reached our home of your arrest, of your danger, of the belief that you were he and of your earnest denials, I knew you spoke the truth, and I determined, if it was in my power, to save you. Perhaps I should have taken a different method, but I was terrified by the imminence of your danger. I did what I did knowing from the moment I stole from the house under the escort of Erastus that you were what you claimed to be—your own self and the best husband that ever lived in all the wide world."

"Thank God," was my fervent response as I fondly kissed her, "the fly at last is removed from the ointment!"

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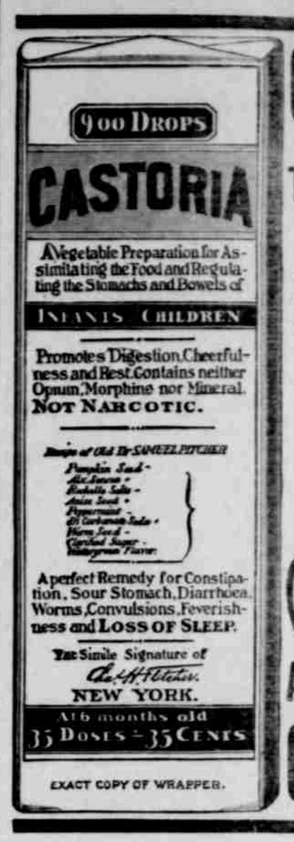

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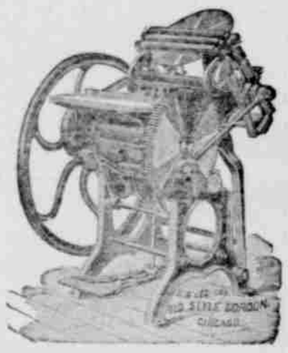

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