

AN HUMBLE HERO

BY THOMAS P. MONTFORT

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CHAPTER XIII. ON MELVIN FEARED.

Turner knew that Melvin was not going to Beckett's Mill. He was as well assured of that fact as he would have been had Melvin told him so. He knew, on the contrary, that he was going to the Jenkins' place. Why he was going he did not know further than that he knew the new stranger had something to do with it.

The important information possessed by a little coterie at Beckett's Mill concerning Melvin had not reached Jonathan Turner. In fact, and for a wonder, it had not spread beyond the few persons to whom Sam Morgan had related it that night at Hicks' store.

The reason it had not spread, and the only reason doubtless, was attributable to Hicks. With an eye single to business he had seen a likely chance to turn a few honest dollars only if they would all keep quiet and patiently await the development of events. Taking the others fully into his confidence, he said:

"If that fellow's done something dreadful for which he has to hide out from the law—which, of course, he has, or he wouldn't 'a' said so—why, it stan's to reason that'll be a reward out for him, if it ain't out already. Now, most ginny when a reward is offered that a-way circulators are sent out to all the postoffice routes where the fellow is likely to go, given the amount of the reward, the fellow's name an' description an' tellin' where he's wanted an' what he's wanted for."

"I've seen them papers a-stickin' up in the postoffice here lots of times." "Now," Hicks resumed, "my plan is to see all jest to low an' keep out months' short, say a week or two, to nary a livin' soul, an' wait to see if one of them circulators don't come along here putty soon 'bout Mr. Melvin. Then when the circular does come we'll jest nab Mr. Man an' rake in that reward."

"They all saw the wisdom of Hicks' plan and readily agreed to it, and for awhile they kept secrecy to their agreement. The temptation to talk was great, it must be admitted, but that reward was a greater temptation yet.

So it had come about that Turner was still ignorant of everything concerning Melvin and in forming his opinion was acting altogether on mere surmise. He had not changed from his first formed opinion that there was something bad of Melvin that was not exactly right, but he had never succeeded in getting beyond that point.

He readily conceived the idea that there was a connecting link somewhere between Melvin and Waite, but what that link was he could not tell. He had no idea whether the link was one of friendship or enmity, but he was inclined to the belief that it was the former. In fact, he labored under the impression that the two young men had been associated together in the commission of a crime or were leagueed together for the purpose of committing some crime at a later date. He did not place any reliance on contemporary crime beyond the fact that there was a fixed it at robbery on a large scale.

When Melvin rode away from the house that night, Turner believed he had gone to meet and confer with Waite, but he was partially mistaken. Melvin had gone to the Jenkins' place, and it was on account of Waite that he had gone to the Jenkins' place. Waite was not the last man in the world to be careful to meet or with whom he would look a conference.

As Melvin had told Mrs. Banks, he had taken the life of a human being. In the heat of a quarrel he had shot down and instantly killed a young man named Marchand. He justified himself on the ground that the man had not had time to escape, and in a way his claim was true. Just at the time of the killing it was merely a question of who would fire first, and if Melvin had not killed he would have been killed. But, on the other hand, Melvin was responsible for the misunderstanding, for Marchand was seeking to avenge the honor of his sister, whom Melvin had betrayed.

"Melvin had betrayed," he thought, "and he knew public opinion nor the court would justify it, so he fled from the scene to escape arrest. Having met Louise Banks and learned to love her while she was a girl at school, his first thought when he began his flight was where he could be near her. That she had married another man, he knew, except to the extent that it moved her out of his way, for he had no high regard for marriage nor a very strongly developed sense of honor.

His plan was to induce her to elope with him if possible, and though she had refused to marry him when she was free to do so, he had no doubt of his ability to influence her now since it had become known to him that she had learned to regret the step she had taken when she had declined him for Sam Morgan. If she would elope with him, they would go to some out of the world place out west and there lose themselves to every one who had ever known them, as well as to the law.

In all his planning Melvin did not lose sight of the fact that the man he had killed had a younger brother living and that the brother was a determined, desperate character who would not likely to wait for the slow process of law to right his wrongs. From the first Melvin had feared Robert Marchand more than he feared the law, and day and night he had been haunted with a dread that that man would cover his eyes and step on his neck, and he was also aware of the restless energy and set determination of young Marchand, and this, added to the anxiety a criminal always experiences, kept him in a continual state of uneasiness.

His purpose in going to Jenkins was to discover, if he could, without making his own presence known, whether the man giving him the story as Waite had stopped there and whether or not it was Robert Marchand. The way he had planned to do this was very simple and at the same time comparatively safe to himself.

He proposed to tie his horse somewhere in the woods near Jenkins' house, then creep cautiously forward under the cover of the fences and shrubbery until he reached a position commanding a view of the house and its surroundings.

He was well aware that it was a universal custom among the people of Possum Ridge to sit out in their front yards after supper, on hot summer evenings, and he felt assured that he would find Jenkins and Waite so sitting if the latter was there. In this way he could satisfy himself as to whether Waite was the man he feared, then steal softly away again.

And if that man should prove to be Robert Marchand there was but one thing for Melvin to do, and that was to flee from the section. He had this all planned out too. He would return to Turner's by his things, claiming he had received a letter calling him back home, and he would go that night. There would be no waiting for the morning, not an hour's delay, if Robert Marchand was there.

He was saved all the trouble of putting his plans into execution for as he passed along the road a mile from his destination a voice hailed him from the woods, and, looking around, he saw old Jim Jenkins sitting on a log and he would go that night.

"Where are you going, Mr. Jenkins?" The old man glanced back in surprise as he answered:

"Why, home, of course. Whar else you reckon I'd be a-goin'?" "Well—but you seem to be in a great hurry, don't you?" "Not special, 'Wheez'."

"Oh, I thought you must be by your walking off that way without a word." "I ain't got nothin' that I know of to stay here to talk about. Have you?" "Nothing in particular, I guess. I presume you think your family are uneasy about you and you want to get home to relieve their anxiety?"

"Reckon nobody ain't much uneasy 'bout me." "Don't you suppose your folks are searching for you?" "Not any to hurt. Hain't no folks but the old woman, an she ain't likely to strike out an' transe round 'boutin' after me."

"By?" "Cause she l'oves I'm able to take keer of myself, an she figgers that I'll turn up somewhar some time all right. Then she ain't able to bother after me now."

A thought occurred to Melvin. "Perhaps that Mr. Waite may come out to look for you," he said. "I believe he is stopping at your house?" "Hain't he? Waite stoppin' at my house," old Jim replied.

"That so?" "I wouldn't 'a' said it if it wa'n't so." "Mr. Turner said a man of that name came over here today to secure board with you."

"Wal, he did come." "And he ain't a-goin' to stay?" "He ain't stoppin' yit." "Is he going to stop?" "Said he was."

"When?" "Putty soon." "This week?" "Mebby—this week or next." "Where is he now?"

"Went to the country somewhar. Goin to stop when he gets back." Melvin drew a sigh of relief and, remounting his horse, rode back to Turner's. He decided that there was no immediate need for him to take his departure from the ridge, so he would remain on a few more days. It would have been better, he better, however, for both himself and others if he had gone then.

CHAPTER XIV.
THE SECRET OUT.

It is difficult for two people to keep a secret, much less a half dozen.

When Pap Sampson advised the men at Hicks' store that night that it would be best for no one to mention to Sam Morgan a word about the meeting between Melvin and Louise, they all agreed with him, and such of them promised not only the others, but himself as well, that he'd abide by that advice, and every man there kept that promise most sacredly.

Yet, for all that, the information they were guarding from Sam Morgan leaked in the course of time, as they might have foreseen that it would.

Sam Morgan, an unguarded moment told his wife all about it, but was careful to caution her to mention it to no one. She carried the secret to her bosom for a day or two; then, finding it too much of a burden to carry, she concluded to share it with her very nearest and dearest friend, Mrs. Mann, not forgetting to caution her not to breathe a word of it to another living soul.

Mrs. Mann, less scrupulous than her neighbor or perhaps less afraid of Sam, did not hesitate to reveal to him the whole story. She so thoroughly deceived Louise, for the simple reason that Sim loved her, that she was only too anxious to avail herself of such a propitious opportunity to injure her. Then Sim, the cruel wretch, had coolly thereby in a manner that would be galling to the heart of any woman, and she was not sorry that it had fallen in her way to be able to make him wince, for once in his life, under the sting of earnestest knowledge that ever falls to man.

She did not stop to consider what might be the result of her act. Meddles never do. The after consequences of gossip are something which they are not concerned and of which they care not a fig. It was in this instance at least, with Mary Mann. It was hard, however, to relinquish the last vestige of the fond faith he had in his wife, and, bent back to her defence, he made a final stand in her defence.

"Sam Morgan won't say no sich words!" he cried in tones half pleading, half defiant. "Sam Morgan won't say no sich words!"

"Then listen," he said. "Every word you have told me is a lie, a willful lie!" Mrs. Mann staggered back as from the effects of a heavy blow. Sim's words, spoken so quietly, so positively, so unexpectedly, completely disconcerted her. In one breath they had dashed all her newly formed hopes and opened her eyes to the fact that the one great desire of her soul would never be realized. Sick at heart and pale with dis- expression of deadly hatred as he had never seen in any human eyes before, she said:

"Sim Banks, you are a fool, a poor, pitiful, miserable fool, an I despise you with my whole heart and soul. I despise you wuss'n I despise the meanest snake that ever crawled the breath of life on the face of the dust. I hate you! I hate you!"

Ordinarily Sim would have been astonished at this sudden and vehement outburst, but at that moment he was not in a state of mind to be astonished at anything. With a wan, weary smile, he said:

"What a different time, Mis's Mann, to what you sung that night up there when you told 'bout lovin' me." "That if it is!" she snapped viciously.

"Oh, nothin. It don't make no difference to me what kind of tune you sing, nary a particle on earth. I'd jest as lief you'd sing this kind as the other, an I don't know if I wouldn't prefer. But some how you've changed a heap."

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"Then listen," he said. "Every word you have told me is a lie, a willful lie!" Mrs. Mann staggered back as from the effects of a heavy blow. Sim's words, spoken so quietly, so positively, so unexpectedly, completely disconcerted her. In one breath they had dashed all her newly formed hopes and opened her eyes to the fact that the one great desire of her soul would never be realized. Sick at heart and pale with dis- expression of deadly hatred as he had never seen in any human eyes before, she said:

"Sim Banks, you are a fool, a poor, pitiful, miserable fool, an I despise you with my whole heart and soul. I despise you wuss'n I despise the meanest snake that ever crawled the breath of life on the face of the dust. I hate you! I hate you!"

Ordinarily Sim would have been astonished at this sudden and vehement outburst, but at that moment he was not in a state of mind to be astonished at anything. With a wan, weary smile, he said:

"What a different time, Mis's Mann, to what you sung that night up there when you told 'bout lovin' me." "That if it is!" she snapped viciously.

"Oh, nothin. It don't make no difference to me what kind of tune you sing, nary a particle on earth. I'd jest as lief you'd sing this kind as the other, an I don't know if I wouldn't prefer. But some how you've changed a heap."

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