

The Gentleman From Indiana

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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CHAPTER VIII.

THE courthouse bell ringing in the night! No hesitating stroke of Schofield's Henry, no uncertain touch, was on the rope. A loud, wild, hurled clamor pealing out to wake the countryside, a rapid clang! clang! clang! that struck clear in to the spine. The courthouse bell had tolled for the death of Morton, of Garfield, of Hendricks; had rung joy peals of peace after the war and after political campaigns, but it had rung as it was ringing now only three times—once when Hibbard's mill burned, once when Webb Landis killed Sep Bardlock and entrenched himself in the lumber yard and would not be taken until he was shot through and through, and once when the Rouen accommodation, crowded with children and women and men, was wrecked within twenty yards of the station.

Why was the bell ringing now? Men and women, startled into wide wakefulness, groped to windows. No red mist hung over town or country. What was it? The bell rang on. Its loud alarm beat increasingly into men's hearts and quickened their throbbing to the rapid measure of its own. Vague forms loomed in the gloaming. A horse, madly ridden, splashed through the town. There were shouts; voices called hoarsely; lamps began to gleam in the windows; half clad people emerged from their houses, men slapping their braces on their shoulders as they ran out of doors; questions were shouted into the dimness.

Then the news went over the town. It was cried from yard to yard, from group to group, from gate to gate, and reached the furthest confines. Runners shouted it as they sped by, and boys panted it, breathless; women with loosened hair stumbled into darkling chambers and flattered it out to new wakened sleepers, and pale girls, clutching wraps at their throats, whispered it across fences. The sick, tossing on their hard beds, heard it. The bell clamored it far and near; it spread over the countryside, and it flew over the wires to distant cities. The White Caps had got Mr. Harkless!

Lige Willetts had lost track of him out near Briscoe's, it was said, and had come into town at midnight seeking him. He had found Parker, the Herald foreman, and Ross Schofield, the typesetter, and Bud Tipworthy, the devil, at work in the printing office, but no sign of Harkless there or in the cottage. Together these had sought for him and had roused others who had inquired at every house where he might have gone for shelter, and they had heard nothing. They had watched for his coming during the slackening of the storm. He had not come, and there was no place he could have gone. He was missing. Only one thing could have happened.

They had roused up Warren Smith, the prosecutor, and Homer, the sheriff, and Jared Wiley, the deputy. William Todd had rung the alarm. It was agreed that the first thing to do was to find him. After that there would be trouble, if not before. It looked as if there would be trouble before. The men tramping up to the muddy square in their shirt sleeves were bulgy about the right hips, and when Homer Tibbs joined Columbus Landis at the hotel corner and Landis saw that Homer was carrying a shotgun Landis went back for his. A hastily sworn posse galloped out Main street. Women and children ran into neighbors' yards and began to cry. Day was coming, and as the light grew men swore and savagely kicked at the palings of fences as they ran by them.

In the foreglow of dawn they gathered in the square and listened to Warren Smith, who made a speech from the courthouse fence and warned them to go slow. They answered him with angry shouts and hootings. But he made his big bass voice heard and bade them do nothing rash. No facts were known, he said. It was far from certain that Barto had been done, and no one knew that the Six Crossroads people had done it, even if something had happened to Mr. Harkless. He declared that he spoke in Harkless' name. Nothing could distress him so much as for them to defy the law, to take it out of the proper hands. Justice would be done.

"Yes, it will!" shouted a man below him, brandishing the butt of a rawhide whip above his head. "And while you jaw on about it here he may be tied up like a dog in the woods, shot full of holes by the men you never lifted a finger to hinder, because you want their votes when you run for circuit judge. What are we doing here? What's the good of listening to you?"

There was a yell at this, and those who heard the speaker would probably have started for the Crossroads had not a rumor sprung up which passed rapidly from man to man and in a few moments had reached every person in the crowd. The news came that the two shell gamblers had wrenched a bar out of a window under cover of the storm, had broken jail and were at large. Their threats of the day before were remembered now with convincing vividness. They had sworn repeatedly to Bardlock and to the sheriff and in the hearing of others that they would "do" for the man who had taken their money from them and had them arrested. The prosecuting attorney, quickly per-

ceiving the value of this complication in holding back the mob that was already forming, called Homer from the crowd and made him get up on the fence and confess that his prisoners had escaped, at what time he did not know, probably toward the beginning of the storm, when it was noisiest.

"You see," cried the attorney, "there is nothing as yet of which we can accuse the Crossroads. If our friend has been hurt it is much more likely that these crooks did it. They escaped in time to do it, and we all know they were laying for him. You want to be mighty careful, fellow citizens. Homer is already in telegraphic communication with every town around here, and he'll have those men before night. All you've got to do is to control yourselves a little and go home quietly." He could see that his words (except those in reference to returning home—no one was going home) made an impression. There was a babble of shouting and argument and swearing that grew louder and louder.

Mr. Ephraim Watts, in spite of all confusion, clad as carefully as upon the preceding day, deliberately climbed the fence and stood by the lawyer and made a single steady gesture with his hand. He was listened to at once, as his respect for the law was less notorious than his irreverence for it, and he had been known in Carlow as customarily a reckless man. They wanted illegal and desperate advice and quieted down to hear it. He spoke in his professionally calm voice.

"Gentlemen, it seems to me that Mr. Smith and Mr. Ribshaw," nodding to the man with the rawhide whip, "are both right. What good are we doing here? What we want to know is what's happened to Mr. Harkless. It looks just now like the shell men might have done it. Let's find out what they done. Scatter and hunt for him. Soon as anything's known for certain Hibbard's mill whistle will blow three times. Keep on looking till it does; then," he finished, with a barely perceptible scornful smile at the attorney—"then we can decide on what had ought to be done."

Six Crossroads lay dark and steaming in the sun that morning. The forge was silent, the saloon locked up, the roadway deserted even by the pigs. The broken old buggy stood rotting in the mud without a single lean little old man or woman—such were the children of the Crossroads—to play about it. Once, when the deputy sheriff rode through alone, a tattered black hound, more wolf than dog, half emerged, growling, from beneath one of the tumbledown barns and was jerked back into the darkness by his tail, with a snarl fiercer than his own, while a gun barrel shone for a second as it swung for a stroke on the brute's head. The hound did not yelp or whine when



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They answered him with angry shouts and hootings. He shut his eyes twice and slunk sullenly back to his place. The shanties might have received a volley or two from some of the mounted bands, exasperated by futile searching, had not the escape of Homer's prisoners made the guilt of the Crossroads appear doubtful in the minds of many. As the morning waned the advocates of the theory that the gamblers had made away with Harkless grew in number. There came a telegram from the Rouen chief of police that he had a clew to their whereabouts. He thought they had succeeded in reaching Rouen, and it began to be generally believed that they had escaped by the 1 o'clock freight train, which had stopped to take on some empty cars at a side track a mile north-west of town, across the fields from the Briscoe house. Toward noon a party went out to examine the railroad embankment.

Men began to come back into the village for breakfast by twos and threes, but many kept on searching the woods, not feeling the need of food or caring if they did. Every grove and clump of underbrush, every thicket, was ransacked. The waters of the creek, shallow for the most part, but swollen overnight, were dragged at every pool. Nothing was found. There was not a sign.

The bar of the hotel was thronged all morning as the returning citizens rapidly made their way thither, and those who had breakfasted and were

going out again paused for internal as well as external re-enforcement. The landlord, himself returned from a long hunt, set out his whisky with a lavish hand.

"He was the best man we had, boys," said Landis as he poured the little glasses full. "We'd ort of sent him to the legislative halls of Washington long ago. He'd of done us honor there. But we never thought of doin' anything fer him. Jest set round and left him build up the town and give him empty thankies. Drink hearty, gentlemen," he finished gloomily. "I don't grudge no liquor today—except to Lige Willetts."

"He was a good man," said young William Todd, whose nose was red, not from the whisky. "I've about give up."

"It's goin' to seem mighty empty around here," said Ross Schofield. "What's goin' to become of the Herald and the party in this district? Where's the man to run either of 'em now? Like as not," he continued desperately, "it'll go against us in the fall."

Dibb Zane choked over his four fingers. "We might's well bust up the dab dusted ole town of his gone."

"I don't know what's come over that Cynthia Tipworthy," said the landlord. "She's waited table on him last two years, and her brother Bud works at the Herald office. She didn't say a word, only looked and looked and looked, like a crazy woman; then her and Bud went off together to hunt in the woods. They jest tuck hold of each other's hands like—"

"I reckon there ain't many crazier than them two Bowlders, father and son," interrupted a patron, wiping the drops from his beard as he set his glass on the bar. "They rid into town like a couple of wild Indians, the old man beatin' that gray mare o' theirs till she was one big walt, and he ain't natcherly no cruel man either. I expect Lige Willetts better keep out of Hartley's way."

"I keep out of no man's way!" cried a voice behind him. Turning, they saw Lige standing on the threshold of the door that led to the street. In his hand he held the bridle of the horse he had ridden across the sidewalk and that now stood panting, with lowered head half through the doorway, beside his master. Lige was hatless, splashed with mud from head to foot; his jaw was set, his teeth ground together, his eyes burned under red lids, and his hair lay tossed and damp on his brow. "I keep out of no man's way," he repeated hoarsely. "I heard you, Mr. Tibbs, but I've got too much to do, while you loaf and gas and drink over Landis' bar. I've got other business than keepin' out of Hart Bowlder's way. I'm lookin' for John Harkless. He was the best man we had in this ornery hole, and he was too good for us, and so we've maybe let him get killed, and maybe I'm to blame. But I'm goin' to find him, and if he's hurt I'm goin' to have a hand on the rope that lifts the men that did it if I have to go to Rouen to put it there. After that I'll answer for my fault, not before."

He threw himself on his horse and was gone. Soon the room emptied, as the patrons of the bar returned to the search, and only Mr. Wilkerson and the landlord remained, the bar being the professional office, so to speak, of both.

At 11 o'clock Judge Briscoe dropped wearily from his horse at his own gate and said to a wan girl who came running down the walk to meet him: "There is nothing yet. I sent the telegram to your mother—to Mrs. Sherwood."

Helen turned away without answering. Her face was very white and looked pinched about the mouth. She went back to where old Fisbee sat on the porch, his white head held between his two hands. He was rocking himself to and fro. She touched him gently, but he did not look up. She spoke to him. "Father," she said.

He did not seem to hear her. "There isn't anything yet. He sent the telegram. I shall stay with you now, no matter what you say." She sat beside him and put her head down on his shoulder, and, though for a moment he appeared not to notice it, when Minnie came out on the porch, hearing her father at the door, the old man had put his arm about the girl and was stroking her fair hair softly.

Briscoe glanced at them and raised a warning finger to his daughter, and they went tiptoeing into the house, where the judge dropped heavily upon a sofa. Minnie stood before him with a look of pale inquiry, and he shook his head.

"No use to tell him, but I can't see any hope," he answered her, biting nervously at the end of a cigar. "I expect you better bring me some coffee in here. I couldn't take another step to save me. I'm too old to tear around the country horseback before breakfast, like I have today."

"Did you send her telegram?" Minnie asked as he drank the coffee she brought him. She had interpreted "coffee" liberally and, with the assistance of Mildy Upton, whose subjoined nose was frankly red and who shed tears on the raspberries, had prepared an appetizing table at his elbow.

"Yes," responded the judge, "and I'm glad she sent it. I talked the other way yesterday, what little I said—it isn't any of our business—but I don't think any too much of those people somehow. She thinks she belongs with Fisbee, and I guess she's right. That young fellow must have got along with her pretty well, and I'm afraid when she gives up she'll be pretty bad over it; but I guess we all will. It's terribly sudden, somehow, though it's only what everybody half expected would come, only we thought it would come from over yonder." He nodded toward the west. "But she's not to stay here with us. Boarding at Tibbs' with that old man won't do, and she's no girl to live in two rooms. You fix it up with her—you make her stay."

"She must," answered his daughter

as she knelt beside him and patted his coat and handed him several things to eat at the same time. "Mr. Fisbee will help me persuade her, now that



"Father," she said.

she's bound to stay in spite of him and the Sherwoods too. I've always thought she was grand, ever since she took me under her protection at school, when I—Minnie was speaking sadly, mechanically, but suddenly she broke off with a quick sob, turned to the window, then turned again to Briscoe and cried: "I don't believe it! He knew how to take care of himself too well. He'd have got away from them."

Her father shook his head. "Then why hasn't he turned up? He'd have gone home after the storm if something bad wasn't the matter."

"But nothing—nothing that bad could have happened. They haven't found—any—anything."

"But why hasn't he come back, child?"

"Well, he's lying hurt somewhere, that's all."

"Then why haven't they found him?"

"I don't care," she cried and choked with the words and tossed her disheveled hair from her temples, "it isn't true! Helen won't believe it. Why should I? It's only a few hours since he was right here in our yard talking to us all. I won't believe it till they've searched every stick and stone of St. Crossroads and found him."

(To Be Continued.)

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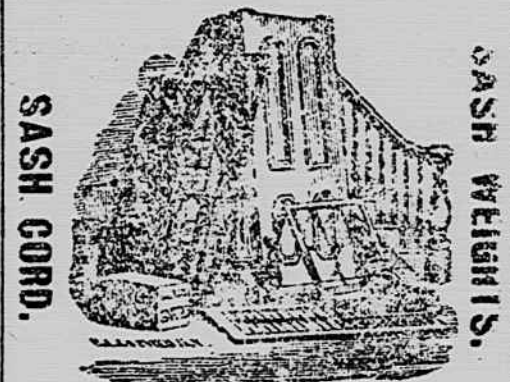
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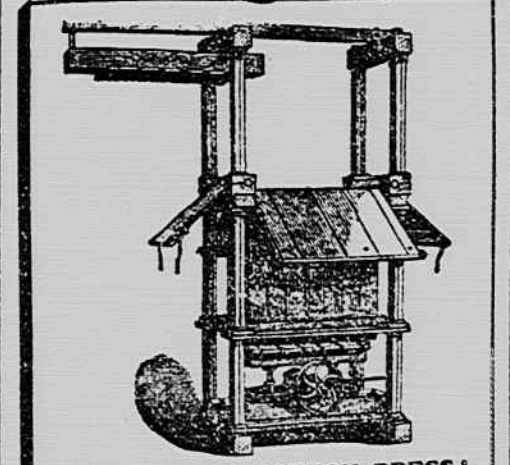
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