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**CATO, THE CREEPER;
OR,
THE DEMON OF DEAD-MAN'S
FOREST.**

BY FREDERICK DEWEY.

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**CATO, THE CREEPER;
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CHAPTER I.

CAPTAIN DOWNING SMILES.

The hot Arkansas sun shone hotly down upon Dead-Man's Forest, that vast, sleepy army of trees which silently overlooked acres of treacherous swamp, silent glade, and tiny hillock. Why it had been so weirdly named, no one knew, as the name had descended from the Indians, and they had regarded it with awe as being haunted with evil spirits.

In extent it was some thousands of acres, some hilly, others level, and a great portion swampy and gloomy. The trees were thickly planted, and were giants among other trees.

In the swampy regions the sun scarcely ever penetrated the matted branches, and the howl of the wolf, the scream of the catamount, and the hiss of the venomous snake, and the scream of some bird of prey were the only sounds to be heard in its depths.

On the afternoon of which we are speaking, however, the gloomy old forest resounded with the quaint tones of a negro melody, trolled from the lips of one of the most sable negroes who ever hunted a raccoon.

He was shambling along a dim trail through the silent forest, idly gazing right and left, and appeared to be wholly at his leisure.

He was short and stumpy, and was scantily dressed in an old cotton shirt open at the neck, and an old pair of blue jean pants, which were much too short for him, being once the property of a diminutive boy.

His lips were thick and huge, and his large white eyes rolled always, never at rest. His head was bare, showing a cranium covered with close-setting kinks of black hair, or wool. He was very dirty, and was one of those heedless, happy vagabonds who have plenty to eat, plenty of time to sleep, and who care not what the morrow may bring.

His name was Cato, the Creeper—from his aptness and stealthiness in pursuing a trail. He once had been a Mississippi slave, but had been freed many years since—in fact when he was quite young, and he was now thirty-five. He lived alone, and what he did for a living no one knew; but he always was to be found

strolling about Dead-Man's Forest, or else asleep in his cabin, which stood on the edge of the wood. He was suspected of being in league with a band of outlaws which haunted the woods, but, as nothing bad was ever proven against him, he was allowed to go unmolested.

Cato emerged into a flowery glade, with a skip and a caper.

"Hi!" he laughed, cheerily. "Ho! wha' for dat Dutchman say song war—hi!"

He stopped, and bending his head, mused for a moment. Then he capered on, with a grin.

"Hi! yah! yah! Golly, I hab it!

"Sugar Bob, Sugar Bob, Sugar Bob-ee;
I eat a glass of lager and I run away to sea—
Sugar Bob, Sugar Bob, Sugar Bob-eree,
Zwei glass o' lager am what suits me."

He grinned with delight at his song, and then burst out again:

"Way down on de ole Gum's island,
Knife and a fork a-stickin' in de bacon—
Bacon, bacon, bacon plenty."

He had hardly finished when a huge man burst from a thicket and collared him, with a series of horrible oaths, almost knocking him down in his violence.

"Blast ye!" the new-comer yelled, with another shake, "haint ye b'en told ter keep yer big mouth shet while ye're in these woods? Do yer want ter bring the Regulators down on us? Be quiet, I say, yer dog!"

"Golly, Mars'r Fink, am dat yo' fo' shore? Golly, Mars'r Fink, I's right glad ter see yer—I be, fo' a fac'."

"Shet up! It's nuthin' but 'golly, Mars'r Fink' all the hull time. Now it's got ter be stopped—d'ye understand?"

"Sho', Mars'r Fink; enty you know I's allus willin' to 'bey orders? I tell *you*, Katy, I's be'n allus a fust-class creeper, ain't I?"

"Yes, tolerable," surlily assented the person called Fink. Then he mused for a moment, still wearing a surly air.

He was a rough backwoodsman, dressed in the rough backwoods style, in coarse

jeans, coon-skin cap and heavy boots. He wore a belt, in which were a pair of wicked-looking revolvers, a small coil of stout cord, and an ugly knife. His countenance was sinister in the extreme, and denoted he was a slave to his passions, which were very violent. The cord was for the purpose of *binding prisoners*.

Prisoners? Yes; the man Fink was a desperado. At the time of this story (during the early settling of Arkansas), in addition to the hostile Indians, were a race more feared, more subtle and dangerous—robbers and cut-throats, united in bands for purposes of plunder. He was the second officer of one of these bands.

“Cato, I’ve got a job fur yer,” he said, looking up.

“Hi, Mars’r Fink; show ’em up; I’s allus ready,” replied the negro.

“It is to— Hello! what hev we hyar?”

He started back suddenly, as a rustle was heard in the thicket, and drew a revolver. The negro, from some hidden place, drew a keen razor with remarkable agility, and stood on his guard, lowering at the copse.

A man burst out of the bushes boldly, as if fearing no danger, and knowing with whom he was meeting. He was dressed in green throughout, with a peaked hat, and high, shining boots. He wore a belt, stuck full of weapons. He was a handsome, genial-looking fellow, in the prime of life, very agile and strong, as could be seen by his sinewy limbs.

His eyes were a deep brown, shining pleasantly, and from under his hat peeped a few short, chestnut curls. His hands were small and shapely, and were very white. His face was intelligent, and his head that of a man born to command. Yet this man, whom, in point of looks, any woman would welcome as a lover, was a fiend within—a demon of extraordinary cruelty and daring. His name was Charles Downing—Captain Downing—and he was the chief of a notorious and feared robber band—the same of which Fink was lieutenant.

“How are you, Cato?” he said, with a smile, which disclosed a set of handsome, even teeth. “So you are on the defensive.”

The negro’s arm dropped, and he slipped the razor into his bosom. Fink belted his revolver.

“Golly, Mars’r Cap’n, Cato t’ink ole fool Injun war prowlin’ ’bout. Berry glad it ain’t, fur ye see thar mout be bloodshed,” and he grinned from ear to ear.

“Nonsense, Cato, there are no Indians within twenty miles. They are nearly all

off on the prairie, buffalo-hunting. We will meet them, however, soon, and it will be no harm to be wary and cautious. I was just trying to find you—I've work for you to do this afternoon."

"Dat's wha' Mars'r Fink done se'd; golly, I'se fearful dry to-day—ef thar's whisky in the camp I'se work my fingers off—hi, hi, hi!"

"You shall have all you wish, Cato, after the job is finished. I want to warn you about singing and laughing so shrilly; it may bring the Vigilantes down upon us. You know you are suspected."

"Hi, yi! ole Creeper Cato done stove 'em off sebenteen times a'ready," grinned Cato. "Tek's Cato Creeper ter fool 'em, yi, yi!"

The lieutenant struck in harshly:

"Wal, thar's an eend ter all things; so thar is ter ropes. Ye'll find that out soon ef yer aint keerful; yer be too reckless by half."

"Recollect, Cato, that old man Jeffries is casting a suspicious eye on you. He is very shrewd, and, if my suspicions are correct, he belongs to the Regulators. You can not be too careful; the oldest and slyest foxes are sometimes trapped."

"And the trees have tongues," added Fink.

"Whar's de job, Mars'r Cap'n?" inquired Cato, impatiently.

"Near the brown cabin," answered Downing. "We will go there now; I am in a hurry. It is nearly sunset, and I have a pleasant mission to-night."

Turning, he led the way through the quiet, ghostly thickets, closely followed by his comrades. For nearly a mile they silently stole on, warily halting at the slightest rustle in the thicket. At length they entered the confines of a solemn, treacherous swamp, guarded by drooping trees, matted vines, and quiet as the grave. Here no song-bird caroled its merry lay; its dark and gloomy depths the squirrel shunned; while the "honk" of the wild-goose overhead, the hiss of the yellow rattlesnake, the growl of the bear, and the wail of the catamount were its only sounds. It was called "the Shadow Swamp."

The narrow trail they had been pursuing now ran along the huge trunk of a fallen tree toward its matted butt. Here they stopped.

A gloomy, black expanse of thick, slimy water lay before them, covering about ten feet across in extent. How were they to cross its stagnant and deceitful surface? They could not wade—it would be death by suffocation; they could not

swim through its weedy, sluggish current, and they had no boat. They wished to go across, for they intently regarded a small thickly-timbered island which lay in the middle of the pond. It was the robber stronghold.

Only a second they stood there, then the captain drew a whistle from his pocket and blew three long blasts, quite shrilly; then he paused a moment, and then blew twice, softly.

As if by magic a boat or “dug-out” shot out from the island propelled by a dirty, sinister-appearing man, bewhiskered and large in proportions. With a single paddle he forced the craft through the weeds and water-lilies rapidly, paddling carelessly. This man was not armed at all, and he acted as if he had recently been asleep. He had been—for his business was trifling and light. He was the ferryman—the Charon of this River Styx.

The distance was trifling, and the dug-out soon grated against the tree. Without a word they slid down the side and stepped into the craft, and the boatman, Jack Dark, rowed or paddled away in silence. The short voyage was soon ended, and the men stepped ashore, and left the ferryman alone, all in silence.

This was the captain’s order—that from the time the signal was first given until the boat had been hidden away on the island, the utmost silence should be observed. No one dared break this rule, for once a robber disobeyed and he suddenly disappeared, the subordinates of the gang knowing not whither. The captain on being questioned, only smiled quietly and cautioned obedience. Then they knew he was of the world no more.

The island was level and had once been heavily wooded, but now the center was cleared, leaving a thick underbrush to the sides near the water. Thus the interior was level and bare, while the outer rim of tangled willows and reeds, made it impossible to discover the retreat from the mainland, even if any one should chance to climb a tree, which no one ever did except on urgent occasions.

Two cabins stood in this clearing, both equal in size, but of different colors. They were composed of roughly-hewn logs set firmly together, the interstices being filled in with moss and dried mud. Neither had but one opening—one door which served for light and ingress. They were the common log-cabins to be seen anywhere in the Western or Southern States.

One was occupied by the officers and the scout—Captain Downing, Fink, and Bob Griffith. It was called the white cabin, because it was composed of light-colored wood, with the bark taken off. The other was about fifty yards distant, and was called the brown cabin, to distinguish it from the other. This was

occupied by the subordinates, where the captain's cooking was done, as he was very fastidious and detested the smell of cookery.

The three men emerged from the clearing, when they were challenged by a sentry, who started up from behind a log. The countersign was given, the sentry slunk back, and they went on toward the brown cabin. Captain Downing was vigilant and cunning.

Several ill-looking men, armed to the teeth, were lying in the cabin door, some dozing and smoking short pipes, while others played cards and quarreled. A fierce black dog was chained to a stump close by. He was a bloodhound—the fiercest of his race.

They walked up to the cabin and the men stopped gambling for a moment to *watch Downing's lips*. If he smiled, beware! evil was brewing. If he was demure he was watching every thing with the eye of a lynx.

In this state he was as harmless as a tame bear when filled with meat and honey. But when he softly whistled a dirge, even his most trusted companions feared him. He was then a tiger. If he laughed pleasantly he was in high spirits and his companions felt easy and secure. But that was seldom.

He regarded his men quietly, then looked toward an object, prostrate, a few yards away, and smiled quietly. Then he became demure, then said with a pleasant laugh:

“Well, boys, who is winner? Is anybody bankrupt?”

“Spades trumps!” vociferated a wiry fellow who had been regarding his captain anxiously. He had slightly offended him the day before. His face grew joyful, and as he swept his winnings between his knees, he cried:

“Hurrah fur Cap'n Downing, boys! three and a tiger!”

The cheers were given lustily. Downing bowed with a look of gratification.

“Thank you, boys,” he said.

Then he turned to Cato.

“There is your job. Bury that villain!”

He turned, and followed by Fink, walked to his cabin, entered it, and closed the door. The men were hilarious.

He had pointed toward the prostrate object. Cato walked up to it curiously. What

was his horror at seeing the body of Bill Jameson, better known as Fighting Jim, dead at his feet.

A bullet-hole was in his forehead, and in his stiffened hand was a long knife. The sinister countenance was ghastly and cold, and the stream of blood from the hole had congealed on his face. He was quite dead.

Cato felt nervous. Only that morning he had seen Jim alive and well and had spoken to him. He was now dead. By whose hand did he die, and when?

As he stood gazing nervously down upon the departed robber, his courage failed. This would make the third robber that he had buried in a month. They had all died by the hand of beautiful, girlish Captain Downing.

The scout, Bob Griffith, came up to him and touched his elbow.

“You had better hurry up and bury him; the cap’n is watching you. *He is grinning.*”

The sweat started out on Cato’s forehead. Without further delay he seized a spade and fell to work lustily; the captain was smiling.

“Golly, Mars’r Griffit’! wha’ for he go um dead?” he asked, working hastily at a rude grave.

“Cap’n told him ter do suthin’ he didn’t like and he kedn’t see it. He called the cap’n a doll-babby. Then cap’n draws and shoots, and thar Jim lays.”

He was moving away when Cato caught him by the arm.

“Who’s de next?” he whispered, with eyes rolling and teeth chattering. “Fo’ God, I ain’t afeard o’ no man—yer know dat am de truf. But I’s done skeered at um cap’n, he so still an’ fierce. He bad man—bad man—Cato t’inks de debbil catches him, sure. Say, Mars’r Griffit’! who’s de next?”

“Durn it, how do I know? Ef a man keeps a civil tongue and obeys orders, the cap’n is his good friend. But let a man jist buck ag’in’ him—whew!” and Bob the scout walked away.

Cato dug the grave, then without ceremony rolled the body into it. Then he filled it in and stamped the soil down, thinking all the time he might be the next. With the laziness and heedlessness of a negro he had buried all the victims where they fell, one, not ten paces from the captain’s own door.

After his work was finished the captain called him into his cabin, and ordered him to meet him at a certain place when the moon rose. Then he gave him a

bottle of liquor, and some money, and sent him away.

After he had gone the captain mused deeply for a moment, then laughed.

“Before long I will be a Benedick!” he said; “a Benedick!”

“Speak to me, cap’n?” grunted Fink, from his pile of blankets and robes in his sleeping corner.

“No; I was just soliloquizing.”

“Oh!” and Fink dropped asleep.

The captain smiled.

CHAPTER II.

A WARNING.

On the skirts of Dead-Man's Forest, on the side opposite to that on which Cato the Creeper lived, was a small settlement on a hillside.

It was very small, numbering but about a dozen houses or cabins, and in the center on the hilltop was a small block-house.

The soil about the houses was somewhat cultivated and fenced, but the latter was hardly needed, for the settlers owned but few cattle and these were "kept up," to protect them from the Indians which infested the country.

The settlement, being on a hill, overlooked a fine landscape. On one side, and in close proximity, lay Dead-Man's Forest, with its acres of gnarled and towering trees, nestling knolls, and vast swamps—gloomy and specter-like, forbidding and haunted.

On the other side, the gazer looked upon a glistening river, winding its way through fertile and beautiful vales, dashing by bluffs and bickering down ravines. The hazy hills in the distance were tinted in the sunlight gloriously, and would be the envy of many a master artist.

On the same afternoon in which last chapter's events occurred, a young girl sat before a cabin, larger and more tasty than the rest, dreamily gazing into the purple-tinted distance.

She was very beautiful, and her beauty was of the pure and holy kind—virgin.

In her deep, earnest brown eyes a wonderful mellow light played and gleamed, and at intervals she sweetly smiled to herself. Her hair was a rich red-brown and fell in glistening waves nearly to her waist, and was confined at the crown by a bit of bright blue ribbon. Her snow-white dress was short and displayed a charming ankle and the comeliest of little feet. Her hands were shapely, and though somewhat browned by the sun, had not lost their original beauty.

But, though the form was of the fairest to look upon, her face cast it into the shade.

Blessed with clear-cut and regular features, with sweet mouth and decided chin,

it would have been beautiful without her eyes, which were deep brown and surpassingly lovely.

Lovely they were at all times, but now in the light of the setting sun, they glowed with a new, glorious light—the light of a pure love.

She was the daughter of old Robert Jeffries, the prominent man of the settlement, and every man, young or old, in the village, would have cheerfully risked his life for little Katie Jeffries. Since his wife had died, years ago, she was all that was left to him, and he idolized her.

The sun went down, and still she sat there, smiling and blushing. Her father was away on some neighborly errand, and she was left alone.

But not long. A hurried, light step came up the hill, a form appeared in the dusky light, and she rose to greet a handsome, athletic young man who sprung to greet her, embracing and kissing her tenderly.

“My love!” he whispered, pressing her fondly to his bosom.

“You are late to-night, Walter,” she said, in affectionate reproach.

“Yes, dearest; somewhat. But you know I have a farm, all my own, and I am working hard now that you may grace it, next spring. It won’t be long, my darling, and then think how happy we will be. You will by your love make me better and a more earnest worker; and will save for me too; while I—”

He drew her nearer, fondly. She felt a delicious thrill, and nestled close to him.

“You will what?” she whispered, blushing at her boldness.

“Try to make life a sweet, happy dream, for my darling.”

A few precious moments of silence ensued; then young Ridgely spoke.

“I’ve the nicest farm in the settlement for you, my darling. I have worked hard, it is true; but even when toil was the hardest and most trying to my patience, I have dissipated all discontent by thinking whom I was working for. You don’t know how your love has soothed me, my darling.”

“Oh, you are too flattering, Walter; too kind and noble. It is sweet to be loved as I am sure you love me, and I have tried very hard to please you; but you are too extravagant. ‘Praise to the face,’ you know, dear.”

“I cannot praise you, my own. It is impossible. That is, I cannot overrate you. Why, you innocent dear, you don’t know how lovable and good you are.”

“Now, Walter, really you must not talk so. I am very happy in the thought you care so for me, but it is wrong—real wrong to talk so to me. The truth is not to be spoken at all times, you know.”

“Well, then, if you wish it I will not. What do you think of the new young man that has come among us—Charles Danforth?”

“He is very pleasant and agreeable, but I do not like him. He looks cunning and cruel. Besides, I like to see men grand, powerful, and hardy—he looks too much like a girl. What is his occupation?”

“I don’t know. He does nothing but wander away into the forest, where he spends nearly two-thirds of his time. Dutch Joe said he saw him in company with another man in a dug-out on Shadow Pond, yesterday, but I believe it was only his imagination. He is not very smart and clever you know—he is simple.”

“Walter!” and Katie lowered her voice, and nestling closer to her lover, glanced nervously around in the twilight. “I am afraid of him. Father distrusts him. He fears the existence of a band of robbers in that dreadful forest. You know men have gone in there and have never come out.”

“Besides that rich man, that trapper that found the treasure somewhere in Mexico. You know the day he left us to go to St. Louis, screams were heard coming from the woods, and the people on the other side did not see him come out. Then father found blood and marks of violence in a small glade. Oh, Walter, I am afraid something is wrong.”

“Nonsense, Katie dear! every thing is quiet. There are no Indians here now, at least in the neighborhood, and even if danger did come, am I not here, my own?”

“Hush, Walter! some one is coming; see!” and she pointed to an approaching shadow. Walter Ridgely withdrew his embrace and sat in a more decorous attitude. Katie’s face expressed discontent at the interruption. The form approached; it was a man.

“Why Walter! it is Charles Danforth!” she whispered.

Walter arose to go. She caught him and begged him to stay—she was afraid to be alone with him, she said. So he again sat down.

It was Danforth (or Downing, for he it was) approaching quite near, humming a jaunty tune.

“Good-evening, Miss Jeffries,” he said, bowing. “And you, Ridgely; how is your health?”

He extended his hand to Katie, who took it reluctantly. Ditto Walter.

Then he seated himself on the doorstep and at once began a lively, rattling conversation. He was a versatile, vivacious conversationalist, and had been educated well. To the backwoods girl, though she had lived at one time in a civilized community, he seemed a paragon of learning, wit and beauty.

But then she mentally compared him to Walter. He had not the frank, honest gaze of the latter; and what women care more for, he did not have the powerful frame and strength of young Ridgely.

Her eyes were partial, it is true, but she found by comparison that Walter was his superior in morals, earnestness, strength and hardihood. But, she could not deny Danforth was gifted with rare beauty. Still she did not like him—she feared him.

After some time spent in conversation, which Katie sustained by monosyllables, and in which Walter did not join, Danforth arose.

“May I see you aside a moment, Miss Jeffries?” he asked. “I have something to say to you.”

She acquiesced, looking disappointedly at Walter, who watched them retire to a little distance. He did not like it.

When they had gone a short distance, Danforth proposed a stroll down the hill. She refused, abruptly. He stared; he had expected a glad affirmative answer. He looked at Walter, and Captain Downing smiled.

“Miss Jeffries, how long has that young man been in the settlement?”

“You mean Walt—Mr. Ridgely? He came with us from New York.”

“Do you know his character?”

“Perfectly; it is above reproach.”

The captain smiled and talked.

“Miss Jeffries, I am the owner of one of the finest farms in the State of Ohio. I am alone in the world—friendless. Will you grace that home?—will you make me happy by being my wife? I love you fondly.”

He spoke this in his sweetest tone, and with his most tender glance, encircling her waist with his arm. She drew away abruptly, and stammered:

“Oh, sir, you can not, you must not talk so to me! You must not—it is wrong for me to listen to you. Please let me go.”

She was flushed and irresistibly lovely. He looked at her quietly for a moment, then caught her in his arms passionately and kissed her hotly.

“My darling!” he passionately cried.

She struggled, ashamed, insulted, shocked at his tones and gestures. He held her tightly, and pressed another kiss upon her.

Walter, watching them jealously from the doorstep, saw the disturbance, and, mad with jealousy and rage, rushed toward them. She escaped from Downing’s arms just as he reached them, and glided to her lover’s side.

“What do you mean, you rascal?” huskily growled Walter, through his clenched teeth.

“Rascal? Take care, young whipper-snapper!”

“Yes, rascal—poltroon—villain! What do you mean? What was he doing, pet?”

“He kissed——”

“Yes, I kissed her, whipper-snapper. I asked for her hand, like a man. She did not choose to smile on me. I have no ill-will about it. I take it you are the favored one. Well, if you had behaved yourself, I would not have borne you any dislike; but you took offense, called me names I never before took, and now you stand sneering at me. Whipper-snapper, you are a scoundrel!”

Walter boiled over and sprung toward him with danger in his eyes. Katie as quickly interposed, holding him tightly, between him and Downing, so if he clenched with him he must run over her body.

“Let me go, Kate! I command you to let me go immediately.”

He was thoroughly aroused, the more so at seeing Downing’s face wear a provoking smile. He endeavored to elude her, but she still kept him closely clasped.

“I will not, Walter; I can not. Be quiet—calm yourself! *Do*, Walter.”

“Yes; calm yourself, whipper-snapper. Keep your temper, bantam.”

The exasperating smile with which Downing accompanied these provoking words maddened Ridgely. He took Katie by sheer force from around his waist, and eluding her, darted toward the robber. He was close upon him, with his sturdy arm upraised, ready to fell the other to the ground, when she caught him.

He was off his guard; the wily captain saw it, and dealt him a lightning blow

from the arm-pit. The blow struck Walter squarely between the eyes, and he dropped like a bullock, with the blood spirting from his nose.

For a few seconds he was stunned, and sat vacantly on the ground. Then he aroused himself and crawled to his feet.

His adversary had vanished, and was nowhere to be seen. Burning with chagrin, pain and rage, he commenced wandering about vacantly in pursuit. But he was too dizzy and stunned to see plainly, and before he had been on his feet two minutes he fell again; the girlish fist of effeminate Captain Downing was hard as a rock, and was backed by the arm of a blacksmith.

Katie sunk down beside her lover, astounded at the sudden change in affairs. Shocked at the captain's ungentlemanly conduct to her, burning with sorrow at her lover's harsh action in putting her aside—these were but trifles compared with the intense shame at seeing him whipped and vanquished. She was as much ashamed as her champion, though dimly conscious that she had caused the disaster by unguarding Walter.

She raised him to a sitting posture, and pillowing his head on her breast, wiped the blood from his face with her handkerchief. The moon had just risen, and by its strong light she saw he had received a herculean blow, as his eyes were red and swollen, his nose was bruised and bleeding, and he was weak and stunned—scarcely more than conscious.

She began to cry piteously and stroke his forehead, when a harsh voice behind her growled:

“What in thunder air ye doin’ thar, gal?”

She turned quickly; her father, a sturdy man in the prime of life, was regarding her curiously. He was an odd mixture of fun, moodiness and good-nature, and united the most repelling face and voice to the kindest heart imaginable. He had been bred in a large city, and was perfectly “well up” in all matters which interest fast youth. He recognized the form of Walter, noticed his bruised face, and saw his daughter's anxiety. At this last he chuckled.

“Wal, what hev we hyar?” he said, going down on his knees beside them. “We hev a couple of moss-agate eyes, and we hev a Roman nose. Wal, what air we goin’ ter do with ’em? Why, we air goin’ to cure ’em. Why didn’t ye do suthin’ fer ’em, gal?”

“I did not know what to do, father. Oh, dear father, please relieve him—I know he is hurt terribly. Do, please, father.”

Robert Jeffries stopped not, but whipped out a huge clasp-knife, and told her to hold it across the bridge of his nose. Then he went off, muttering:

“Ef we lived in a decent place, now, we’d hev oysters, beefsteak, ice and sech fur the eyes; but we live in black Arkansaw, and we hain’t any thing but vinegar, salt and mud. Cuss sech a kentry!”

He bustled about the cabin, struck a light, and rapidly procured some vinegar and salt. Then he took a cup of water, and making some mud, formed the three ingredients into a paste, which he clapped on Walter’s eyes.

It aroused him instantly, and smarting from the salve, he staggered to his feet, and looked vacantly about; he had received a terrible blow. Katie affectionately supported him.

“Lie down—lie down!” commanded Jeffries. “D’ye want ter start the blood a-runnin’, an’ make yer eyes like a hearse? Lie down and keep still!”

“Where is he?” inquired Walter, making a faint show of determination. “Where is he?”

“Who?” inquired Jeffries.

“Charles Danforth, father. Oh, he struck poor Walter as hard as he could, right on his poor forehead.”

“What! yer don’t mean to say that girl Danforth knocked him down like a beef! whipped a feller that cleaned out six Pawnees, one after t’other! Wal, I will—that’s good.”

“Oh, father; he wouldn’t have done it if I had not caught him when he was going to strike. I held him, then Danforth struck him.”

“Yer did, eh! yer did; and yer promised to be his wife. Gal, I’m ashamed of yer. It’s foul—it ain’t ’cordin’ to the rules of the ring—wal, wal; and yer claim to be a Jeffries.”

Walter, who had recovered his senses, here interfered.

“You see, sir, she meant good—she tried to prevent a fight. So she tried to stop me—if she hadn’t I would have given him a thrashing.”

“Thank you; thank you, Walter,” said Katie, with a grateful glance at him.

“What was the mill about?” asked Jeffries.

“He treated Katie like a—a—”

“What!” vociferated the father. “Treated my daughter like what?”

“He threw his arms around her and kissed her.”

Jeffries’ eyebrows sunk down over his eyes, and he breathed hard. He was aroused.

“And yer got hit fightin’ for my daughter, did ye? Well young feller, yer did right, and I’ll remember yer. And *him* too,” he resumed. “I’ll make his hide smart.”

Without further parley he walked away down the hill toward the grocery or rather cabin, for there was no good “store” in the settlement. Katie knew what was his errand, and she also knew he was not to be turned aside from his purpose. But she tried to alleviate his wrath, and called out:

“Now, father, please think before you speak.”

He muttered some reply and strode down the hill. Three hundred yards away was the provision cabin where Danforth stayed when he was in the settlement. It was kept by a German named Hans Winkler. It was not a “store,” for the few families which lived in the neighborhood were too poor to require such a thing. But the old German, thinking to turn an honest penny now and then, had brought on a few staple articles from the Eastern States, which he retailed out for furs, produce, etc., making a large profit on every thing.

The cabin stood on the bank of the river already mentioned. To this Jeffries strode, and after listening for a moment, knocked at the door loudly.

No answer. Hans must be asleep. He knocked again. Still all was quiet. Then he halloed. Yet the cabin was still.

He turned away, provoked; his bird had eluded his wrath for the present. Resolving to punish him severely at the first opportunity, he was striding away, when a faint voice, seemingly far away, came to his ears:

“You are treading on dangerous ground; take care!”

He stopped and listened intently; all was still. The placid stream flowed on quietly, leaving no sound; the night was still. He started on.

Before he had gone a yard, the same voice rung out in clarion tones, near, loud, and shrill:

“You are treading on dangerous ground; take care!”

The sound proceeded from a group of willows a few yards up the river bank. He darted to them. He entered their gloomy recesses, ready against surprise, and searched them through; but, though he beat them for an hour he found nothing, and heard the mysterious voice no more. Then he went home, wondering intensely.

CHAPTER III.

“BEWARE!”

Walter, after being nursed a while by the tender hands of Katie, bid her an affectionate good-evening, and started toward his lonely bachelor-hall, which was situated beyond the cabin of Hans Winkler a mile, and down the stream. Half of the distance home lay through the settlement, while the other was rendered dismal and gloomy by the road's running through a projecting cape of Dead-Man's Forest.

It was a lonely, gloomy walk to take in an unsettled country, and through a skirt of such an ill-omened wood. But Walter was sturdy and bold, and thought nothing of it. What danger? had he not a revolver? could he not shoot with the best? Certainly; what had he to fear?

He strode along with his hands in his pockets, musing. His thoughts were partially pleasant and gloomy. He had been unable to avenge an insult offered to the girl he idolized; he had been “knocked out of time” by an effeminate youth; and mauler the salve, his eyes were purple and swollen, and his face was bruised; never mind—he would search out Danforth in the morning.

On the other hand, she had tenderly cried over and tended him; she had shown, without doubt, she devotedly loved him; and in the spring she would be his own loved wife.

What more could a young man, very handsome and intelligent, in the full vigor of early manhood, in possession of a good farm which in a few years would yield him a good living, desire?

“No more,” he said, after a mental calculation.

What! was it possible here was a contented man? No; a lingering drop of gall remained; he was smarting at defeat, and bruised eyes. He would show him tomorrow—that he would.

He passed Hans' cabin, and noticed it was dark and silent; then he continued, whistling.

Before him lay a short reach of open, moonlit glade, then came Dead-Man's Forest.

Every thing was in perfect repose. In front the dark, somber wood stretched away; behind was the settlement, sleeping on the hill; and around him was the ghostly, quiet glade.

“You are treading on dangerous ground; take care!”

Hallo! who said that in such a quiet, far-away voice? Who spoke? Hallo!

The voice did not reach his ears—he did not hear it; but it spoke for all that. He went on.

He was plunging into the haunted forest; in another moment he would be lost to sight in the ghostly mazes.

“You are treading on dangerous ground; take care!”

He did not hear the warning, and went on. He passed a thick tree in the middle of the wood; a man glided out from behind its trunk; there was a dull, heavy blow, a deep, rattling groan, a fall; and a man was bleeding on the ground in Dead Man’s Forest.

Robert Jeffries returned to his cabin, very much out of humor. His revenge was yet to come; he was forced to wait; and he ground his teeth.

A light was burning in the little cabin when he entered, and Katie was sitting by it, sewing. She looked very sweet and lovely as she sat there, and his heart first softened, then became adamant; let any man insult her—the tenderest, purest girl in the world.

She greeted him with an anxious look.

“Well, father?”

“I couldn’t find the villain—curse him!”

“Oh, father, I’m so glad!”

“Glad of what, gal? When a man insults ye and gits out’n yer father’s reach, air ye glad?”

“Oh, father, he wanted me to marry him.” (This with a blush—very red.)

“The skunk!”

“And I am glad because you did not have a quarrel.”

“I ain’t; I’ll fix him! Marry you! Why, gal, ye don’t mean to say ye like him?”

“No, father; far from it. I am afraid of him; but perhaps—perhaps—”

“Wal?”

“Perhaps he—loved—me—so he could not control himself. I am sure he is not to blame for loving me.”

A woman all over. They never think the less of a man for loving them, however low he may be. If they did they would be disparaging themselves.

“I guess yer’d better go ter bed—I’m going.”

She arose and lighted another candle and then kissed him tenderly.

“Good-night, dear father,” she said. “A pleasant night and happy dreams. I know you will feel softer in the morning. Good-night.”

The cabin contained two rooms; one sacred as her sleeping room, the other the kitchen, parlor, dining and her father’s sleeping room.

She had a bedstead with a soft bed, pure and white as was she; he had a double blanket, with a valise for a pillow; she had a window in her room large enough for a bear to clamber through; he had none.

The window was of glass and opened like a door—on hinges. It was about five feet from the floor and was usually kept closed at night with a button, but as the summer nights were hot and uncomfortable, she left it open to admit the cool breeze—in her innocence never dreading harm.

She went into her room and closed the door, her father directly going to bed, sleeping on his gun; Robert Jeffries was wary.

After she had gone to bed and had put out the candle, she lay thinking of Walter, smiling, and feeling very happy. In the spring he would be her husband.

After she had thought and happily dreamed a delicious wide-awake dream, she felt cool. Should she close the window? She had better; she had grown timid of late. But she called herself a timid, weak thing and resolved to leave it open. She did; and went to sleep.

“Trouble is coming; take care!”

Hallo! away down there in the dark, grim wood. Who is talking at this time of night? Hallo!

She went to sleep, so did Robert Jeffries, and the window was open.

The moon rose into the zenith and looked down from her pale face upon three different objects: a forest, a river, and a cabin.

In the forest a silent form lay cold, still and bloody, near a thick tree; a man stood over him, looking quietly down upon him.

The watcher spoke in a strange, far-away voice.

“Trouble is coming; take care, take care.”

He turned and was gone with a very white face, a silent, swift tread, and a cold, staring eye.

On the bank of the river a negro crept back and forth by the cabin of the German. He was evidently waiting for some one, as he stopped now and then and peered intently toward the cabin on the hill, then kept his creeping pace.

A man kept along a dark shadow, stealing toward the cabin. He drew near, then listened; crept on a little, then listened again. All was quiet; he stole up to its walls, then stopped and listened a third time.

Jeffries was snoring inside. He crept round to the other side and stood under the window. Inside was beauty, innocence and virtue; outside was beauty, cunning and wickedness. He placed his hand on the sill.

Creak!

He peered in. By the pale moonlight he could see the fair girl in deep sleep—deep and placid. The pure white covering fell daintily over her as she lay there, with a smile on her lips, and a sweet expression on her face. She was dreaming of *him*.

He could not hear her breath—it was too soft and gentle; but he could tell by the gentle rise and fall, and by the placid expression of her face, that she was in a deep sleep.

Creak!

He stood for a moment, gazing at her, with a smile on his comely face. Then he turned and went from the shadow of the cabin out into the bright moonlight. Drawing a white handkerchief from his green coat he waved it briskly above his head.

Down on the river bank, near the German’s cabin, a bright light glowed for a moment, and a white object waved. Then both disappeared.

He stole back with another smile and again stood under the window.

Creak!

She moved, then turned gently, smiling sweetly in her sleep as she did so, and one word escaped her lips:

“Walter!”

The man outside smiled sweeter than ever at this and again placed his hand on the sill.

“Take care! beware!”

He started as if he had been shot, and cowered under the wall in affright. He had heard a loud, shrill voice away in the forest utter those words, and a deadly fear overcame him.

For many times of late he had heard that voice, warning him of evil; too many times he had laughed at it; but now?

Creak!

He was thoroughly frightened and fairly shook with fear, though a bolder man never trod the earth. He might well shake.

He listened for a repetition but it did not come. Then after a few moments he recovered and laughed at himself, and again for the third time placed his hand on the sill.

Creak!

Three times he had placed his hand on the sill ready to enter; it was loose and it creaked; but the fair sleeper, unconscious of danger, slept sweetly on.

He listened and peered a last time, and then cautiously mounted the sill. Half in the window he stopped, fearful lest the shadow might awaken her; but she still slept on.

He dropped lightly to the floor and crept to the bed. Gazing at her as she lay there, a wicked smile crept over his lips.

A low chirp came faintly to his ears; the sleepy chirp of a half-awakened bird.

He went to the window and waved his white handkerchief, then glided back to the bedside.

A shadow fell over the room; he turned and saw a round, woolly head in the window. He smiled again and gave a gesture of satisfaction.

Then he stole to the head of the bed, and took a small instrument from his pocket.

It was a piece of wood about an inch and a half square, padded with cotton, with a string knotted in both ends—it was a gag.

He reached over and with a quick, cunning movement, placed it in her mouth.

Then like a flash of lightning he passed the string around her neck; she was gagged!

She awoke with a start, and looked wildly at the man standing over her. She tried to scream—she could not. Then she rose upright with terror depicted on her face, and her eyes wore a horrified expression.

She attempted to rise and fly but he held her fast. He had his hands full in a double sense, for she struggled violently, beating him with her hands, her whole nature aroused. He made a signal to the man outside.

He slid through the window with the agility and silence of a cat and stood beside him.

“Throw her clothing out of the window!” he whispered. The negro obeyed.

“Now get outside and take her!” He clambered out.

“Here she is. Ha! she’s fainted!”

She had. Unnerved by the suddenness and alarm of the scene, by the terror of maidenly modesty, she had fainted dead away and lay motionless in his arms.

He passed her out to the negro, who gave a chuckle of delight at his lovely burden.

Then he swiftly followed.

Once outside he listened intently. The heavy breathing of Jeffries inside was the only sound; he was soundly sleeping. The worst for the present was over.

“We must lose no time!” he whispered. “Now for Shadow Swamp!”

Silently in the moonlight they stole away, down the hill, past the few cabins, sleeping quietly. Katie’s fate was approaching.

She lay limp and quiet, with a white, scared face, beautiful in its alarmed expression. He clasped her tightly and hurried on.

When they had got to the cabin by the river, a faint shadow stole out from it, and ran like a streak of light toward Dead-Man’s Forest. They stopped, alarmed, and Downing, placing the form of Katie upon the ground, drew a revolver and cocked it. Cato, the Creeper, whipped out his razor.

Across the glade darted the shadow, and vanished in the recesses of the somber wood. Cato's teeth chattered.

"Golly, Mars'r Cap'n. I'se afeard." And his eyes rolled.

"Coward! afraid of what? Why, couldn't you see it was a raccoon?"

"Oh, no, Mars'r Cap'n; dat warn't no 'coon. Dis chile's hunted 'em 'nuff ter know 'em. Golly, Mars'r Cap'n! dat war a ghost sure 'nuff!"

"Pshaw! ghost! See here, don't you suppose I can see as well as you can? I tell you it was a raccoon. By George, I believe the bloke's scared, sure enough."

"Dat I am, Mars'r Cap'n—dat dis chile am! Ole Cato giv' berry much to be out'n dis 'ere muss. I done tol' yer, cap'n, Mars'r Cap'n, dat war Obeah sure 'nuff. I done see'd 'em onc't afore. Golly! dis chile's done gone dead!"

"Hold your tongue! what if it was a ghost? Spirits can not harm a man. If they did there wouldn't be a live man in all the world. I want you to stop this nonsense right away. Don't let me hear another word of it! d'ye understand? Time is scarce; come on, and keep still."

Taking up his unfortunate prisoner, he motioned Cato to follow suit with the clothing he had dropped in his fright, and went rapidly across the glade, closely followed by the terrified negro. Five minutes later the glade was deserted, and Katie, sweet Katie, was in the hands of a villain, being hurried away to Shadow Swamp.

Hush! who is lying cold, still and bloody by a thick tree in Dead-Man's Forest? Who is there to save him from a terrible death?

Hallo! who is talking in the depths of the haunted forest when the moon is looking calmly down? Who is silently gliding from shadowy tree to moonlight glade with ghastly face, robed in white, with a staring, steely eye? Hallo!

Who is speaking in a far-away voice to the quiet night? What is he saying? Who speaks? hallo!

"You are treading on dangerous ground; take care!"

"Take care!" whisper the forest echoes.

"Take care!"

CHAPTER IV.

A SHARP GIRL.

The sun rose as usual the next morning, and Jeffries was awakened by its rays peeping through his door; he rubbed his eyes, then sat upright.

“Wal, old yeller-face;” he addressed Old Sol. “Yer’ve cotched a weasel asleep this yer time, fur a fact. Wal, I’ll be durned! a-sleeping at sun-up! Bob Jeffries, this yer won’t do; won’t go down; it’s a lazy trick.”

He arose, stretched himself, and called out:

“Hullo, in thar! you napping, too, gal? Heigho! arise! wake up! go ter the ant, thou sluggard, etc., etc. Katie, Kitty, Puss, Tabby, wake up!”

He received no reply; he called again:

“Come, Kate, come! it’s time to get up.”

Still he received no reply; he marveled, for she was generally up and about before he was, and once calling was sufficient. He opened the door and looked in, dreading some evil.

What was his surprise at not seeing her there. He was alarmed.

The bed had been occupied, but her clothing was gone, together with her own self; the window was open, and she had left by that means of egress.

This he knew, for to have gone out by the door she must have disturbed him, as the door opened outward, and he lay directly before it. She had gone out by the window.

He rushed to it, and looked out. She was not in sight; he became alarmed in good earnest, and went hurriedly out of doors into the open air.

He went directly to the house or cabin of the nearest settler, Josh Dunbar, hoping to find her there. Hettie Dunbar was a sweet young girl, Katie’s bosom friend, and their cabin was a favorite resort of Katie’s.

Hattie came to the door at his approach, and smiled gayly at him, not noticing his disturbed appearance.

“Have you seen Katie this morning? is she here?” he asked, hurriedly.

“Katie? Why no. I haven’t seen her since yesterday afternoon. What is the matter?”

“I dunno, I dunno. I’m afraid suthin’s wrong; she ain’t at the house.”

“Oh, she’s gone out awhile, perhaps, before breakfast,” suggested Hettie.

“No, she ain’t—she don’t hev no time ter go a-walkin’ afore breakfast; she allus gets it herself.”

“Are you sure she is not at the house?”

“Sartain, sartain. She clim’ out the winder, ter boot.”

“Climbed out the window!”

“Yes; thar’s suthin’ wrong. But p’r’aps she’s at some of the other houses,” he added, with a faint glimmer of hope.

“She can not be, for I have been up ever since daylight, working at the window. If she had stirred from the house I surely should have noticed her. She has not left it since daylight.”

“It’s mighty strange—mighty strange! she never went off so before,” said the anxious father, gloomily.

“Hello! what’s the matter with you, Jeffries?” echoed a stentorian voice, close at hand. Jeffries turned.

It was Josh Dunbar, coming around the house. He was a sturdy, stalwart man of forty or thereabouts, good-humored and jolly, with the eye of a hawk, the arm of a blacksmith, and the leg of a savage, and like Jeffries, a widower. He had just been milking and evidently drinking the tempting fluid on the sly, too, for his bristling mustache was suspiciously creamy.

“What’s the matter with you?” he reiterated.

“Father, Katie has suddenly disappeared, very strangely and Mr. Jeffries is much alarmed.”

“Disappeared?”

“Yes; nothing has been seen of her since last night. She is not at home.”

“Hoh! she’s at some of the neighbors’.”

“No, she is not. I have been here ever since daybreak, and no one has left the house.”

“Ha!” and Dunbar started.

“What’s the matter?” asked Jeffries. The other came forward with a grave, solemn face, and laid his hand on his shoulder, quietly.

“See here, Rob, I’ll not beat about the bush, but will out with it. Last night, about midnight, I was awake, and as I lay quiet, I heard what I thought was an Indian yell, away down the creek. I got up and looked out the window. The moon was shining very bright, and all was still as the grave. As I stood looking, I saw something small and white glance for an instant close to your house, then a bright red light shine down by Hans’ cabin. Thinks I, something’s brewing, and I watched, but I saw nothing more. But I heard somebody away down, it seemed like, in Dead-Man’s Forest, say these words in a far-away voice:

“Take care! beware!”

Jeffries started. “That voice!” he exclaimed, uneasily.

“What, did you hear it, too?”

“Go on!” and Jeffries gestured impatiently.

Dunbar stared, but went on. “It was the strangest voice I ever heard, and I can’t give any reason for it, but a cold chill ran over me, and I felt for my gun. It was a voice from the grave.”

He stopped short, and Hettie turned pale. Jeffries gave a gesture of irritation.

“Go on!” he said.

“In a few moments, say ten minutes, I saw, or imagined I saw, a dark object moving rapidly down the hill. Part of it was black, part white. I only saw it for about five seconds, when it vanished, and all was quiet again.

“I waited for some time, then, seeing no more, went back to bed, wondering. Just as I was falling asleep, I felt a draft of air pass over me, and looked up. Though seeing nothing, I was sure that a presence was near me—a thing felt, but not seen.”

He stopped, and drew Hettie protectingly to him, and grasped Jeffries’ hand.

“Now, my daughter, I don’t want to alarm you, but though I could not hear it, something seemed, ay, *said*:

“Trouble in Shadow Swamp—take care!”

Jeffries looked uneasy and seriously alarmed, while Hettie grew very white.

Dunbar watched them both steadily, then said:

“Now, what I think is this.”

Jeffries stopped him.

“Hold! I’ve suthin’ ter say, too. It’s all about thet rascal, Danforth—thet galish feller.”

Then he related the events of the evening before; the meeting of the lovers; the quarrel between Danforth and Walter; the latter’s defeat, and the former’s disappearance; and concluded in a low, earnest tone:

“I was a-huntin’ for the villain, and was down by Hans’ cabin, whar he stops, when suthin’ said, ’pears like away off in the night:

“‘Yer air a-treadin’ on dangerous ground! tek keer, tek keer!’

“Wal, thet voice seemed so far away like, I kedn’t tell whar it was; but as I war thinkin’, it kim ag’in, clost ter my ears, loud an’ peart, right from the bunch of willows jist above the cabin. Thinkin’ it must be Danforth hissself, I beat ’em all through, spendin’ an hour at it; but it was no go. Then, hafe scared, I kim home. Dunbar, thar’s suthin’ wrong.”

“I am afraid there is, my friend, very apprehensive. I have always given Dead-Man’s Forest a wide berth since the red-skins have been about, but I think the best thing we can do is to search in it at once for Katie—for it’s my opinion you’ll find her there.”

“That’s so, sartain. She ain’t ter hum, an’ whar she is no one knows. Great God, whar’s my pooty little gal, my little pet?” And Jeffries buried his face in his hands.

“Courage, my friend!” said his friend, kindly. “Courage, perhaps we are mistaken—perhaps something strange though not of evil might have turned up. Hettie, run to Sol Jacobs and give the alarm. Tell them to spread the men around while I go down to Hans Winkler’s cabin to see him. Gather the whole settlement and send a swift lad for Cato the Creeper—we’ll find her soon.”

Hettie sped away toward the distant cabins, making her white, bewitching ankles fly over the ground; she loved Katie dearly, and, with a woman’s lightning wit, suspected the true state of the case.

Once she had been strolling about on the border of the wood, and had overseen Danforth in close confab with a trio of villainous, desperate-looking men, all

armed to the teeth. Then, again, she had seen him exchange significant glances with Cato, whom she cordially suspected of evil.

To use an uncouth but forcible phrase, Hettie was “nobody’s fool.” She linked several suspicious events, and by a little shrewd guessing picked Danforth to pieces.

Though naturally penetrating and keen, she was under the influence of the great sense-sharpener—Cupid, and was thoroughly in love with gay, handsome Captain Downing. She loved him with an ardent, whole-souled love, and could have gainsayed him in nothing. Fortunate for her it was that the unscrupulous robber did not know of her passion for him—very fortunate; for he would have caused her bitter misery. She well knew his impulsive temperament, and avoided him, knowing that to see him were only to give her love another impetus.

Stop and consider what this backwoods girl was doing, and see what a heroine she was. Cognizant of Downing’s ardent love for Katie, conscious he did not love her, knowing Katie was her successful rival, she was deliberately doing all she could to protect and save her—she who had unwillingly outstripped her in the love of the beautiful bandit—to organize a party for the apprehension and punishment of her idolized hero, though it would almost be her death-blow to see him disgraced and punished.

You see she was a very extraordinary girl—this young backwoods maid.

She soon arrived at the cabin of Sol Jacobs, and hurriedly entering told them of the story. Old Sol heard her through, heard her suspicions, conjectures and fears, then turned sharply to his son, a stalwart young fellow of twenty who would have died for Hettie, being devotedly attached to her.

“Arouse the settlement, Eben!” he said, “and make your pins fly too. Tell every man that little Katie has disappeared suddenly! that’ll bring ’em together short meter.”

Eben sprung away while Hettie lingered with the women, who, cackling all at once, plied her with questions. Old Sol took down his gun and rubbed the dust off the barrel.

The news flew like wildfire about the little settlement. Men frowned and quietly took their rifles from their pegs. Young men swore an oath or so, then clenched their teeth, and baring their arms, watched their brawny muscles as they swelled with the arm’s rise and fall. Then they clutched their guns, and uniting together, clamored to start in pursuit.

The elders, though quite as resolved and more worthy and reliable than their juniors, were men of experience, and never moved rashly, always looking before leaping. They assembled the youngers, and all uniting started for Jeffries' cabin.

They had gone but a short distance when they discovered three forms approaching by Winkler's cabin. They halted and waited for them on receiving a signal to that effect.

They were Cato, Eben Jacobs, and Walter Ridgely, the latter walking unsteadily. His head was bound up in Eben's scarlet handkerchief and his face was livid and white. His eyes were bruised and purple and his nose was defaced. He was too angry and chagrined to control his anger, but allowed it free scope. The result was that he was in a dangerous state of mind.

They gathered round him, plying him with questions, which he answered moodily.

He had been walking, he said, through the spur of forest when he felt a rustle behind him, and turning had seen a man with uplifted bludgeon directly behind him. He tried to avoid the impending blow but too late; the cudgel descended squarely upon his head, and he knew no more until morning, an hour or so since, when he was stumbled upon by Eben, on his way to Cato's cabin.

When asked if he recognized his would-be assassin he replied in the negative. But he was sure that it was not Danforth. He was a much larger man, being almost a giant.

Murmurs of indignation and menaces rose from the settlers, old and young. They had long suspected the depths of the grim forest were the haunts of evil men, and they were now sure of the fact. They were rapidly believing that quiet Danforth too was not what he should be, but was connected in some way with Katie's disappearance, all being aware of last night's events.

Walter was frantic when told of her sudden and strange absence, and sick with fear and doubt, raved to be gone in hot search. In this he was seconded by Jeffries, who was scarcely less alarmed and distracted. Accordingly, hasty arrangements were made; officers and scouts were chosen; Cato, the Creeper, stood ready to fix upon any trail, trace or mark; and the hearts of the whole band beat as one.

Every man was armed to the teeth, and what was better, was buoyed by the sense of being in the right—a weapon far more potent than the steadiest rifle, the deadliest pistol, or keenest knife ever made.

Place two men of equal strength and agility upon an open field to combat, one being in the right and the other in the wrong. It will surprise you to see how soon the former will defeat his antagonist. This is solid truth.

Sol Jacobs was chosen chief, as being an old Kentucky Indian-fighter. The next in command was Jeffries. The scouts and flankers were the keenest, sharpest young men in the settlement, under the supervision of Cato, the Creeper.

Before long they were wending their way down the hill toward the forest, Cato grinning with delight, the only agreeable person in the party. The women stood by the little block-house watching them depart; and though many feminine hearts were sad, none were so heavy and torn as the virgin one of sweet Hettie Dunbar, watching with red, swollen eyes, the departure of cunning, earnest men, to bring to harm her lover.

In a few moments they were out of sight, and the women went back to their cabins sorrowfully. But Hettie mounted the narrow ladder in the block-house and sat drearily alone, sadly waiting, trembling lest at any moment she should see her heart's idol brought back wounded or dying, and in disgrace and shame.

CHAPTER V.

A FIENDISH DEED.

Downing and Cato hurried away through the forest, toward Shadow Swamp, Katie meanwhile lying unconscious in her abductor's arms. But, when they arrived at the pool, and stopped and signaled for the canoe, the cessation of the jolting motion aroused her and she opened her eyes.

At first her senses were scattered, and she did not remember the startling occurrence which had just taken place. But by degrees her wandering thoughts collected, and looking at the dark, grim trees, the still, pale light of the moon, the sable form beside her, and at her own villainous captor, she realized all and her heart sunk. The incidents, one by one, with startling distinctness rushed over her; the sudden awakening and fright; the villain's rude and immodest grasp of her; the gradual fading away into oblivion; all, with the terrible, sickening dread of her fate to come was too much for her, and she swooned again.

When she again opened her eyes she looked upon four log walls and a roof of "brush." She was in a cabin.

The walls were hung with skins, weapons, utensils and clothing, and last, in one corner, was a *looking-glass*—the pet of the dandy captain. The cabin was small, very small; but it was clean. Raising herself on her elbow, she looked around. In two corners were two piles of buffalo-skins undressed, and blankets—evidently used as beds. A round, short piece of a log stood on end in the center of the room, evidently a stool. This, with her own couch, completed the scanty furniture of the cabin.

She was lying on a bed which had been prepared for her, and she was delicately covered by skins. Her own clothing lay near.

In a few moments the door opened, and Captain Downing entered. He found her dressed and sitting vacantly on the stool without power to fly and escape. He had evidently taken some pains with his toilet, as his green coat was carefully brushed, his hair was arranged, and his boots were cleansed of all soil which generally adhered to them.

He bowed gracefully, in a manner which would have reflected credit upon many a "carpet knight."

“Ah!” he said, softly, “I am very glad to see you are able to be up and about. Please accept my sincerest wishes for your health.”

She did not raise her head, but sat as if in a trance. He went on:

“May I call you Miss Katie? Please do not be offended if I do. It seems so much more pleasant than cold, formal Miss Jeffries. Besides, my ardent regard for you causes me to use a more familiar title.”

But she did not notice him. After watching for any effect his remarks might produce, he lounged gracefully upon his pile of robes, and took a meerschaum from his pocket.

“A relic of former days,” he said, in a musing tone. “May I so far trespass upon your good-humor as to smoke? A vice to which gentlemen are much addicted. The dear ladies, however, in their sweet graciousness, not only grant their permission generally, but protest they ‘like the perfume of a good cigar.’ Here’s to the ladies—one in particular, the bonniest of them all. Having no claret to quaff their health in, I am forced to be satisfied with a meerschaum and very villainous tobacco. Miss Katie, your own health.”

He puffed out a wreath of smoke with exquisite effrontery, and smiled as a low moan escaped her lips.

“You are looking lovely to-day, Miss Katie—very enchanting. If you only knew how my heart bleeds for you in your present embarrassing situation, you would at least reward me with one of your sweet smiles. Let us hope, however, that the present place may soon become pleasant, even dear to you. I will do all in my power to make it so, I assure you.”

His last remark had the effect of partially arousing her from her apathy. She looked at him mournfully, with a glance in which were mingled grief, outraged modesty, terror and contempt. He laughed.

“You are very beautiful—very lovely. When you gazed at me so earnestly just now, my heart beat faster than its usual wont, and I imagined I could detect a sly twinkle of love, too. Was my surmise correct, Katie?”

She rocked to and fro, groaning in sheer despair and terror. His eyes snapped.

“I’m like the boy who drew the nightingale in the lottery,” he muttered. “I’ve got her, and now she won’t sing. Well, we will try the efficacy of force.”

He arose deliberately and stood before her, and their eyes met. Hers were terror-stricken, like a wounded fawn’s; his glittered like a snake’s. Nevertheless, he

spoke musically and low.

“If the fair Katie is aware of the value of obedience, she will temper her stubbornness slightly.”

Her eyes wandering vacantly about, fell upon a polished pistol hanging to a peg close by; she noted it. He waited a moment, then laid his hand quietly on her shoulder.

With a wild, piercing cry she shook it off, and darting away, clutched the pistol.

Never opening her lips, but piercing him with her eye, she stood drawn to her full height, her cheeks pale, her hands quivering, and her whole being aroused.

“Stand back, you monster!” she commenced, in a ringing, grating voice. “Don’t dare to lay your vile hands on me! Keep off, I say!”

She was thoroughly aroused, and her eyes darted angry fire. Irresistibly lovely she looked, and Downing, in spite of his chagrin at her opposition, loved her ten times more than ever. He gazed at her with his heart beating violently, he was so affected by her resolute bearing. Then his lip curled and he advanced on her.

She quickly cocked the pistol and presented it. He halted, but moved slowly around her, trying to find an opportunity for rushing in and disarming her. But, impelled by her terrified modesty, she was wary and kept him at bay. After some time spent in gliding about, he saw it was no use and changed his manner.

Dropping his arms and extending his hands, he put on, with splendid cunning, a mask of virtue. Throwing a wistful, pleading look into his comely brown eyes, he murmured, in a low voice:

“Lady, do your will and take my life! See, I am unarmed and unguarded; shoot! Oh, dear lady, to die by your hands were far sweeter than to live and see you scorn me so, my love!”

His sudden change surprised her, but she was too affrighted to lose her advantage. He saw she was in earnest, and he went on:

“I do not, I could not wish to bring myself to such a degraded level as to wish to do you harm. If you knew how passionately I love you, with what high regard I esteem your purity and courage, you would at least refuse to threaten me so. Your harsh manner cuts me to the heart. Believe me, dear lady, I do not mean you ill—if you think so, you have only to shoot and rid yourself of such a detested object as I am to you.”

He groaned as he said this, and sinking on his couch, buried his face in his hands. She watched him warily, though half melted by his protestations.

“I brought you here,” he said, with his face muffled, “to love and cherish you—to tenderly care for you. If, after a time you did not like it here, I was going to take you back. But oh! it wounds me to have you scorn me so.”

“I know too well your foul hypocrisy to be deluded by it. You have brought me here for evil, and you can not deny it. But this I tell you—that if you lay your hand on me but once, it will be your last moment upon earth. Take it in earnest, you demon, for I am terribly so.”

He groaned, then spoke, pleadingly:

“Oh, my love! please—”

“Keep your distance in language as well as in manner, for I will brook no rude familiarity from you!”

“Miss Jeffries, won’t you try and care for me? Even if you can not regard me as I would choose, you can at least *endeavor* to respect me.”

This last was a false move. With this last effrontery her ire and grief found a full vent.

“Dare you sit there and ask me to respect you?” she rung out, in noble wrath. “Dare you, in the name of all that is pure and holy, to ask me to look even pityingly upon you? Oh, sir, if in your mother was a spark of womanly virtue, if your father was a man of worth and honesty, if you ever had a pure sister, think of them and then of yourself at this moment!—think of them and release me from this wicked place. Take me back to my dear home; do not, oh, sir, do not bring down the wrath of Heaven upon you! Think of my poor father—of his anguish at my absence; think of the one who is to be my husband; please, sir, please pity and commiserate me. Oh, if you could imagine my grief and horror at being here, away from my friends, if you could respect or pity my sorrow, you would at once release me. Oh, sir, for the love and in the memory of your mother and sister, please do so, and let me go, and I will never tell of what I have been through here.”

He looked up in his natural expression and said, quietly:

“I will at once release you and take you safely home if you will grant me a single favor. It will not incommode you.”

“Name it!” she said, hastily, with her face lighted by a ray of hope.

“I will. It is to marry me.”

“Marry you!”

She looked at him steadily for a moment, then sunk on the stool with a shudder, wildly weeping.

“What is your answer?” he asked, with a quiet smile.

She did not answer, but sobbed and wept as if her heart was breaking.

“What is your answer?” and he smiled.

“Never!” she sobbed; “never!”

“Very well—very well.”

He arose and walked toward the door and looked out.

“By the sun I should judge the time to be ten o’clock. Now, Miss Jeffries, you will stay here twelve times twelve hours without food or water unless you accede to my desire. I do not wish to humiliate you in any manner, and will say there is a preacher about forty miles east. If you desire to unite your fortunes with mine, say the word and before night we will be at his house. Otherwise think of the terrors and anguish of slow starvation. I will give you an hour to decide. Reflect carefully, Miss Jeffries!”

He walked quietly out, leaving her a prey to the most harrowing thoughts. She had been tenderly reared and had never known the slightest grief, and this blow, dire as it was, humbled her and caused great anguish. She well knew his quiet ferocity and unrelenting disposition; she had just now seen his character in different phases; and knowing he would accomplish his purpose if it was possible, she trembled at the thought of the future.

In addition to these keen pangs was one nearly as piercing—she had no idea in what place she was. In the settlement the robber had lived in Hans Winkler’s cabin; she had often been there and knew this was not it. She was probably in some remote and obscure place, far from any path, alone with this dangerous and passionate man. She did not dream that a dozen yards from the cabin, seven or eight men, abandoned and profligate, ready to sanction and further any act of Downing’s, isolated from any thing pure or honest, were laughing and coarsely joking—even about her.

It was fortunate she did not, else she might have been unable to bear the thought, and would have swooned with fear.

She was in a critical and harrowing position, without means of escape, as she had heard him place a heavy log against the door as he went out. The door opened outward purposely in order to confine any prisoner within. Escape by the door was impossible.

As she thought upon her situation, fear lent her strength, and she began to examine the walls of the cabin. For a half-hour she beat them and pushed at the heavy logs feebly; she ran about sobbing, beating them with her delicate hands until they bled; she mounted the stool and searched the strong roof; she vainly endeavored to force the door; she called on her father and lover frantically; then, when escape was only too vain, she began to pray, half-crazed.

At the expiration of the hour Downing entered and closed the door behind him.

Then he folded his arms and quietly gazed at her as she sat on the low, rude stool, in a semi-stupor.

“Well?” he said.

She made no reply, neither did she raise her eyes; but sat motionless.

“Well,” he continued, smiling slightly, “have you made up your mind?”

He expected here that she would show some spirit, at least a little resistance; but she neither did one nor the other.

“Have you resolved which alternative you will take?”

She answered in a faint voice, “I have.”

“Well, will you be my wife and gain a protecting husband?”

“No!”

“Are you in earnest, Miss Jeffries? Think well before you speak. You know the alternative; do you choose it?”

“I do; any thing were better than being the wife of a man I loathe and detest.”

“You will find yourself mistaken before many days, mark well what I say. I am not to be deterred from my resolve.”

“I am resolved.”

“Once again I enjoin, nay entreat you to reflect. You are, metaphorically speaking, at the forks of a road. One leads, if not to perfect happiness, to at least, an easy, indolent life, well garnished with luxuries; the other to—a horrible, unknown death.”

“Fiend!”

“I am, Miss Jeffries, I acknowledge it. Yet I can be most tender and agreeable when I choose. Fiend! that is a harsh word, yet I take a strange sort of pride in it. You do not know my early life. Well, I will relate it. Meanwhile you can, in listening, form some opinion of *death by starvation*. I love you fondly, tenderly, Miss Kate, as only one of my disposition can; and it is for this reason that I treat you so cruelly. It is one of the contradictions of my nature. But I will go on with my history.”

He lighted his quaint, costly pipe, and begging her pardon as politely as any native of France, began in his rich, round voice, occasionally making a gesture with the ease of an experienced orator.

“I am a native, of nowhere, and my parents were nobody. That is, my parents either died or deserted me when very young, as I was found, a frail infant in the middle of one of New York’s busiest thoroughfares, in early morning, by a young roystering blade, rolling home in the morning. He took me to a foundling asylum, and left me to live or die—as my nurses by their care or neglect, might will.

“I lived—after suffering all the ills and evils of babydom, and grew strong and healthy. When I arrived at the unripe and vicious age of ten, an old gentleman, a retired merchant, attracted by the comeliness of my face and form, adopted me, giving me his own name—Robert Davis.

“I was a quick-witted, jovial little chap, and if I do say it myself, was very fair and handsome. Being petted and caressed by all the women both old and young, of the neighborhood, I easily grew into the belief that I was something superhuman—in fact a genius, one day to be the President of the country. It is true, that notwithstanding my good-nature and affability, I was at times seized with fits of quiet, inordinate cruelty, which made me a demon, and at these moments everybody avoided me.

“As years went on these attacks became more frequent and violent. Before, when under the influence of them, I restrained myself, and was content with murdering all the small animals within my reach. But now, I became more bloodthirsty and ferocious—attempting, though vainly, the lives of all my companions.

“Then they avoided me, and feared the very ground I trod. This incensed me and I grew more violent. At last, on my twentieth birthday, a fit, stronger and more uncontrollable than any before, seized me. Without provocation of any kind I fell upon a comrade and attempted his life. I failed, though he was made a cripple for

life, and I was buried in an insane asylum, a monomaniac. I was not insane but only a monomaniac, yet that was sufficient to cause my incarceration.

“In five years I was pronounced cured, and was freed. I went back to my old haunts, penitent and resolving to do all in my power to alleviate any suffering I had caused. But I was too late; the friends I sought were gone. My adopted father was dead, the one whom I had made useless for life had gone, no one knew whither; and weary of lingering near the scene of so much unhappiness I went South.

“If you recollect, or if you ever knew, a most horrible robbery and murder occurred in Charleston, a few years since. The perpetrator was never discovered, though long and vigilant search was made for him, and large rewards were offered for his apprehension. I see by your face you recollect the event—it was the talk and alarm of the whole country. I will not tell you what reason the murderer had for his outrage; I need not dwell upon the subject, but will only say that he escaped scot-free, plunged into the western wilds and organized a band of robbers. Miss Jeffries, the man who stole into a banker’s house for purposes of robbery (and to gratify a grudge) and who, being discovered, took the lives of him and his servant, then made off with a rich plunder, stands before you.”

She started up wildly, then after gazing at him in terror, clasped her hands and sunk to the ground, unnerved. He smiled.

“I did not relate the narrative for effect—if I had I would have told it minutely and in much greater length; but I told it briefly to make you aware with whom you are dealing. And, to conclude, I will tell you my name is not Danforth, but Captain Downing, chief of a bandit band, and that I was never yet thwarted. Have you your answer ready?”

She slowly arose, pale, but firm and calm. Smiting him with her eyes she regarded him steadily until his own quailed. Then she spoke in a strange, grating voice:

“Were I in the power of one ten times the villain that you are; were I looking forward to a fate worse than death; were I doomed to eternal future pain and misery, instead of knowing that you can but take my life; I would still have the same answer—I shall never wed but one man, and he is your opposite.”

“This is your final resolve?”

“It is my final resolve!”

“Very well. May you enjoy yourself then, in the short life you have marked out

for yourself.”

He went softly around the cabin, and took every weapon from its walls, even the pistol at her feet. Then, he opened the door, and looked at her fixedly.

“It is well!” he said, with a quiet smile. “Through this open door take your last glimpse of nature. You will never see human being or outside world again. Farewell forever Miss Jeffries.”

“Ay!” she said, “we will never meet in the future world. I have but one single prayer, and that is, may you forever be haunted by the ones whom you have so fiendishly injured on earth. God forgive me for uttering such a wish; but, mark my words, if ever there was justice above or below you will be punished.”

He smiled on her, then turned and went out. The door closed and was barred; she sunk down, overwhelmed; but a voice rung out through the forest, unheard at the island in Shadow Swamp, but speaking still, and the words were ominous:

“You are treading on dangerous ground; take care!”

She was left, without hope, to her fate.

CHAPTER VI.

A DOUBLE BRIBE.

The pursuing and searching party wound swiftly into Dead-Man's Forest, with Cato the Creeper in advance. He strode boldly along, whistling and singing jovially, though keeping a sharp eye upon every thicket and matted copse. In addition to his razor, he carried a huge knotted bludgeon which he trailed along the ground. When fairly in the shades of the forest, he commenced a favorite melody, with great gusto:

“Jawbone walkin', Jawbone talkin',
Jawbone eat with a knife an' fork:
Jawbone broke an' de marrow—”

“Dry up!” sternly ordered Sol, the leader. “Don't yer know thar's Injuns skulkin' round? let alone the gang of rascals I know hide in these yer thickets. Ef yer don't yer'd oughter.”

“Golly, Mars'r Jacobs, I've done prowled 'round these yer woods fur dis long time an' I done never see'd any gang. Ef thar was one, ole Cato'd know it, shore.”

“Curse me ef I don't believe you do,” mentally declared Jacobs. “I guess I'll keep an eye on the nigger.”

They were in a small glade. Stopping short, Jacobs turned and faced the men, who halted and gathered about him. After thinking a moment, he said:

“Now, boys, yer've pretty much made up yer minds how little Katie got lost, ain't yer?”

An expressive grunt was his answer.

“Wal, 'cordin' ter Dutch Joe, this yer Danforth ain't what he should be, an' it's my opinion he's in some way or t'other, got suthin' ter do with it. Them yer sentiments, boys?”

“Ay, ay!” and “you bet!” were his emphatic answers.

“Now, Dutch Joe is rayther cracked, but he's right smart on common things.

He's told me, time an' ag'in, that he seen Danforth paddlin' on Shadow Swamp pond, with a lot of hang-dog men, armed ter the teeth. Now, yer know thar's been sev'ral chaps gone in this timber that've never b'en seen ter come out. Blood, too, has been diskivered. Most every one has heerd yells come from this yer timber when these yer chaps war in it—yells of terror. Boys, yer know old Sol Jacobs has fou't Injuns and knows a thing or two; and yer know he's no person's fool eyther. Wal, puttin' this, that, and t'other together, it's my opinion this yer Danforth is in cohoots with a gang of robbers, and that whar he is at, the pretty little Katie is."

Several exclamations came from the men—groans from Walter and Jeffries, threats from the young men, and murmurs of assent from the elders.

"Wal, now, ter get little Katie back ag'in, we must find Danforth. Ter do that we must hev a trailer who knows the woods and who kin foller a blind trail. The best fellur fur that biz in the outfit is Cato, here; and though I know he'll work fur nuthin', still he'll work a durned sight faster and surer with suthin' in view—pay, p'r'aps."

"Golly, Mars'r Jacobs, yer done speak de truf *dat* time, shore," and the negro grinned in anticipation.

"Now, boys, what'll yer give ef he does his duty, whether we find her or not? Fur one, I'll throw in a dozen beaver-skins. Come, boys, shell out!"

They did so, giving liberally of their scanty store of backwoods paraphernalia. One gave a gun, another a foundered pony, a vicious Bronco; another promised a small keg of liquor; another gave a set of beaver-traps; while Walter and her father, in their grief and anxiety, promised all their earthly possessions if she were returned to them unharmed.

After this no time was lost. Eager for the search to begin in earnest, anxious to recover the pet of the settlement, burning to meet and vanquish the supposed gang of robbers, the men, one and all, clamored to be led on.

Cato, who had been grinning from ear to ear during the discussion, now desired to be left to himself, assuring them he would soon find a trail on which to fasten. Then all would be easy.

"Wal, go on!" said Sol, impatiently. "No one's hindering yer."

Cato answered by gliding off into the "bush" at a rapid, sneaking shamble. Eben followed him closely. The negro turned, half angrily:

“Mars’r Eben, ef dis yer niggah’s gwine ter pick out de trail, he must be left ter hisself, shore. Kain’t work when any pusson’s ’round.”

“I’ve got orders ter foller yer,” answered the young man.

Cato dropped his hands to his sides.

“Wal, den, dis yer niggah’s done give up de job, fo’ shore. Kain’t do nuthin’ while pusson’s round tramping up de ground. It must be cl’ar.”

The young man laid his hand significantly on his gun.

“Go on!” he sternly commanded.

“Golly, Mars’r Eben! yer don’t shoot dis yer niggah?”

“You bet I will ef yer don’t dust around lively. Time’s scarce; move on!”

“Dat I will; dat I will!” surlily answered Cato. “Mars’r Eben, dis niggah done go on. Call ’em all ’long! brung de hull pack! skreech an’ yell all yer want! it don’t make no difference ter Cato!”

“You threaten, do yer, yer black rascal? Well, this I’ll say: ef yer play us false, watch out fur a bullet.”

“Golly, Mars’r Eben! dis chile nebber cheats. Fo’ shore I find um trail berry soon.”

“Well, what d’ye stand there for? Curse yer, why don’t yer go on?”

“Move on! Move on!” came in a high, warning voice close by, in the opposite direction from where the party were grouped, watching their movements. It proceeded from a dense thicket near at hand.

“Hullo! who said that?” asked Eben, in surprise. The negro turned yellow, and his teeth chattered with fear. He was thoroughly alarmed.

“Golly, Mars’r Eben!” he stammered, staring toward the thicket. “Did yer hear dat?”

“Of course I heard it! what was it?”

“Oh, golly, mars’r! dis chile’s dead an’ done buried.”

“It was a man’s voice. I will go and see who it is.”

The negro stopped him as he was moving away, grasping him firmly by the arm.

“Don’t go, mars’r; stay heah! Dat am de Obeah man.”

“Pshaw!”

“Yas, mars’r, I’s done offen heerd um. Obeah man no like ter be pestered. Mars’r Eben, yer’s done gone dead ef yer goes thar.”

“Let me go! take your hand off! ef ye air afeard I’m not. I’m goin’ ter see who ’tis.”

He shook the negro off, and, followed by the party, who hearing the voice had drawn near, plunged into the thicket, save Jeffries, who, with his superstitions revived, stayed behind. Walter in his frantic zeal was first. Darting into the thick “bush” he forced his way through the matted hazel bushes, eyeing vigilantly every twig. The rest dispersed themselves through the adjoining thickets and he was left to himself. Hearing a rustle close by he sprung toward it and imagined he caught a sudden glimpse of a misshapen form swiftly retreating.

The form was white as snow and was that, apparently, of a hunchback. For a moment only was it visible, then it vanished, and a horrible, low, hollow chuckle rung mockingly out. He darted after in close pursuit, but was brought to a stand by a matted grape-vine, which stood an impenetrable barrier directly in his path. Knowing from experience he could not penetrate it he was forced to retreat and take a circuitous path around it. He was very much surprised, for the figure had glided through as easily as if he had been a snake.

He was some minutes in returning to it, and when he got there he was satisfied that hot pursuit would be in vain; he must fasten on the trail. Being familiar with this art, he stood perfectly still and peered at the ground. It was soft, and his own foot-marks were distinctly visible, but they were the only ones. But he went down on his knees and crept about, earnestly watching for any indentation which might lead to the discovery of the trail. But his search was in vain—no other beside his footsteps marred the earth.

Then he examined the adjacent twigs and bushes to see if they were disturbed in any manner by his passage. Then he examined the grape-vine. Neither were barked or bruised in any way and had not been touched. According to their evidence (at any time or place reliable) no one had passed by.

Now he was indeed surprised. He had, with his own eyes, seen the hunchback disappear through the vines. He had heard him chuckle mockingly, and he remarked the sound was most hideous and unearthly. Whoever he was, he was most sly and foxy, and had left no trail. He was, ere this, entirely beyond his reach.

For a moment, a feeling of evil came over him. Here he was in Dead-Man's Forest, in its gloomy depths. He had seen, he knew not what; he had heard it mock him derisively; he was opposed by a strange, invisible foe; and he was somewhat alarmed, and greatly astonished, at its mysterious disappearance. But, he was not one to stand and wonder at marvelous things; he was a young man of great energy, and almost distracted with grief, was impatient at delay and in a hot fever to go on. He raised his voice and called to Cato; *he* would surely find a trail.

"Cato! oh, Cato!"

No answer. He could hear at a little distance the rustle of bushes and the breaking of twigs; like himself, his comrades were ferreting about in pursuit of the strange intruder. Now and then, one would exclaim suddenly, then relax into silence; then a low whisper would reach his ears from an ardent pair close by.

"Cato! where are you?"

An owl close by, awakened from his midday nap by the unusual clamor, screamed and laughed:

"Hoot, hoo! who, who—who *are* you?"

"Confound the bird! I can't hear for his cursed noise. Cato! oh, Cato!"

"Ha! hoo! hum! Polly cook for we all, who cooks for you all?" screamed the owl.

To one bred in a city the noise would have sounded like a person speaking the above words with a mouth full of pebbles; but he was acquainted with the sound and was incensed at the uproar.

"Cato, come here, you are wanted; here is 'sign.'"

"Who's that callin'?" asked some one close by.

"Walt Ridgely. I want Cato."

The man took up the cry, and hallooed:

"Come hyar, ye blasted nigger; ye'r' *dee*-sired."

But no answer came. Walter, incensed, made his way back to the glade where they were standing when the cry was heard. When he got there he found it deserted. Thinking the negro was away on a scout, he hallooed to the searching men to bring him back. They did so, calling loudly. But no answering halloo was

heard.

The frontiersmen, thinking an important discovery had been made, came back, and soon all were re-assembled, plying Walter with questions. He related the occurrence, and their faculties aroused, part of them went away into the woods to recover the missing negro, leaving the father and lover well-nigh distracted at the delay.

In half an hour (which seemed an age to the latter) they all came back, vowing vengeance; the negro had deserted. Brought to a stand-still, they cursed and growled some, then entered into a council of war.

Cato, on being left to himself, had taken advantage of the moment, and sped away at full speed toward Shadow Swamp, distant about three miles. Arriving there, he gave his own peculiar whistle for the captain, who soon appeared on the edge of the island.

The negro signaled him to cross. The captain disappeared, then appeared paddling toward him. He drew up by the projecting log on which the negro was standing, and demanded:

“What is wanted?”

“Dey’s trailin’ yer, Mars’r Cap’n; dey’s all in a fiah ’bout yer; dey’s gwine ter cotch yer an’ string yer up.”

“Who? What do you mean?”

“De squatters—dey’s a-huntin’ yer.”

“What! do they suspect?”

“Yas, mars’r—an’ dey ain’t fur wrong, hi, yi!” and he laughed uproariously.

“Hold your tongue, you blockhead! do you want to be discovered? How far are they away?”

“’Bout t’ree mile.”

“Are they on the trail?”

“No, sar, mars’r, no, sar. Dem fellahs kain’t foller trail—psho!” and he turned up his flat nose in contempt.

“Don’t be too sure, Cato; there are sharp men, old Indian-fighters, among them. We must be vigilant—very wary. How came they to suspect me?”

“Dunno, sar. Foun’ ’em red-hot dis mornin’, all bunched up reddy ter foller on

de trail. Trail! dem fellahs! sho!”

“Did you speak to them?”

“Speak to ’em? Golly, Mars’r Cap’n, I’s de fellah dat is leadin’ ’em; I’s de fellah dat am gwine ter fotch ’em right hyar ter der Shadder Swamp!”

The captain whipped out a revolver.

“So you are, are you? Then you live,”—cocking the weapon and aiming it at the negro’s head—“then you live just one half of a second longer.”

The negro threw up his hands in alarm, and yellow with fear, gasped out:

“G-g-golly, Mars’r Cap’n, I’s done—I’s wrong.”

“Wrong? Mind your speech! Ha! don’t you dare to move or I’ll pepper you! Now, you villain, tell me what you mean.”

He was in a dangerous state of mind, as could be told by the ferocious smile he wore. Cato, knowing him well, was alarmed.

“Golly, sar—Mars’r Cap’n; I’s done mistaken, I’s—”

“Out with it!”

“I’s yer—yer—de fr’end ob de cappen’s.”

“None of your gasconade, I won’t hear a word of it! Come, out with your lie!”

“I done mean ter say I’s a-foolin’.”

“Fooling?”

“Yas, sar; I’s de fr’end ob de cap’n.”

“Trifler!”

“Hold on, mars’r; don’t shoot. I’s de enemy ob de fellahs!”

“What fellows?”

“De squatters—de Regumulators! I’s blindin’ ’em.”

“You mean to say you are pulling wool over their eyes?”

“Dat’s it, mars’r—I’s pullin’ hull bales ob wool ober ’em.”

“And that you mean to mislead them? to pretend to trail me, and take them out of the neighborhood?”

“Dat am a fac’! Hi!

“‘Jawbone walkin’, jawbone—’”

“Be quiet. Did they give you any thing for it?”

As he said this he belted the revolver, and Cato grew easier. His eyes gleamed at the prospect of double pay, as he knew the captain would give largely to avoid apprehension.

“Yas, mars’r,” answered the black; “dey done gib me heaps ob t’ings.”

“What?”

“Debblish peart pony, big gun, beaver-traps, farms, houses, lots ob cows—”

“You trifle with me, do you?” demanded the captain, with a wicked smile.

Cato became nervous again.

“No, mars’r, I’s se speaks de truf! De young fellah, Waltah, an’ de ole man, done sed dey’d gib me de hull t’ing—farms, cows, de houses, de hosses—”

“Oh, they are anxious, then; well, I suppose you will endeavor to earn your reward?”

“No, sar! I gits hafe ob it anyhow, an’ de other am on de job.”

“Soho! Well, you are a fine sort of fellow, Cato, to be sure. Won’t you take something?” and he drew a flask from his pocket.

The negro took it eagerly, and put it to his lips, rolling his eyes in ecstasy as the fiery liquid gurgled down his throat. Now the captain could do any thing with him.

“Now, Cato,” he continued, “you have always been a faithful fellow, and have never been sufficiently rewarded. Now if you will mislead them thoroughly—mind, *thoroughly*—I will give you, not foolish weapons, or land which you will never use, but money—yellow money.”

Cato’s eyes rolled. The captain went on:

“How would you like a hundred dollars, Cato—a hundred yellow dollars? You will be rich, Cato.”

“Golly, Mars’r Cap’n! whew! one hun’ud dollars! golly, sar, I’s se do it right good fur dat much. Hi! den Cato am gwine back inter ole Missip’, ‘a berry rich niggah.’”

“I am glad you are satisfied. It is indeed an immense sum—very large. But, Fink is calling me—I must go. Now, just do your duty by me and you will get your money and be a rich man. Now off with you!”

He waved his hand, and Cato, grinning with delight, scudded away at full speed, very unlike his usual lazy pace. Downing saw him vanish in a thick “brush,” then embarked in the “dug-out” and paddled back to the island.

CHAPTER VII.

A TERRIBLE TREE.

Various and many were the threats of the settlers when Cato was not to be found, but they were eclipsed by the settled determination of Walter and Jeffries, who resolved to make him pay dearly for his fickleness and desertion when they met him. And no wonder they were incensed at his conduct. Aside from the delay, which might prove serious, and which was provoking, the thought that this very moment Katie might be suffering terrible evils, was one of anguish to the two who loved her so fondly.

Of the two griefs, Walter's was the greatest and hardest to bear. While the father was stricken and stupefied by the blow, and was in a semi-stupor, Walter was kept nervously strung to the highest tension by a thousand surmises, suspicions and fears. He well knew, from personal knowledge, Downing's impulsive and evil character; he well knew, by his actions the night before, that he was very hot-blooded, and plethoric with sinful passions; and were Katie, as everybody strongly suspected, in his power, the worst might happen.

It was also strongly suspected that this gay, handsome Danforth was in league with a band of bandits. Although the country was new and sparsely settled, although the squatters were generally poor and without money of any kind, and so far from genuine civilization, one would think a band of robbers was an absurdly superfluous thing. But it was not so. Across Arkansas, and right on the brink of Shadow Swamp, and bisecting Dead-Man's Forest, ran what was then known as the "Arkansas trail," the great wilderness thoroughfare (?) from the Mid-Western States to Mexico. It has long since been abandoned, and is now almost unknown; but along its serpentine course many murders have been committed, many robberies and dastardly deeds, of which the world will never know.

Men laden with wealth—the hard-earned savings of many hard and dangerous weeks' work—men growing lighter-hearted and merrier at every step, had left sunny Mexico with enough to enjoy forever, and were nearing sweet home. Perhaps they had been harassed on the plains by hostile savages; perchance they had suffered the direful pangs of hunger and thirst in the wilderness, and had stared death in the face and had warded him off many times; but of every ten

who entered Dead-Man's Forest, within the confines of civilization, at least seven *never came out on the other side*.

No wonder the existence of a robber band was suspected; no wonder handsome Charles Danforth, doing nothing else than roaming in the gloomy forest, was suspected of conspiring with it; and what wonder that sweet Katie, who had rejected him the night before, should be in his toils?

And as Walter thought of these dark things, his blood surged and he felt the terrible pangs of the sickness of strength arising within him. Fear rolled on fear, and festered and grew sore; and his pangs were not a whit alleviated by the delay.

But it was of short duration. A hasty council was formed, questions were made and answered, the elders gave their sage advice, and they soon started off, with deadly rage hob-nobbing with fear.

Now Sol Jacobs was to be the bloodhound, *i. e.*, the trailer. Once he had been famous for his skill in the high and subtle art, but he had not followed a trail for years. He was old, but still strong and spirited, and in the shooting-matches always carried off the prize. His old energy still remained staunch and his eyes were as keen as ever.

They started toward—where? They did not know. Then they went to the border of the forest, and began to look for the trail, the party dispersing for the purpose. They had not long to search, for they were singularly fortunate. They had not been scattered above five minutes when an exclamation was heard from Sol, who was bending and looking intently at something, being only a few rods from the cabin of Hans Winkler.

They hurried to the spot. Sol pointed to a set of tracks in some moist ground. One was that of a small boot, neatly shaped; the other that of a coarse shoe, large and flat. Both were pointing in the same direction—toward the forest, and by them he judged the parties must have been moving rapidly.

“Wal, boys,” said Sol, “ef I ain’t mistaken, hyar’s the trail.”

“How do yer know that?” inquired a suspicious settler. “It mout not be the one we’re after.”

“Wal, but yer see it air!” returned Sol, a trifle nettled. “Bekase why? why thar’s only one man in the settlement that wears such a boot, and he is that Danforth. See, it’s trim and neat—a store boot. All ye fellers wears coarse ones, or rather moccasins. Every feller hyar knows that boot-mark, don’t yer? And then t’other;

that thar is bigger and flatter—more like some of yer all's. I'm cussed ef I know who it b'longs ter—darn me ef I hain't. I don't believe thar's a man in the whole settlement that's got a shoe like that. Wal, it makes nary difference—Danforth's the man we're after, and Danforth's the man we'll find, whether he's guilty or not guilty. Them yer sentiments, boys?"

"You bet! Ay, ay! go on!" and many others were the exclamations by which he was answered.

"Yer all hyar?" he asked, looking over his followers.

"All hyar!"

"How many air ye?"

"Fifteen."

"Fifteen brave, stout men. Wal, yer all ready? Come on! foller clost, boys; keep yer eyes open, yer mouths shet, and don't tramp on the trail! Hyar we go after little Katie!"

He started off at a round pace with the most gigantic strides, bending down to see the trail, and keeping his gun at a trail.

The others followed, observing his instructions, and fuming to recover Katie. Hettie, from her position in the block-house, saw them emerge from the forest, gather round Sol, and then start away rapidly and disappear in the wood. She sighed.

"Ah!" she sorrowfully murmured, "my darling, I hope you will come to no harm."

Into the forest they plunged, just after midday, swiftly pursuing an open trail. On they went, stealing under drooping trees, striking out across a glade, slinking into a dense coppice, out again with a pause and a listen, then on, following the plain trail. Never deviating, never halting, always wary and watchful, they went on; and the ghostly trees nodded, the sun shone redly down, and all was quiet in Dead-Man's Forest.

Hallo! who is talking? who is crying aloud when all should be still? who speaks? Hallo!

A voice, borne by the wind, floated up and into the air, speaking only a few, very few words; but they were full of strange meaning. The pursuers did not hear it, neither did any one else—only the trees in Dead-Man's Forest. But it spoke,

notwithstanding.

Cato was on his way to meet the party, and was running quite rapidly, when he entered a small glade, one of the many that embellished the gloomy old wood. He drew back out of sight, directly, and ensconced himself under a bush.

What had he seen?—nothing. Had he heard any noise to alarm him?—no. Had he received any warning about this particular spot?—no. Then why did he fear to emerge into the glade? Why did he hide under the bush?

He could not tell. The moment he had set his foot into the glade a large tree in the center of it attracted his attention; a feeling of fear came over him. Nay, more—a feeling of positive terror. He was absolutely afraid to enter it.

Now, there was nothing remarkable about that tree—it was a common oak, rather devoid of foliage. No man could hide in its top—a coon would have been discovered by a greenhorn if he had trusted to its shelter. Its trunk was of the size of a man's body, not large enough to shelter a large man; no one could hide behind it without rolling himself into a ball. Neither had the tree that awkward appendage of a rope hanging pendent from a dead limb—nor the more awkward habit of staring a man in the face as some trees do, as if they were saying:

“Avoid me! this is a weird, ghostly spot!”

It was a common tree—nothing more.

He watched it awhile uneasily, then softly arose, and intending to skulk around the glade, started stealthily on. But before he had half completed the circuit, a faint voice, seemingly from a great distance, said:

“Stop!”

He did so, in a cold sweat, and shaking from head to foot. His eyes were fixed on the tree as if fascinated. What was the matter with the tree?

His limbs refused to move as he essayed to flee. His eyes rolled in their sockets and icy sweat poured from him. Was he under a strange influence?

With a superhuman effort he gathered strength, and wrenching his eyes from the tree, started off on a dead run.

“Stop!”

He did so, nearly ready to faint with terror. Half fainting, his ignorant, superstitious mind conjured up myriads of ghastly, grotesque and fantastic objects, which floated before his eyes. Imps rode fantastic steeds snorting fire,

blue as—as alcohol; blue serpents entwined their horrible folds before him; pale specters with awful pale-blue countenances, grimly grinned at him; a conflagration of lurid blue raged and roared around him; new, strange, and terrible animals, charged and recharged upon him, never striking, but coming fearfully near; and above all, there stood the tree, now blue as all the rest; blue, blue, blue.

A clamor, as if of ten thousand giants harshly wrangling, surged in his ears, rivaling the throb of his heart. A fever took possession of him and made his torment, if possible, worse. He strove to flee—he could not. He strained to shriek, but strove in vain—he was a lost man.

And now a dog, invisible, drew near. He could hear him come slowly on, panting. He remembered the day was hot—so undoubtedly was the dog. Dogs always pant and loll when heated; hear him pant, pant, pant.

He sunk to the ground in despair and he could see the tree burning, now, with a blue fire which waved fantastically. By degrees the flames communicated with other trees; more demons appeared; terrific giants drew near and scowled down upon him; and still nearer drew the dog—pant, pant, pant.

“Help! help!” he shrieked in agony. “Help!” But the wind still moaned, the fire waved and augmented, the tree loomed up, and the dog drew nearer—pant, pant.

Was it resurrection day? was Dead-Man’s Forest giving up its dead? were the ghostly victims, long since immortal, crowding around about him, demanding his blood?

“Help! help!”

The dog drew nearer, and he could feel his hot breath upon his face and hear the dreadful pant. Oh, God! would no one come?

He started half-way up, all on fire. Was not that an answering halloo? or was it the voice which spoke so strangely in the forest?

He had not much time to spare—the horrible dog came nearer with his hot and craving pant—pant, pant. Once more he screamed for help until his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth.

“Help! help!”

Ha! that was surely an answer—a halloo. And voices too—voices he knew. Footsteps hurriedly approached, the fires suddenly ceased, and he could hear the dog panting far away. Some one’s hand was laid on his head, a rough voice

sounded, confused sounds rung in his ears, and Cato, the Creeper, was unconscious.

When he awoke he was surrounded by a large party of men, who were regarding him angrily and curiously. He did not recognize them, but, remembering his recent peril, partially arose and looked in search of the tree.

It was nowhere in sight. There was the glade and the towering sycamores standing guard over it; there was the very bush he had concealed himself under; but where was the tree?

“How d’ye feel?” asked one of the rough men, kneeling beside him.

“I dunno, mars’r,” he said, sinking down drowsily and closing his eyes.

“Feel better?”

“Whar’s de dog, mars’r?”

“What dog? thar ain’t no dog with us.”

“Are ye done shore, mars’r?”

“Sartin. Thar ain’t no dog hyar, is thar men?”

Several answered in the negative. Cato feebly raised himself on his elbow and looked up.

He thought he recognized his questioner; he surely had seen him somewhere. And the others too, their faces were familiar. Was he asleep and dreaming? who were they?

“Whar am de fiah—am it all over?”

He heard a low voice remark: “What in thunder is he talkin’ ’bout? darn me ef I don’t think he’s done gone mad.” Then it was raised interrogatively.

“Thar ain’t b’en no dog nor no fire—leastways my peepers don’t see ary sign of any.”

It was a new voice that spoke, and Cato knew it for the voice of Old Sol. Rising on his knees he gazed around on his companions; they were the settlers, gazing at him moodily. He started up and grasped the veteran trailer by his horny hand.

“Golly, Mars’r Jacobs! Cato’s right grad ter see yer heah,” he said, fervently. “Ye kim in der berry time. Cato war a’most gone, mars’r.”

“What was up?” asked the men, pressing about him. “Tell us! did you see the

gal?”

“No, mars’r, Cato done see’d nothin’ ob her,” he answered, mournfully. “But de niggah see’d suthin’ berry much worse—he done see’d Obeah. Oh, Mars’r Jacobs, it was ter’ble—ter’ble.”

“What was it? what was it?” were the impatient demands. Cato peered round fearfully. He was really frightened, they could see, and as he was by no means a coward, they knew that something had happened. Then as if reassured by the presence of so many brave and strong men he told his story. They listened with great attention, and when he was through, many declared their opinion, in a few words.

“Snakes in his shoes—the tree-mens.”

(They all knew he drank immoderately.)

“No, sar, it wasn’t no tree-mens,” he protested, not yet recovered from his fright. “It was too ter’ble—too hor’ble. Mars’r Jacobs, Cato won’t be Creeper berry much longah. I done heerd de voice—fo’ shore I heerd um. ‘Stop!’ it said; an’ for de life ob me dis niggah hadn’t de strength ter move. Dat voice, mars’r, dat voice I heerd; and dis niggah ain’t gwine ter tech whisky ag’in.”

“How did the voice sound? Was it like the one we heard a little while ago?” asked Josh Dunbar.

“Jess the same, mars’r—jess percisely the same,” answered Cato.

“Ha!” cried Sol. “Hyar’s business! now, Martin, stay with Cato—he’s too weak to follow. Stay hyar until we kim back. Come, boys, come; hyar’s ter ketch that voice. It’s suthin’ ter do with leetle Katie, sartin. Come on and cock the black feather!”

He struck on the trail, which had been abandoned at discovering Cato insensible on the ground, and rapidly “loped” off, followed closely by his little army, who were of various opinions regarding Cato’s fright. Some declared with solemn faces and low tones that Dead-Man’s Forest, always considered haunted, was surely so, and by a terrible unknown, and that Cato had been under his influence; while others as stoutly insisted it was the punishment which ungrateful liquor always brings upon his subjects—the delirium tremens. Old Sol, on being interrogated, only shook his head solemnly, and evaded the answer—he had his opinion, but it was for himself alone.

If Walter had not been so grief-stricken and anxious, he would have longed to

find the owner of the voice (if there was one) and would have done so if he had spent weeks in the task, for he had had a glimpse of him once, but a very brief one; but he was now so troubled and frantic he desired only to recover his lost treasure.

Away they went on the broad trail, fully satisfied that in reaching its end not only Downing, but the voice would be found; and they wound in and out among the trees in the grim old forest. They were within a mile of the swamp when Eben, always keen as a ferret, suddenly halted, drew his rifle to his shoulder and fired at some distant object.

“Missed, by thunder!” he angrily cried with a good old-fashioned oath. “Bungler!”

“What was it, Eb?” inquired the men, peering cautiously around ready for an attack.

“The durnedest looking chap I ever saw—a hunchback. He was peeking from behind a tree.”

“Which one?”

“That big cottonwood. Whew; how he *did* scamper.”

“Come on, boys!” shouted Sol, starting off in the direction indicated. “Hyar’s suthin’ wrong. We ken easy find the trail ag’in.”

They followed pell-mell toward the cottonwood, but before they had gone half the distance the same former voice, called out:

“Halloo-o-o!”

They halted short.

“Do-n’t fol-low me. Take the trail to Shadow Swamp. She is there.”

They looked in each other’s faces, uncertain what to do. Suddenly the voice added:

“You can not catch me if you try. Go on to Shadow Swamp.”

When he heard this Sol slowly turned, and without looking back, returned to the trail, followed by the bewildered men.

“It’s no use ter foller him, boys,” he said; “he speaks the truth. Le’s find the trail and go on.”

They did, some grumbling, others alarmed, but all astonished and bewildered, at

Sol's strange conduct. But the sage old veteran knew what he was about.

CHAPTER VIII.

SOMEBODY IS GOING OUT.

The day slowly dragged by as Katie, half-crazed, sat on the low stool in the cabin, and pondered on her cruel fate. Hope seemed a mockery—she knew she was in the power of a most unprincipled villain, one who would halt at no deed, however violent, to gain an end.

Mere death she did not fear—it was the thought that it would nearly craze and ruin her lover, and would bow her father to a premature grave, that gave her anguish.

The most harrowing and painful thoughts harassed her, and she was almost unconscious when the door softly opened, and Downing came softly in.

He barred the door behind him, and folding his arms, regarded her steadily for a moment. He saw she was distressed and bowed by grief, and that she was very faint from the lack of nourishment, which she had not taken for nearly twenty-four hours. Though disliking to see her in this condition (as a man would dislike to see his pet dog lean and gaunt) he still felt a thrill of savage joy. Cruelty was his predominating trait.

“Miss Jeffries,” he said, softly.

She looked up in surprise, as she had not heard him enter. Then seeing who it was she grew pale and looked defiant.

“You will not answer?” he asked, in well assumed mournful reproach. “Miss Jeffries, I have come to give you another opportunity of ridding yourself of this hard life. I did say I would never return; but my ardent love for you has outweighed all feelings of anger or pique. Say, my dear Miss Jeffries, will you make yourself and me happy?”

She flashed on him a glance of exquisite scorn, then burst into wild weeping. He approached, and sinking down on his couch began to pluck a straw to pieces, idly.

“It’s all the same to me,” he said, indifferently, “whether you cry or laugh—at least in your present mood and state. Were you, however, my wife, it would grieve me to see you distressed. I love you ardently, devotedly; but conscious of

my small chance of winning your affection in a fair way, I quell my good and better feelings and resort to foul ones. I am frank, you see.”

She turned her back upon him, and her pale face wore an expression of deep loathing.

Whatever hopes he had cherished were dissipated, his air-castles were demolished and felled to the ground, and chagrined, disappointed, all the malice of his treacherous nature seemed to leap into life.

Stepping to the door and opening it he said with his wicked smile:

“As you will, my bird; if you won’t sing by coaxing or threatening, you will have a dark cover over your cage; you stay here only to starve. Should you, when frantic with hunger and despair, offer to accept my conditions, I will not relent; here you are, and here you stay. Good-by!”

The door closed and was barred, his footsteps grew fainter and died away, and she was alone—this time to certain fate. Though her heart sunk and her brain reeled, yet she did not shrink—she would have died twice over rather than consort with such a fiend.

It was nearly sunset. Creeping to the door, where a wee bright light showed, she put her face close to it and peered out. It was a small chink, and by straining her eyes she could perceive objects at a little distance. In front, at the end of a path cut between a thick growth of willows lay a small craft lying on the bank. Just beyond she could see a small bit of black water. The craft was a “dug-out,” and in the stern was a paddle. Then she guessed where she was. Recollecting the assertion of the captain, that he was in command of a robber band, remembering Dutch Joe’s statements, and by putting several other things together, she made up her mind she was on the island in Shadow Swamp.

Heavens! if she *could* escape! There lay the craft, within a few yards. By reaching it she could paddle to the main land and hide in the forest!—in the gloomy, grim Dead-Man’s Forest!

She pushed the door gently. It moved. She felt it give to her touch, and heard the heavy log grate along the ground. Downing had been careless in fastening it. She drew back with beating heart, and sat on the stool sick with fear lest some one should come, and entering, discover the log’s slight resistance.

Footsteps approached, but they were not Downing’s. His were light and jaunty; these were heavy and slow. She shivered with apprehension lest the person should discover the change of position in the log.

The person was Fink. The captain had ordered him to stand guard over the cabin until relieved, his post to be at the rear of the building as the wall was weak on that side. So he stalked away toward it, just as the sun was setting.

She need not have been alarmed, for the second officer merely tramped around several times, then sat down at the rear.

Slowly the sun sunk below the tree-tops of the haunted forest; slowly the shades of the damp night stole on; and the watcher in the cabin waited for night, trembling.

Darkness came at length, black and damp. There had been a little loud laughter and coarse merriment at the other cabin just at sunset; now all was still. She heard some one come toward the rear of the cabin and speak to Fink. It was Bob Griffith, the scout.

“Come ter relieve yer, leftenant. How’s all inside?”

“Hunky. But *she* won’t last long.”

“Ay? How’s that?”

“She don’t git any thing ter nibble on.”

“So? Capt’in’s playin’ the game fine.”

“You bet! No use buckin’ ag’in’ him. Who’s after you on the watch?”

“Downing. From midnight till mornin’.”

Fink stalked away, and Griffith sat leaning against the cabin. Katie could hear him breathe, and draw at his everlasting pipe.

It was dark now, very dark. He arose, knocked the ashes from his pipe, whistled a bar of an old familiar hymn, and slowly sauntered round the cabin.

“God pity the gal!” he muttered. “Ay, fur thar’s no pity hyar for her. She’ll hev a sad life or death—it don’t make much odds which it is. I’ll keep my hand off *her*—poor gal!”

Sauntering around the house as he said this, he heard a faint sigh inside; a sigh long-drawn and sad.

“She heerd me,” he muttered. “Poor gal!”

He went back to his station, and, lighting his pipe, leaned his back up against the log walls; new and strange feelings arose within him, and he was—

Hist! was not that a light step inside? Was not that the sound of the door moving? Was some one coming in or going out? Yes; there was some one going out.

“Durn me ef I don’t feel cheap ter-night, helpin’ keep a nice gal close shet up ter be treated God knows how by the Cap’n! It’s too bad—too bad!”

He softly rose and took a step or two toward the door; he heard a noise there. He was aware that Downing was in the brown cabin asleep; he well knew no other durst venture to the white one at this time; what was up? He stooped and listened. There was a faint rustling as if of the dress of a female, and a steady grating was kept up on the hard ground near the door. He peeped at the log. It was slowly moving, propelled by an invisible force.

As he looked at the log, a fire came in his gray, cool eye, and he softly went back to his seat and sat down quietly.

“Poor, pooty gal! God bless her!”

And now a quite perceivable creak came to his ears, but he did not appear to notice it. He smoked on with senses on the alert. Then came a moment of silence.

Then a quick “swish.” He knew the sound. Then rapid footsteps, very light and airy; and, after a moment, dead silence. The guard peered round the corner. Away in the darkness he could see a dusky form at the boat-landing; some one was down there. Somebody was tampering with the craft, too; he heard a paddle drop across the gunwale.

“It’s none o’ my business!” he shortly declared. “I ain’t here to watch the canoe. I’m here to watch the shanty.”

Bob listened for some time like a chased coon, with his ear in the air and his eyes shining cunningly. Then he heard, very faintly, some one climb up the huge log on the opposite side of the water. Then he went down to the shore, on the side of the island furthest from the landing. Drawing a revolver, he placed his hat on the ground, and fired. The ball took out a wee piece of the crown. Then he fired again and hallooed for help.

“Turn out! turn out!” he yelled. “Thar’s inimies on the island.”

He sprung into the water and splashed around noisily, firing twice in rapid succession. He could hear the night watch at the brown cabin cry, “Turn out! turn out!” and he could hear him coming down at a rapid run.

“This way, Bill!” he cried, running out of the water; “this way!”

In a few moments the whole robber force stood grouped around Griffith.

He told them he had been shot at, and showed the hole in his hat; he told them a foe was on the island. A search immediately began, and Downing darted toward the cabin.

The door was open. Wild with apprehension he struck a light and peered into the cabin.

It was deserted!

He went down to the boat landing, running as he never ran before. When he got there he found the boat was gone. His bird had flown!

“Balked! fooled!” he hissed, in rage. “Gone, gone, gone!”

“Ha! ha! ha!” rung out a voice from the mainland. “Gone, gone, gone! ha! ha! ha!”

He shuddered; then sat down on the ground, scared, frightened. For once, Captain Downing was afraid of the darkness.

It was very dark, and the ghostly echoes of that cursed voice seemed as if they would never die away. Sick with rage and disappointment, with an icy sweat on his forehead, he staggered back to the cabin. HE HAD RECOGNIZED THE VOICE!

CHAPTER IX.

THE CORPSE OF AN HONEST MAN.

The next morning dawned bright and fair, and the sun was ushered to the world by the merry carol of thousands of feathered songsters. Brightly it dawned upon the settlement on the hill; benignly on the merry, sparkling river; pleasantly over the valley; but never did it fall upon a busier little world than on Dead-Man's Forest.

Busier?—scarcely. On the edge of the swamp lake were a dozen or more men, peering over at the silent island; angry looks they gave; in the island were the same (almost) number of men, equally reckless and bold, but far more wary and wicked. The dug-out in which Katie had escaped still lay where she had left it; and much Cato (who had rejoined the pursuers) marveled. He knew that something was wrong, else it would have been moored to the island, out of sight; and his eyes, familiar with the island, noted something was wrong there, too.

Usually a faint, blue wreath of smoke curled up from it, but now there was none. It was the hour for the matin meal, too.

Could they have left the island entirely—have disorganized and deserted the old rendezvous? That would account for the presence of the canoe on this side. If so, then his reward was gone, and his easy, vagabond life also, for he should have to hunt, fish and work for the settlers.

This idea was so distasteful to him that he grinned in vexation, and he resolved to “blow the hull t’ing” should it cost him his neck, for he knew the men would be enraged at his part in the abduction. And he had nearly done so when the words of a former speech of Downing's came to his obtuse memory, “Think twice before you shoot once, and then don't go off at half-cock.”

Cato the Creeper was a prodigy at pursuing a trail, but he was no thinker, and quite too apt to follow every impulse. So, you see, this little bit of memory was something wonderful. He profited by it.

Noticing a fish-hawk warily wheeling above the slimy black pond, he stepped out prominently upon the log where the trail ended, and gave a shrill cry, an exact imitation of that of the hawk. The bird did not notice it; such birds never do, and Cato, far wiser than *sage* men of nature, knew it.

But in a few moments another cry, an answer, came from the enchanted, dark-bordered island, low, long, and mournful. Then Cato knew they were still there, that his party was under sharp inspection at that moment, and that something was wrong.

It was well he kept his sable face immovable, for Sol, watching him, heard the answer and saw no corresponding fish-hawk, except that above the lake. However, he might be perched upon some tree on the island. But the sagacious old veteran kept his peace, his counsel, and his eye—on the negro.

“Ef I ain’t fooled, that thar island air what is called Shadder Swamp Island, aint it, Cato?” asked a young man.

“Dat’s de island,” tersely answered Cato.

“What’s this ’ere boat, Cato?” inquired the chief, eying him keenly.

“Dat, Mars’r Jacobs? dat am what am called de dug-out.”

“Wal, yer fool, don’t yer s’pose I know what a dug-out air? I’ve made more of ’em than yer black skin is years old. But I want ter know what it’s doin’ hyar, and who it belongs ter?”

“Mars’r Jacobs, dis niggah’s de igneramus on de subjec’,” he replied, idly tossing bits of sticks into the black water.

“How in thunder, then, did ye know the sign, the signal for them fellers over there?” indicating the island with his thumb.

“Wha—wha—golly, Mars’r Jacobs! am dey ober dare?” stuttered the negro, in perfect astonishment.

“You bet they air! and you giv ’em a signal,” declared Sol, sternly. The negro never lost his self-possession.

“Signal! golly, Mars’r Jacobs, I’s de fr’end ob de gang.”

“What gang? d’ye call them a gang? dum me ef it ain’t sootable.”

Walter here interposed. “For God’s sake, let us be going! where is the trail? have you lost it? Oh, heaven! this delay!”

“Yes, yes; we’ll all go on,” repeated the afflicted and stupefied parent, lighting up a moment. “We’ll all keep on.”

Old Sol glanced at them pityingly, then looked at the trail; they had reached its termination.

“Come, my boy, cheer up. We’ll hev her soon, you bet! we *will* go on. Hyar’s the eend of the trail, right hyar on this log. Thar’s a canoe—it must go somewhar. We’ll jump in, as many as kin. Air ye all ready, boys?”

“All ready! lead on!”

“All right; jump in, Cato, you’re the pilot.”

But Cato drew back, and leaped from the log, and stood there with an alarmed and perplexed face, looking now to the island, then back to Sol.

“Come; none of yer foolin’! jump in!”

Sol saw his perplexity and smelt a rat. The negro was in a quandary. If he went across with the men, the robbers, as a matter of course, would think he had turned traitor, and he would be shot dead before they had made half the passage. The prospect of being slaughtered by a sudden and unseen bullet was too glaring for him to face—he would rebel. On the other hand, he knew Sol suspected him of treachery, and would enforce his command. If he refused to enter the canoe and fled, he would be brought to a sudden drop by the lightning hand and murderous aim of the ex-Indian-fighter. What could he do? he was in a bad dilemma.

The men looked at him, some in surprise, others in wonder, and the rest, the majority, surlily. He felt that the eyes of both bands were upon him, and that both would kill him in a second if treacherous. He was betwixt two very slippery and bad stools, one of which would be sure to slip. He knew his danger and perceived his only chance—to parley.

“Now, Mars’r Jacobs, an’ de rest ob de berry kind and good mars’rs—don’t fo’ce de pore niggah wha’ nebber done ye harm, ter sich a ter’ble t’ing. Mars’rs, I’s a brack man—I’s one ob de berry best an’ de berry true ob yer fr’ends. I’s de fr’end ob de mars’rs.”

“What is all this tomfoolery?” hastily asked Walter, turning to go on. “Come; do as he tells you, immediately!”

“Oh, Mars’r Waltah, don’t force de pore niggah. Mars’r Waltah—dar’s death ober dar—fo’ God, dar am. Obeah, Mars’r Waltah—dar’s hisn’s place. I’s done b’en ober dar onc’t, mars’r, only onc’t. But dis chile nebber go ag’in. Fur de place am ha’nted, mars’r, by de mos’ ter’ble gosses, an’ ef dis chile done fo’ced ter go, he nebber come back a niggah, sure. Now, don’t, mars’rs—kind an’ berry good mars’rs!”

“Ghosts?” exclaimed several of the most superstitious. Cato saw his chance and doubled the dose. Sinking his voice to a shrill whisper he drew near the log, and glancing fearfully over at the island, muttered:

“Dis am de Forest ob de Dead Man—de man dat runs in de woods ob nights. Mars’rs, I’s done see’d him—I’s done heerd his’n voice. An’ he libs ober yender, an’ he don’ like fur no one ter pester him. He berry mad, mars’rs, w’en he am pestered, an’ he don’ want no one ter set dare foot on de island. He hates de brack man an’ he done swear he’d kill um. Oh, for de lub ob ebery t’ing, mars’rs, don’ send de pore niggah ober dare.”

Several looked at Sol, half-believing the negro’s assertions. That nettled the old veteran, and he thundered out:

“Air ye sech durned fools ter b’lieve his trash? I tell ye thar’s game over thar—*thar’s* whar we’ll find suthin’. Didn’t ye hear the voice, yesterday evening? Ef yer b’lieve in sperrits, what more can ye want? It told us ter come hyar, and we air goin’ over to that island with the nigger, ef it teks a leg from each man. Now, you mule, get in the canoe afore I make you!”

The negro trembled like an aspen and rolled out some unintelligible phrases, but Sol seized him and thrust him into the dug-out, then sprung in after him. There was room for four more, and these places he gave to Eben, Walter, Dunbar, and a tough, bold, squarely-built young fellow, Hettie’s brother—Jack Dunbar.

Ordering them to place their weapons in readiness he shoved off with the paddle.

“Now, yer fellows,” addressing the men on shore, “ef we’re fired on, jest blaze away at the inimy’s smoke, and watch out for a chance at knockin’ some one over. I b’lieve thar’s robbers over thar. Now keep well peeled!”

He submerged the paddle and began to force his way through the weeds, the water-lilies, and the *debris* of dismantled, water-soaked limbs and boughs, old and ugly snags, and rotten slime. It was a difficult job. There was a channel, or rather path, but it was known and noticeable only to the robbers and Cato. The latter was glad Sol did not enter it, for he desired to be as long as was possible in making the passage. But chattering with fear, and expecting every second to feel the pang of a robber bullet in his vitals, he sat in the stern, alternately groaning and blaspheming, while Sol paddled on, the others kept in readiness for an attack, and the men on shore were covering the island with their shining gun-barrels.

At last, after tedious and exasperating labor, they left the thick impediments

behind, and bowled away in comparatively open water, half-way across. Still no shot from the silent willows, still no defiance shouted, still all was quiet.

They skirted around the fringe of willows until they found the regular landing-place of the robbers. Seeing it, Sol whistled.

“By Judas!” he declared, using his strongest oath, “hyar’s a reg’lar, beaten trail leading up from the water. Now I *know* thar’s been —— ter pay in these ’ere woods. Ef this air don’t say thar’s a band of rascals hyar, I’m a skunk. Look out, boys, look out, and mind yer eye!”

The dug-out, propelled by a few vigorous strokes, shot up to the landing, while Sol abandoned his paddle and took up his gun. The negro, he saw, was wild with nervous fear. His lips were of a dull, gray, leaden hue, and worked convulsively; his cheeks were sucked in; his ears went back and forth like those of a mule—at any other time a most ludicrous spectacle; while his eyes rolled and dilated, eagerly peering at the willows; Cato the Creeper was very alarmed and excited.

The boat touched the bank, and the occupants, with splendid nerve and coolness, kept their seats, with presented weapons, while the negro beat the air with his hands like a helpless idiot. But still the willows nodded and waved in the gentle breeze, still the men on shore covered them, and still there was no noise, no motion.

Sol rose and stepped ashore, then sinking on his knees beckoned the others to follow. They did so, and soon were all ashore, in a group, with the frightened negro in their midst, behind their bodies for protection.

Several minutes passed in silence, then as all was still, Sol ordered Cato to go back for more men. The negro, somewhat cooler, and thinking to escape when he reached the other shore, gladly availed himself of the opportunity, and getting into the canoe, paddled lustily away. He took the channel this time and was near the shore, congratulating himself upon his lucky escape, when the voice of Sol came to his ears like a knell:

“Bring Cato back with you, boys—don’t let him run off!”

So the negro was forced to sit in the boat while its human cargo was being loaded, though seized again with terror.

The boat was filled, and Cato was about to paddle slowly away when a voice rung out, where they knew not, only it was quite near.

“You had better go back!”

Away in the woods went the echoes, resounding from tree to tree. "Go back!"

Cato dropped his paddle with a yell; the others sprung to their feet, nearly upsetting the dug-out, and looked around. The other two parties heard the voice and were gazing round in surprise. But Cato's fear was strong and violent, and he trembled; for the voice was the same magnetic, terrible voice he had heard at the Tree.

"Did ye hear that?" asked Jeffries, in a whisper. "Say, did ye?"

It was the same he heard the evening by Hans Winkler's cabin. It had followed him wherever he had gone, at intervals ringing out its wild cry. What was it?

Cato landed the party, then went back for the few remaining. Then all assembled on the shore, on the border of the robber stronghold.

"Now, boys," said Sol, "jest hyar's the place whar them robbers air, I'll bet money. P'rhaps they're watchin' us right now. Wal, boys, I reckon leetle Katie's hyar, an' we'd better skulk along toward the middle of the island."

They crept stealthily on from willow to willow, Sol keeping the reluctant black before him. Suddenly one of the party drew back, with an exclamation, and pointed toward a distant object. Peeping through the saplings, they saw an open space cleared and stumpy. Almost in the center were two large cabins, one of a light color, the other dark. A man with a pale face was leaning in the doorway of the first building, apparently in a brown study, with a pipe in his mouth, evidently unlighted.

They watched the quiet scene before them for some little time; then Sol whispered:

"Thar's the robber den; thar is a band of robbers, sartain."

"Ay, but where are they?" asked Walter. "Only one man is visible."

"Off on a devilish trip, no doubt; it's durn quiet thar—just like the grave, an' thet chap stands thar like a statoo. What in thunder makes all so quiet?"

"Pop," whispered Eben, "p'r'aps thar's a scheme a-workin'. Mebbe thar's a dozen men tucked away in this here fringe of willows, awaitin' fur us ter rush out; then they'll jest mor'n pepper us."

"Mebbe. Take two or three along with yer, and beat the bushes. Mind yer eye, now."

Eben selected three sturdy friends, and they crept and skulked the entire circuit

of the island, one party going to the right, the other to the left. They met on the opposite side, having seen nothing. Then they hurried back to the leader. He heard their story, cocked his gun, and said:

“Now thar’s got ter be a charge, and we’ll take ’em by surprise. When I shout and run, follow like wild-cats, but hold your loads. Now!”

He took a quick, true aim at the man, fired, and sprung out into the clearing, followed by the rest. Up the narrow path they dashed, ready to meet and vanquish their foe. To their surprise the sentinel did not fall nor move, neither did he raise his head, but still leaned in the door with his head down.

They rushed toward the cabin and were nearly there when their eyes beheld a sight which caused them to stop in their tracks, astonished.

They saw the cabins were empty; they knew no living robber was on the island; but what startled them more was that the mysterious man was already dead.

Dead! Stiff and cold, with a gashed throat, numberless knife-wounds in his body, with his clothing cut and torn—with a bullet-hole in his forehead, there stood Griffith the scout, propped against the door. He had not died without a struggle, they could see, as there were indications of extreme violence. Griffith was dead!

They searched the cabins through and through, but beyond some very scanty, poor furniture they were entirely empty. They were as far from Katie as ever, and Walter was frantic.

Suddenly, as they stood there in the bright morning sunlight, they heard a voice, seemingly far away in the forest, utter four words. The tone was singularly fierce and commanding, and they all recognized it as the Voice.

“Go back! go back!”

Immediately it was followed by a piercing scream from the pond near the ferry. This was followed by another, wilder and shriller, and in the unmistakable tones of the negro. With one accord they rushed down to the landing.

There they saw Cato paddling for dear life toward them from the center of the lake. His manner was that of one in extreme terror, and with rolling eyes and open mouth he worked with might and main. He was flying from some pursuer, no doubt, as he frequently glanced back nervously. It did not take him long to reach the bank, and as the bow of the craft touched the land, he sprung out and stood regarding the other shore, all on fire.

“What is it, Cato? What’s the matter?” and many others were the questions put

to him. He did not at once answer, but, clasping his hands, stood trembling. At length he spoke:

“Oh, mars’rs, sech a ter’ble sight! Oh, ob all de sights dis niggah eber see’d, dat was de wust. Oh, mars’rs, dar’s tr’uble comin’, tr’uble comin’! Dead-Man’s Forest am alibe with sperrits.”

“Come! out with it!” commanded Sol. “Ef thar’s any thing wrong we ought ter know it. It mout be of use ter us.”

“Oh, sar, dare was de biggest man—de daddy ob de world, shore. He had a big bunch on his back—”

“The hunchback!” interrupted Walter.

“Did yer see him, Walt?”

“Yes. But let him go on.”

“And de bunch on his back, an’ de fire a-comin’ out’n his head, and de smoke a-comin’ from his hands, an’ de big white eyes, an’ de white clo’s—oh, mars’r, dis niggah’s in de ground all cobered up.”

“Did he speak?” asked Jeffries, eagerly.

“Oh, sar, dat he did. He stretch an arm out with de smoke a-comin’ from it, an’ he sed, ‘Go back! go back!’ an’ dis niggah done went.”

“The same!” said Jeffries. They turned to him.

“What! did you see it too?” He related the events of the night before the abduction, when he heard the voice in the willows.

Then Walter told of his vain attempt to capture him. They all had heard him, and two had seen him. Curiosity and wonder grew to a great hight, and the fact that Cato had been trying to escape when the apparition appeared to him, was forgotten. Sol brought his gun down with a ring.

“Now, boys,” he said, “thar’s suthin’ up. Ever sence we’ve b’en arter the gal that voice has b’en after us all. Hyar’s the robber den with a dead man in it. Katie’s nowhar ter be found, nyther the feller we think tuk her off. This yar den has b’en abandoned right lately, and *I* think thar’s robbers and Katie nigh. Now, what have we got toward findin’ her? Nothin’. But, we’ve got ter find her, and she hain’t hyar on this island. So she must be off it. Wal, le’s go back an’ find her. Come on.”

“We’ll tear up Dead-Man’s Forest, but we find her,” shouted the men as they crowded into the boat.

Ten minutes later the island was bare. Bare? no. For in a few moments a man stood in the door of the cabin. Another one appeared; another yet; and in five minutes Captain Downing’s villainous band laughed and talked in front of the cabin. Where had they been concealed?

CHAPTER X.

A GLAD MEETING SUDDENLY INTERRUPTED.

When Katie stepped out of the dug-out on the main-land, she climbed upon the huge log, and looked around. All about her was darkness and grim silence. Close by, a tall sycamore, erect and lofty, raised its head above the forest and waved in the damp night air. Underbrush grew thick and matted everywhere about her; the ground was beset with miry, treacherous bogs, which threatened death to her footsteps; she knew not where she was, nor the way to leave the island; she was in a quandary.

She knew not what to do—where to go, but, inspired with terror at the thought of again enduring the horrors of captivity, she followed the log down to its end and stepped off. Then wandering vaguely, she started away into the silent, black forest, terrified at its silence and grimness, at the danger behind, and at danger before—for there was danger.

Here, in this forest, lurked the dangerous catamount, and the venomous snake; here trod the bear, nocturnally rambling; the gray, ferocious and gaunt wolf stole through the shadowy aisles; and last, but not least, the red-man was not yet exterminated. Treacherous bogs and deadly pools, too, dotted the spongy ground—terrible dangers in themselves.

She had not gone far when on stepping, she felt her foot sink into a soft bog. Hastily withdrawing it ere it became too late, she turned away only to encounter the same danger. Frightened and faint almost to exhaustion with hunger, and alarmed at the rising cries of beasts which she heard, she sat vacantly down, leaning against a tree. Overtasked nature refused to yield to artificial laws, and she fell asleep.

When she awoke it was broad daylight, and the sun was high in the zenith—it was high noon. Faint with hunger, she yet felt considerably refreshed, and rising, she looked about her. She had not tasted food for thirty-six hours—she must have some; she could not live, scarcely move without it; and she needed strength to fly.

While she was cogitating and looking about, she heard a rustle in an adjoining thicket—the fall of a foot. She slipped behind the tree quickly. What could it be?

Was it an enemy, searching for her, or was it a lurking Indian? Whichever it was, she felt alarmed, and her heart throbbed.

Again the sound came—a light footfall. It was nearer—some one was coming—she must escape. Leaving the tree, she softly glided away, keeping the tree between her and the sound. She might have escaped had she been versed in wood-craft, but, being unskilled and timorous she trod upon a dry twig. It snapped, loudly. She heard a sudden, low exclamation. Believing she was discovered, she made no further attempt at concealment, but fled.

She heard the footsteps behind quicken, then settle into a steady run. She strained her pace. A dense coppice lay near. If she could only reach it! She would try, anyhow, and she flew toward it. Hitherto a dense thicket had intervened between her and her pursuer, but now she heard him burst out in full sight. She was almost to the coppice—she would soon be there. Accelerating her speed, she was rapidly nearing it when she heard a voice behind her say:

“Katie!”

She stopped in an instant and turned—she knew the voice. Then, seeing who was her pursuer, she held out her arms, and with a loud cry, rushed to meet him. It was her lover, coming with radiant face and outstretched arms to meet her.

It were worse than useless to attempt to describe the meeting. Suffice it to say they clasped each other in their arms, and Katie wept for joy, and he murmured glad, comforting words to her; she nestled close, and implored his protection; while he swelled and strutted in vast pride, and longed for an enemy to appear, that he might have an opportunity to fight for her.

When she was somewhat composed, she told the story, truthfully, and minutely. Then he became enraged and grew red in the face and scowled; now he had a double account to settle with Downing. Then, suddenly recollecting her long fast, he bade her stay where she was while he went off with his gun to procure food.

He was not long, and soon came back with a brace of red squirrels, the first animals he had seen. Striking a light, he soon had a fire burning, while Katie dressed the squirrels in a trice. Then, bidding her cook them, he started off for more—he would have destroyed all the animals in the forest for her sake. He came back soon with another brace—these being the only eatable animals at that time of the year. He found her busily engaged in disposing of the first brace, eating joyfully. They were young and very tender, and after her long fast she ate voraciously.

While she ate, he watched her, smiling to himself, and exulting over her, and told of his absence from the party. He had been off on a peculiar trail, which he supposed was that of the mysterious hunchback. His attention had been drawn to her by the snapping of the twig, and he hotly pursued her, believing it was the one he sought. They were near the landing, and the party were on the other side of the lake, distant about four miles.

She finished eating, and he arose.

“Come, darling,” he said; “let us hasten back to our friends. There may be danger in remaining here.”

He took her hand, and walking rapidly, (for she was now quite refreshed and strong,) they hurried toward the other side of the lake. He did not go toward the settlement, for he reasoned that, when Katie’s escape was discovered, as it undoubtedly was, the robbers would instantly get between the swamp and the settlement in order to intercept her. Thinking they were off the island, he thought they were in the forest toward the settlement—hence his hurrying to join the party.

His reasoning, though evidently correct, was erroneous. When the settlers found the cabins empty, and the island bare, they thought the robbers had evacuated it, but in fact they had been concealed in an underground pit or passage, dug ready for an emergency. So Walter’s escape would have been certain if he had at once moved toward the settlement; but instead, he was running point-blank into danger.

They were half-way round the lake when Walter halted, and climbed a tree in order to discover, if possible, the whereabouts of the party. But, on seeing nothing from his elevated perch, he was about descending, when an object on the lake drew his attention.

In a direct route, that is a “bee-line,” across the water, he was about a mile from the landing by the log, near where he found Katie. But by land and through the forest it was about two miles. Looking across the water, he could see a dark object slowly moving from the island toward the land, on the water.

At first he could not distinguish the outline of the object—it was a dark, close mass; but, by degrees, it assumed shape, and he saw what it was.

“Ha, Katie! there is a raft on the lake, covered with men. Who can it be?”

“Which way are they going?” she asked, paling at the remembrance of her captivity.

“From the island toward the landing.”

“Oh, Walter, it is they; they are after me. Oh, come down and let us fly.”

“Nay, stay a bit,” he replied. “It may perhaps be our friends, though I don’t see how they could have gotten to the island and back as soon as this. I can see the dug-out now, empty and lying by the big log; they are steering toward it. It must be the robbers.”

Confident in his ability to throw them from the scent, he watched the raft until it touched the shore. The men slowly disembarked, and filed out upon the log, where they stood like a row of vultures, leaving one man upon the raft.

A dark object was at his feet. This soon arose, and Walter discovered it to be a large dog. He wondered what use they had for a dog, and why did they bring the beast with them on this expedition?

He was soon answered. The men, followed by the dog, filed along the log and vanished in the thicket.

A few moments passed, and they did not reappear. Walter began to descend, when he suddenly stopped and listened keenly. Katie, below, saw him change color and look anxious.

She wondered as she watched him, looking and listening alternately, his bold, dashing air being changed to one of anxiety. His hand was placed to his ear to facilitate his hearing, and, with head slightly bent, he remained entirely motionless.

“I thought so—curse this delay!” she heard him mutter. Then he came scrambling down, hand under hand. Alighting by her side, he caught her arm, and hoarsely asked:

“Are you quite strong? can you run?”

“Oh, yes, Walter. Oh, you frighten me! Let us go at once—I know something is wrong.”

“Ay!” he said, starting off at a round pace toward the place where he had left the settlers; “something *is* wrong.”

“Please tell me, Walter. If I know the danger I am sure I can fly faster. What alarms you?”

“Alarms me?” he said. “Ay! I am not ashamed to own it. Listen! Two miles away are our friends. It will take us a good half-hour to reach them through this

cursed, nasty swamp. Meanwhile, behind us is a terrible enemy—the keenest, bloodthirstiest trailer in the world. *In ten minutes he will be on this very spot—for he is on our trail!*”

He laid his hand on her arm. Just then arose, behind, a round, rich, melodious sound, swelling gracefully, then dying away. He raised his hand.

“Do you not know the sound? did you never hear it?”

“What is it?”

“A bloodhound! *In ten minutes he will gallop across this very spot!*”

She turned deadly pale. He caught her by her arm.

“Come!” he cried, hoarsely. “For God’s sake fly, else we are lost!”

They plunged into the dense forest, impeded by fallen logs obstructing their course; by matted grape-vines, an impenetrable barrier; by bogs, about which they were forced to circuit; by dense thickets and brambles which threatened their every step; and still behind swelled out the bay of the bloodhound—“Hong—hong!”

CHAPTER XI.

A SUDDEN MEETING.

Three hours after they had left the island, the settlers found themselves on the main-land, with Shadow Lake between them and their homes. Walter had been absent for some time and they began to feel anxious about him. He had started off on a wild and perhaps dangerous errand—that of ferreting out the strange intruder, the owner of the mysterious voice.

He had now been gone several hours, and they were alarmed, for they thought the robbers were prowling about the forest, and he might fall in with them. Sol, having a high regard for him, and not wishing to have evil befall him, called Eben aside:

“See here, Eb,” he said, “d’ye want a job?”

“What is it?”

“Ter foller Walt. I’m afeard he’s got inter some scrape. Yer can go back ter the place whar Walt left us, and pick up his trail. Don’t leave it ontill ye find him. Ef yer want ter find us ag’in, all yer kin do is ter pick up our trail and overtake us. Yer understand?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Now thar’s no one lookin’—slip inter that hazel-patch yender.”

He sauntered slowly away until he reached the hazel-thicket, when he “loped” away toward the place where Walter had left them. Sol returned to the band, and bidding them follow, started off in search of the robber trail. For once the veteran was wrong.

Eben, walking rapidly, soon came to the spot where he was to take Walter’s trail. It was by a large cottonwood tree which towered above its adjacent companions. Here on every side, except that of the lake, stretched away the old gloomy swamp, ghastly and grim, even in the noontime. As the ground was springy, he had no difficulty in finding the trail, and picking it out from the others. It struck off along the “coast” of the lake, and the young man had in all probability made his way to the log-landing, where the unknown was last seen.

He slung his gun in the hollow of his arm, and bending to the trail, went on apace. It was quite distinct, and he felt sure he could follow it on a run.

He had not gone more than fifty yards when he heard a rustle in a thicket just ahead. With the instinct of a backwoodsman he went behind a tree like a squirrel, and cocked his gun.

The rustle was not such as would be made by a bird or small animal, but was a rustle and a dull thud. This, Eben, being quick-witted, readily construed into a footfall on a prostrate log.

He remained close hid for some little time, then peeped cautiously out. An intervening thicket obscured his view. Gently stepping, he crept to the thicket and peered through.

Before him was one of those numerous small glades with which the forest abounded. This glade was bare, but he was certain he heard a footstep, and in the present unsettled condition of things he was wary about venturing out in full sight. However, as he forced his way through the thicket he saw that on all sides of the glade the surrounding trees were somewhat diminutive in size—being for the most part a young growth of cottonwoods. They were too small to afford protection to any man, and beginning to lose his slight alarm, he stepped boldly out, still on the trail.

No one was in sight. The surrounding forest was devoid of human beings. He went up to a large log lying in the open space. It was decayed, and Walter's trail passed directly over it. In fact he had stepped upon it, as his boot-mark was plainly visible in the soft, yielding punk. But as he noticed this, another object caught his attention.

It was another and different footmark, and he could see it had no heel, and the edges were not sharply defined; he knew at once it was the track of a moccasin.

"Hullo! Injuns?" he inquired, off his guard. "It can't be—there are none within sixty miles. But, by thunder! ef I don't b'lieve it is the track of one."

Interested, he looked searchingly around for some further evidence, but to his extreme surprise he found none—it was a solitary footprint. It pointed at right angles to the trail he was pursuing, and he judged that as the surrounding ground was dry and rather hard, the owner must have passed by without leaving any other trail.

"Well—no matter!" he said to himself. "I'm on Walter's trail—I mustn't leave it. But, by thunder! I'd like to know where this one leads to."

He gave a final look around, then bending again, went on, wondering. Now the ground was rather hard, but as he was on a “boot-trail,” he found no difficulty in keeping it.

Right ahead the dense thickets and soft ground came again. The moment he “struck” the latter, he started back at seeing he was now pursuing a double trail, the second being that of a moccasin; some one was trailing Walter ahead of him!

He noticed it was the same mark as the one on the log—at least it corresponded to it in size and shape. He pushed on a few paces, to see how far it continued, and if the second person was really on the track of Walter. He was, he found after going a small distance. Sometimes the moccasin overtopped the boot, as if the unknown was not desirous of keeping the trail for further use, and for every five steps of Walter, there were only two moccasin-marks; the fellow was evidently going at a smart pace.

Whoever he was, Eben was certain he was not far in advance, for just now he had heard him step on the decayed log. He pushed on, determined, as it lay in his way, to ferret out this rapid tracker, and perhaps by doing so he would rid Walter of an enemy.

He had been looking down at the trail. He now raised his head and looked around, to prevent being surprised by his fore-runner. Had he looked up a second quicker, he would have seen a form dart behind a huge tree, fifty yards or more in advance, with a smile on his face. But he did not see it, and went on, rapidly.

He approached the tree, keeping his eye bent on the trail; he drew nearer, and the man behind the tree smiled again. He came directly opposite the tree, and the man slipped around to the other side.

Eben passed the tree, then stopped short.

“Hullo! where’s the moccasin trail? I’ve left it, or it’s left me—one or t’other.”

He went back a step or two and discovered it again.

“Hullo! here it goes, branching off by this big sycamore. Shall I follow it?”

He hesitated a moment, then resolving to pursue it a little distance, went off, following it.

Went off? not far. Before he had taken two steps the man behind the tree came up behind him and gently touched him on the shoulder.

“How goes the day, young man?” he said.

Eben turned with a cry of surprise, and confronted him.

He saw before him the strangest man he had ever before seen. A man with a deformed, hunched back, with crooked, crazy legs, with long, swinging arms, and an enormous nose. He was dressed in a corduroy jacket, and leggings of the same material, which terminated in a pair of plain moccasins. On his head was an old flat cap covered with ashes—a cap made from *green wood*, Eben could see. An old cloak of undressed sheep-skin was flung over his shoulders, and this, in unison with his ghastly, white face, staring, fishy eye, and straggling *drab* hair, gave him, to say the least, a strange appearance.

Eben was, for the moment, alarmed at his ugly companion, and did not know what to do or say. At last he stammered out:

“Who are yer?”

“No matter—for the present. I will tell you after I have done talking with you. I have come to see you on business.”

“Business? What d’ye mean?” asked Eben, beginning to become more and more surprised.

“Time is scarce. The young man and woman are in danger. I need your help. There is work enough for both of us.”

“What man and woman?”

“The young woman that was lost.”

“Ha! do you know any thing of ’em? Speak quick!”

“Ha!” yelled the man at the top of his voice. “Do you hear that?”

The faint, melodious bay of a hound came wafted to their ears. Eben knew the sound.

“I do,” he said. “It is a bloodhound.”

“Ay!” and the hunchback brought his face close to that of Eben. “It is—and he is on the trail of the young man, who has found the young woman!”

Eben saw by the earnest expression of the cripple’s face he was terribly in earnest, and that he spoke the truth.

“Then come on!” he said. “Come on, to the rescue!”

The hunchback, with surprising agility, darted away through the thicket, followed by Eben.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DEATH PATH.

Walter and Katie fled as fast as the thick brush, the constantly-impeding grape-vines, and the soft and boggy ground would allow, but still the bay came louder and rounder to their ears, and they could but see the terrible tracker was swiftly gaining upon them.

They had gone about half the two miles which would have placed them in comparative safety, when it became only too evident they must halt and make a stand against the dog. He was now quite near, being only four hundred yards behind. The rapid pace at which he was coming proved it was their only resort—to stand and fight.

A good opportunity presented itself, and Walter, seeing it, availed himself of it.

Near by, a knoll rose abruptly, in fact, horizontally. Before it, and encircling one side of it, myriads of tough, matted grape-vines were hung, forming an impenetrable barrier—at least sufficient to repel the entrance of a man.

Walter drew his bowie, and after working energetically, soon had the satisfaction of making an entrance sufficient to enable him to pass through, which he did, followed by Katie, who bore herself admirably. Then hauling and bending the leafy vines, he soon closed the entrance so it would not be detected.

It was a rare place for a stand, and had Walter a dozen men with him, he might have withstood a hundred. Behind him rose the knoll abruptly; before him was a leafy, green, impenetrable wall of tough, obstinate, fibrous grape-vine, so thick and leafy that persons before it could not see through it.

But Walter had only his arm and weapons to depend on, and they might fail. Still he spoke hopefully and encouragingly to Katie, and hoped for the best.

On came the dog—quite near. They could hear the bushes rustle as he darted through them, and at intervals out swelled the sonorous bay—“Hong, hong!”

Walter gently put Katie away from him.

“I want room to work in,” he said, drawing his knife.

His good rifle was at his shoulder at a full cock, aimed through the wall; in his

trigger-hand he clutched the bowie-knife. Should the former fail (as in all probability it would, owing to the thick underwood) he could make a determined battle with the blade.

On came the dog, full of fiery and bloody desire. Glimpses of him were caught at intervals, his dark brown body gleaming through the copses.

Now the patter of his feet came to their ears, and mixed with them, shouts behind: the robbers were hotly following their fore-running ally.

Suddenly he appeared, coming on at a true bloodhound pace—half-galloping, half-pacing—a sort of amble. He was only a few yards away.

Walter, taking a cool, steady aim at the hound's breast, fired.

A confused snarling and growling was heard, the smoke hanging obstinately down, obstructing their sight. Gradually it lifted—just in the nick of time.

For, as Walter was peering through the covered entrance, knife in hand, the dog came on with a spring. He had been shot, as could be told by the blood on his breast, but not fatally. It only maddened him to stronger exertions.

Seeing Walter's face at the entrance, the brute, with a fierce growl, sprung at him, with red jaws, white, wicked teeth, and a gleaming, bloodshot eye.

He was met half-way. As his fore-paws touched the barricade, Walter, exerting all his nerve and muscle, drove the keen-edged bowie into his breast—exactly in the bullet-hole. There was a maniacal, gasping snarl, a convulsive movement of the feet, a rapid quivering throughout his body, and the bloodhound fell to the ground, stone dead.

Katie was frightened as Walter drew back his knife and slowly wiped it on the vine-leaves. She had never before seen a brave man at bay—she had never seen such a fierce, passionate, and at the same time cool and resolute look upon his face. His wrath was majestic—he was a brave man at bay, battling for the one he loved.

His attention was quickly drawn to the approaching enemy by the sight of a thickset man at the head of the column, which was coming at Indian-file. He was short and squat, and his sable face proclaimed his Ethiopian origin.

Could he be mistaken? He knew he was not mistaken. It was Cato the Creeper, and beside him walked Captain Downing.

To see was to act with Walter. It was a life and death struggle now.

A stream of fire blazed from the barricade, a puff of smoke arose, and Cato the Creeper, with a wild cry, tossed his arms aloft and fell to the ground, a bullet driven into his brain. Cato the Creeper had followed his last trail.

Completely surprised and astounded at the sudden discharge and its fatal effect, the bandits flew to cover, where they remained quiet and talked in whispers. How many men were behind that screen? Downing, Fink, and another man were close together in a dense thicket.

After canvassing matters, it was decided to make a rush—Downing feeling certain that only the young settler was there with the girl. The signal for a rush was to be the discharge of the captain's revolver, when every man was to press forward on a run.

Soon a sharp report rung out, and simultaneously every sturdy ruffian sprung from his cover, and rushed, gun and knife in hand, toward the vines, yelling and swearing as they did so.

Foremost came Captain Downing, ahead of his men; next came Parks and Fink, all three being somewhat in advance.

Walter saw his arch-enemy, and full of rage and desire for revenge, raised his gun and took a steady aim at him. But, just as his hand was hard-pressing the trigger, Downing slipped, and stumbling, fell headlong.

It was too late to hold his fire; Downing had scarcely dropped when the bullet, speeding through the air where Downing's head had been, went on its way and lodged in the brain of Parks, killing him instantly. The robber dropped without a groan, and Fink, pressing on close behind, stumbled over him.

The remaining robbers, seeing three men prostrate, imagined there had been a simultaneous volley from the vines, which had felled their leaders. They stopped and hesitated.

But only for a moment. The leaders soon righted themselves, Downing regaining his feet first. With a wild, profane oath he darted on, beside himself with rage.

The men followed. Walter, knowing a critical and almost hopeless crisis had come, threw down his gun, and brandishing the keen bowie, awaited their attack.

It came. The robbers, anticipating an easy victory, rushed against the barrier, supposing it would give to their combined weight and momentum. But the vines were tough and strong, and though the robbers dashed in a body upon them they resisted the shock. They swayed, bent, and creaked, but, with their natural

elasticity, immediately returned to their natural position.

“Cut through the accursed vines!” howled Downing, white with rage. “Cut through them! No quarter to the villain inside! Cut his throat the minute you get at him!”

Drawing his knife, he set the example by cutting wildly and violently. Fortunate it was for Walter the vines were tough and thick—fortunate it was for him that he had an open space behind him to fight in.

“Get behind that log, yonder, Kate!” ordered Walter. “Else you may get hit by a bullet.”

She obeyed. Now danger had come, now that an imminent crisis had arrived, she, though pale, was calm and collected. Disregarding his command to lie still, she seized his abandoned gun, and lying behind the log, attempted to reload it. But she had no ammunition—it was hanging to Walter’s shoulder.

Slipping up behind him, she quickly took off his powder-horn and bullet-pouch, then retreated to the log and loaded the gun, finding caps in the pouch. Then she watched her lover with the eye of a lynx.

He stood behind the only tree in his “fort,” watching, with snapping eyes, the robbers as they energetically worked at the vines. Cutting and twisting, they worked hard and swiftly, and soon Walter could see their hands protruding through the leaves.

One hand in particular he noticed—a brown, horny hand, huge in dimensions. A thought struck him. Creeping softly within easy striking distance, he raised his knife, and taking a sure, deliberate aim, struck it with all his force. At the same time Fink, outside, cried aloud, and drawing his arm hastily back from his task, exposed it to view.

His arm was without its natural appendage—the hand had gone at the wrist.

The blood flowed so freely that directly he became faint, and staggering to an adjacent log, sat down upon it, with a very white face. The others desisted, and looking at him, now became chary of their own hands, knowing the danger they ran in inserting them through the leaves.

Downing, hearing the clamor, stopped in his frenzied work, and walked up to Fink.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. Fink held his hand to his view.

With a fierce oath he cried:

“We *must* get him. One hundred dollars to the man that kills him—five hundred to the man that takes him alive.”

The men needed no other stimulus. With one accord they returned to their task; and then they worked like tigers—cutting and twisting. However, they were chary of their hands—the example before them was too potent to be disregarded; and though working hard, they observed great caution.

They had not much longer to work before they could reach him. To prevent his escaping, men were sent to the rear of the knoll, with orders not to harm him, but to take him alive if possible. Walter’s chances were few indeed.

And now a cry came from one of the most industrious—he had opened quite a breach.

The outlaws were quite near the close of their respective tasks, and, fearing to lose the reward, worked like men for their lives.

The man who had opened his breach, becoming reckless, at once plunged through, knife in hand. It was Jack Dark, the ferryman.

His recklessness and eagerness proved his death. Met half-way in the narrow gap by Walter, he had no time to turn, no time to strike or defend himself.

The glistening steel flashed in the air; the sturdy arm descended, and with the blood spirting from his heart, Dark fell limp and lifeless in his own gap, completely obstructing it.

Walter drew the reeking blade from the body, and was about to wield another blow, when a faint shriek came to his ears—the voice of Katie.

Like lightning he turned toward her. She was crouching behind the log, partially upright, pointing with white face to another part of the barrier.

Walter followed her gaze, and saw a robber half through the vines.

He darted toward him.

The other saw him coming, and endeavored to spring through, but his foot was fast in the vine. Then he endeavored to draw back; but too late.

Once more the steel flashed in mid-air, and the terror-stricken bandit, looking up, saw it descend like a flash. The next moment, he was a corpse.

“Four men down!” shrieked Downing, now completely frenzied. “Kill him—kill

him!”

Simultaneously, the men drew back a few paces, and then each one rushed for the breach he had made.

Walter saw one man burst through with a yell; the next moment he was upon him in close conflict.

Katie saw two more burst through, and, alive with fear raised the gun and fired at the foremost.

The aim was true; with a horrible oath, he fell, mortally wounded.

The other, disregarding her, rushed by her, toward Walter, who was fighting desperately with his adversary, a small, wiry fellow, with the activity of a cat and the muscle of a bear.

She saw the last man hurry on with gun ready for instant use; she saw others burst through the vines, with bloodshot eyes and inflamed passions; she saw, as she thought, Walter fall, wounded unto death, and knew no more.

As the whole gang effected an entrance and came rushing on Walter, he succeeded in dealing his antagonist a fatal blow in the side. He fell, with the blood surging from the wound.

At this critical moment, a loud cry came from the knoll above—a loud hurrah—then a succession of rapid shots and cries of pain; then another hurrah!

“Hold up, Walt! Keep cool!” came in ringing tones close by. Then came another voice, louder and shriller:

“Charge, boys—charge! Give ’em fits!”

There was a rapid rush of feet from the hill above. The outlaws halted and looked up.

Down the steep hill came a dozen men with the velocity of the wind, to the rescue—the settlers, headed by Eben and the hunchback, had arrived!

Rolling, jumping, tumbling, on all fours, in their mad haste (for the hill was perpendicular), some with their hair flying and hats off, others with gigantic, reckless strides, down came the settlers to the rescue.

The outlaws looked up, halted in their murderous design, turned, then fled through the barrier—now a barrier no longer; and the brave young man was saved!

Of the outlaws, Captain Downing alone remained. Drawing a revolver from his belt, and with an oath, he presented it to the young man's breast.

"Dog of a coward—die!" he yelled, and pulled the trigger.

Reckless act! In his excitement and frenzy, he pulled the trigger on an empty barrel. Before he could draw the hammer to insure his murderous deed, the hunchback tripped his feet from under him, and dealing him a blow with his fist at the same time, felled him to the ground.

Then, as the settlers went hurrying by in hot pursuit of the outlaws, and as Walter rushed to Katie, the deformed man grasped Downing by the throat.

"Dog—villain!" he hissed. "Do you know me?"

Downing's face, though pale, grew paler still. The Voice was speaking to him—the same Voice he had recognized on the night that Katie escaped from his toils. He now recognized the man.

"James Dunning!" he gasped.

"Yes, Robert Davis—James Dunning, the man whom you abused, maltreated and crippled, is now your captor; the son of the rich banker in Charleston whom you murdered, is now your master; the man who has followed you, abetted your pursuers, foiled your attempts, and, haunting the forest, has caused his voice to be heard at noonday and midnight, has you now in his power; and he will use that power."

"Let me rise—let me go!" demanded Downing, vainly endeavoring to rise. "Unhand me, you villain!"

"Villain? Ha! you will bitterly regret that epithet, Robert Davis, mark my words, you will."

"Let me up! What right have you to detain me in this manner?"

"Right? Look at that young girl yonder—she is insensible from fright, and all because of your misdeeds! Look at her father and lover beside her—many have been the torments they have undergone because of you! Look at the lifeless men lying here. They have ended their career upon earth in the midst of vile wickedness, because of you! Look at me, an orphaned and poverty-stricken son, and a cripple—yes, a cripple, deformed and ugly, because of you, and then ask me what right I have to detain you! You are mine—mine to do with as I will, and, as I told you before, I will use my power."

He looked around on the scene, still keeping a secure hold on Downing. The settlers and outlaws were all gone, but they still kept up a scattering fire far away in the forest. Fink had bled to death; Cato lay lifeless on the ground; five dead robbers were stretched, grim and ghastly, upon the neighboring scene; and Katie, now just recovered, was weeping for joy in her father's and lover's arms.

His brow darkened, and he took a cord from his clothing and proceeded to bind Downing. The latter, struggling and fuming, proving a hard customer, he dealt him a blow between the eyes which rendered him incapable of any further resistance.

Then he bound him securely, and casting a last look around him, he took the unconscious robber chief in his arms as easily as if he had been a child. Then he walked away into the swamp just as the sun was setting—into Shadow Swamp, in Dead-Man's Forest.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT THE GRAY WOLF SAW IN DEAD-MAN'S FOREST.

Little more remains to be told. When the gallant settlers, with the happy lovers under their escort, arrived at the settlement, they were joyfully greeted by their wives and daughters, Hettie among the rest.

The outlaws were nearly all killed, and were entirely exterminated from their haunts. To Hettie's dismay, nothing was ever heard of Downing, he having not been seen since the hunchback had felled him to the ground.

Much more the surprise at the hunchback's odd appearance and disappearance, and for a long time it was the subject of fireside gossip and conjecture, until a wedding occurred which forever banished it. It is needless to say who the parties were, nor how very gay the company was, nor how blushing and happy the bride, and exultant the groom—the intelligent reader has, ere this, suspected it. But, it is, perhaps, necessary to state that, in time, Hettie lost her unfortunate attachment for the robber chief, and, suddenly discovering that Eben was a fine young man, yielded to his suit and became Mrs. Jacobs.

And so, after so much hard trial and pain, these hearts were at last happy. We can do nothing more for them, as their cup of joy is complete, so we bid them all good-by.

The moon looked palely down from the zenith upon Dead-Man's Forest; it looked down in its steely light upon the swamp in the forest—Shadow Swamp.

Truly was it named Shadow Swamp—for in its quiet, ghostly mazes, a shadow was flitting to and fro across a glade—a glade, in the center of which stood a tree—the terrible tree.

The shadow was that of a man—a cripple; and he was flitting in the midnight hour on some preconceived and arranged labor. Dry sticks he gathered from the glade and carried to the tree, depositing them at the base. After he had collected a large quantity he changed his task—bringing limbs and pieces of dry logs to his pile. Then, again, he changed—this last time bringing larger limbs and

branches and small logs, which he arranged on the summit of the others.

When he had completed his task to his satisfaction he chuckled in horrible delight; then he disappeared.

Shortly he returned—not alone; a man was with him—a captive. This could be seen by the thongs which bound him, by his pale face, and frightened, nervous air.

The hunchback led his captive to the tree, and placed him, back against it. Again that hideous chuckle rung out. The captive was standing in the center of the fagots, which the cripple piled closely around him, the pile reaching quite to his shoulders, leaving only his head visible. Then taking a cord from his clothing, he bound the prisoner closely to the tree. Then, stepping back, he contemplated his prisoner, and gave vent to a shrill, maniacal laugh.

“Ha!” he said, pacing softly to and fro before his prisoner, “The work is nearly done. Revenge is sweet—sweet!”

“Yes,” he continued, “you are doomed. When the moon casts a shadow over your face, this dagger will be driven to your black heart, and the fagots will burn your foul body from the earth which detests it.

“In three minutes the shadow will cover your face. Robert Davis, have you any last words—any thing to say?”

The prisoner uttered no word—made no sign: but, tied securely to the tree, prepared to meet his doom.

“Once more, Robert Davis, have you any last message? That much will I do for you. I shall not speak again.”

No answer. The shadow crept slowly down the tree toward the doomed man’s face.

All is quiet in Dead-Man’s Forest, to-night. The wild animals are still, and the night is calm. Still creeps the shadow down. To and fro paces the executioner, still watches the prisoner his captor. Still creeps the shadow.

A thousand fantastic shadows play about the moonlit glade, and the prisoner notes them mechanically. One in particular he watches—a shadow stealing on from the glade toward him.

What is it—an animal? Yes. Bear, perhaps? No. Perhaps an Indian? No; it is a gaunt, gray wolf. The prisoner asks and answers these questions, then looks at

the cripple. Still creeps the shadow; still plods the moon; still all is silence in Dead-Man's Forest.

The gray wolf creeps nearer and licks his chops cravingly as he peers at the prisoner. Perhaps he anticipates a repast—perhaps he does.

The shadow is obscuring the captive's head now—part of it; in a few moments it will be down over his face. Still he watches the gray wolf, still the gray wolf watches him, and still creeps the shadow—down down, down!

Still the moon wanes; and shadows about the glade are slightly changed, now. The captor silently draws his knife, whetting it on his palm. The prisoner watches him quietly.

The gray wolf might be mistaken for a dog, sitting so near on his haunches; but he is still a hungry wolf.

Part of the face is in the shadow now—only a portion; but the captor still whets the knife, while the prisoner quietly watches him.

The gray wolf howls mournfully as the shadow entirely clouds the white, bleak face.

The captor strikes a light among the lighter fagots; they blaze up, brightly. The flames quickly communicate with the other and larger fagots. They are dry and will burn until exhausted. The prisoner scowls.

There is a sudden movement of the captor's arm; a bright, steely glimmer is in mid air; there is a dull blow and the sound of gurgling blood; and the gray wolf howls mournfully.

A figure, misshapen and deformed, glides over the glade, into the forest, and vanishes in silence; a gray wolf stalks up to a man in the midst of a burning pile; he sees a dagger in the man's heart, and the man's head is on his shoulder; he is alone with the dead.

Howling at the fire, he turns and trots reluctantly away from its crackle and blaze and its glaring light; and all is quiet in Dead-Man's Forest.

Transcriber's Notes

A number of typographical errors were corrected silently.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CATO, THE CREEPER;
OR, THE DEMON OF DEAD-MAN'S FOREST ***

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