

The Years of the Wicked

By Hopkins Moorhouse

MISS Hepzibah's bare foot took on the appearance of a white lily as it dipped cautiously into the shaft of moonlight. The shaft of moonlight streamed between the cretonne curtains and came to rest in an irregular patch on the rag carpet beside the bed. The bed itself creaked; the utmost stealth of movement notwithstanding, it creaked so loudly in the quiet of 2 a.m. that Miss Hepzibah held her breath and listened in sudden panic.

Above the throbbing of her pulses she could hear the breathing of the dog. That was all. She wasn't worrying about Priddy, for he was pretty well trained and while he was nose-on to the crack at the bottom of the door with the clothes line that tied him to the bedpost tant as a bowstring, he hadn't let out a sound.

There was a certain business-like menace in that silence which seemed to substantiate the grim assurance of the lines of Miss Peters' mouth as she tipped about the room. Also there was a gun hanging on a rack beside the bed—a double-barrelled affair, a muzzle-loading old-timer that had killed many a deer in its day. The knife which dangled on the bedpost, where it would be handy for severing the bulldog's leash in an emergency, was just a plain domestic butcher-knife which Miss Hepzibah used for cutting up rhubarb stalks and so forth; but one could have shaved with it quite handsily—almost. In fact, Miss Hepzibah Peters was armed—to the teeth!

Reaching for the gun, she wound the dog's line several times around her wrist and quietly turned the knob of the door. With a flaming red dressing-gown wrapped about her meagre form and pale blue wools bedroom slippers peeping out now and then beneath the hem, she began a cautious advance. On the landing, half-way down the stairs, she pulled the dog behind her and craned her thin neck forward till the moonlight, shining through the glass of the front door, bathed her forehead and used by two front curl-papers to make a shadow on the wall that looked like the devil's head.

There was nobody in the hallway below. The sounds seemed to be coming from the parlor. That was the room which she kept shut up with the blinds drawn. One by one, the family had gone to the cemetery from this room. It contained all the family heirlooms, a melodeon whose yellowed keys nobody ever fingered, mohair chairs upon which nobody ever sat now, a pair of china dogs which nobody ever played with and sundry black walnut frames enclosing crayon portraits which nobody ever looked at except Miss Hepzibah.

For she lived alone now, Miss Hepzibah—very much alone indeed—and she did not encourage visitors. The few whom Priddy and his mistress did tolerate were content to munch their cookies and sip their raspberry vinegar in the kitchen; certainly the fine rag carpet which the grandmother had made with her own hands was no place for stains and crumbs.

So the parlor was the room which was kept shut up till the air was musty. And that was where Miss Peters had hidden a little old Japanese urn, of brass—in a dark corner beneath a board that was loose in the flooring. And this urn had money in it—not very much, barely enough for her to live on without selling the old place.

Peeking breathlessly through the crack of the open door, she had just noted that the blinds were all up as far as they would go, admitting a flood of moonlight, when the dog broke away from her abruptly and with a ferocious growl charged into the room as if shot from a catapult.

Followed a hoarse yell, a crash of glass, the black figure of a man diving through the window, the black streak of the bulldog, leaping after—running feet, barking!

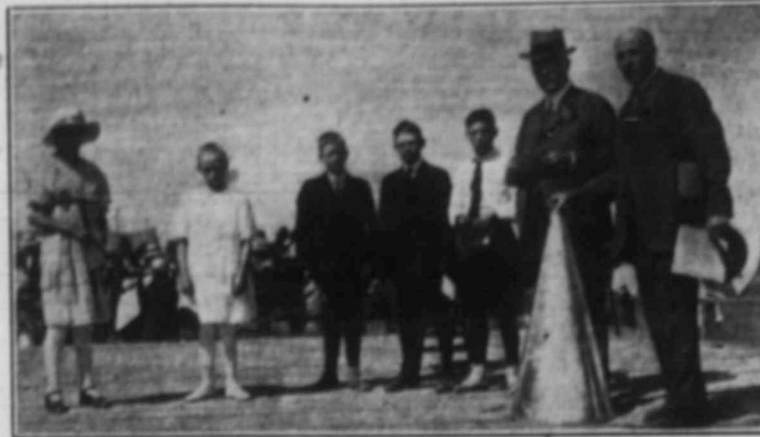
Miss Hepzibah had been knocked off her feet by the dog's sudden plunge. She picked herself up slowly, hobbled over to the window and glanced out. Then she crossed to the dark corner

where the carpet was turned back and a black hole yawned in the flooring. The little old Japanese urn was lying on its side not far away and when its owner had finished poking up the scatter she put it back, replaced the board and drew the carpet over it once more.

On one of the chairs a .32 calibre revolver shone wickedly in the moonlight, evidence of a haste inspired by an overpowering fear of dogs. Miss Hepzibah handled the thing gingerly and tossed it out the broken window. She went back to her bedroom. There

then did she look to see which tree the midnight intruder had chosen.

He had chosen well. The big willow forked about four feet from the ground and lent itself more readily to hasty ascent than any of the others. Leaving the carpet bag on the doorstep, Miss Hepzibah marched down the gravelled walk between the borders of Sweet William and Forget-me-not and struck straight across to the tree at the foot of which bulldog growled his savage regret. In the bright moonlight her angular form bore down like a Nemesis.



Boys' and Girls' Club Members being Honored at the Red Deer Fair. The boys and girls are winners in the Calf and Pig Classes for Boys' and Girls' Clubs. Lieut. Governor Brett, of Alberta, and President Galbraith, of the Red Deer Agriculture Societies are distributing the prizes.

she lit the lamp, laid out her best lustrous dress and her ridiculous little black bonnet, rusty with age and use, and proceeded to make a careful toilet. When her front hair was frizzed to her satisfaction and the bonnet ribbons tied to suit her, she hunted up the grandfather's worn old carpet-bag and descended to the kitchen. Here she lifted a trap door and climbed down carefully into the cellar where a hanging shelf that was laden with a variety of things swung to and fro to the touch.

And all this time Miss Peters was as coldly purposeful as she could be. Her thin, sallow face was set in dominant severity; her eyes glittered like bits of metal; her feelings seemed to be all curled up inside her and her outward calm was the deceit of placid surfaces beneath which rage dangerous torrents, deep down.

When she came up from the cellar she blew out the lamp, left it on the table with some matches beside it, picked up the muzzle-loader that had killed many deer in its day, and marching out of the house, deposited it and the carpet-bag on the step while she locked the door behind her. Not till

"For heaven's sake, call off that dog!" called the man hoarsely. "It's me—your nephew—Dan."

She stopped to peer upward, squinted her eyes to catch sight of the black shape among the shifting moon mottles on the leaves.

"You'll be a climbin' down now," she commanded.

"Call off that hell-hound, d'you hear me!" he roared.

She spoke sharply to the dog, who whimpered and trotted over to her side obediently. Once more she twisted the dragging rope about her wrist.

"You'll be a climbin' down," she repeated, a trifle louder, and he started downward, laughing shortly, one eye fastened warily on the dog. He paused in the fork of the tree.

"Nice doggie! Nice ol' feller!"

"He won't be a-bittin' you 'less I be a-tellin' him to. You'll be a climbin' down!"

"Right-o. Down it is." He jumped and started forward, very much at his ease.

"Stop!" shrieked Miss Hepzibah. She raised the gun. "You jest stop where you be or I'll shoot you!"



Convalescent Soldiers in a Red Cross Hospital in England.

"Wh-Why, Aunt Zib! Alas! I tumbled to me yet! Don't you know who I am?"

"I know who you be, Danny Larcombe, right well. Turn your back and march straight ahead. We be a-goin' to stable to hitch up old Bill."

"Not so fast!" His eyes had narrowed with quick suspicion. "Not by a darn sight! I don't mind helpin' you to hitch up, but I gottar know where you're goin'."

"When the time comes for you to know, Danny Larcombe, you'll know. You be a-comin' with me. What's more, I be a-goin' to stand for a foolin' this time."

"This time!" he echoed, snarling angrily. "Say ol' girl, you better cut out the funny business an' talk a little sense. Savvy?"

He took a threatening step toward her, at which she promptly unwound one loop of the dog's rope from her wrist. He saw the movement and his heavy jaw dropped. Something very like triumph flashed into Miss Hepzibah's eyes.

"Some time ago, Danny Larcombe," she began with quiet determination, "you stole some money fer which you went to jail. You lied to me about it—writ that you didn't do it—as when you broke out an' come runnin' fer as I was fooled into helpin' you to get away from them as was a-lookin' for you. I thought maybe you'd be agittin' a fresh start up there in Canada where you said you was a-goin'."

"An' what do I find, Danny Larcombe? I find that you was a-lyin' all the time—that you was nothin' but a thief! An' to prove it I find you back here now—in my house—in the ol' o' stealin' every cent I hev in the world! There be them as be worth their salt, Danny Larcombe," cried Miss Hepzibah indignantly, "an' them as ain't!" She waved her arm toward the stable.

"We go now to hitch up old Bill an' we'll just be a-drivin' over to the penitentiary you broke out o' an' we kin make it nicely by sun-up if we a-gittin' started to wunst."

Larcombe swore. He scoffed loudly. Nevertheless his eye was wild as he glanced quickly about him. The dog growled, tugging at the line and whining with desire. Miss Hepzibah is another loop drop from her wrist. The man stared at her intently and for the first time fear crept into his look.

"Ah, now, Aunt Zib, you can't be meanin' all that," he objected in a jocular tone. "Why, Aunt Zib—Why, say, I wasn't tryin' to swipe your coin. Think I'd do that after the way you've always been so good to me! What kind of a nephew d'you take me fer say way?" He laughed at the very idea.

"Honest, Aunt Zib, I wasn't."

"Quit lyin'!" snapped Miss Hepzibah, her eyes blazing with sudden wrath. "I be a-goin' to wait mid longer, Danny Larcombe, fer you to be a-marchin' to the stable. I'll be a-turnin' the dog on you when I count three 'less you be a-movin' the way I be a-tellin' you to! Ef the dog don't git you, I'll jest be a-shootin' you!"

"One!"

"Fer heaven's sake, Aunt Zib, lister a minute, will you! Have you got clean dippy? Y'aint meanin'—"

"Two!"

The dog started as he felt the rope loosen still another loop. He strained forward eagerly.

"Now look here, Aunt Zib, you kin on a minute! I'm—"

"Three!"

"Goin', doggonit!" finished Dan Larcombe savagely.

About he went, overpoweringly anxious, and started forward with alacrity towards the ramshackle old stable in the rear of the premises. Miss Hepzibah following grimly and the dog's drooling jaws within a yard of his heels.

It did not take long to get the harness on the old horse. Larcombe had crept near the lantern, after lighting it, stroking one big hand along the animal's neck.

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