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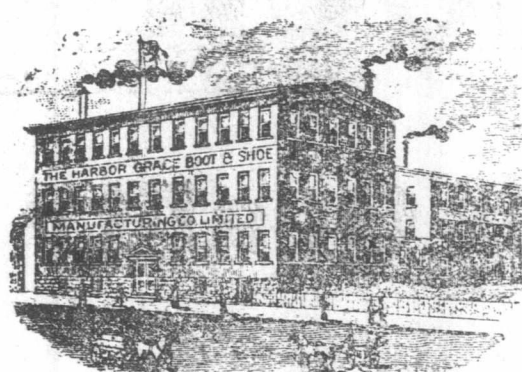
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The Shepherd Of The Hills

CHAPTER XXVII.

While Young Matt was speaking, Gibbs backed slowly away, and, as the young man finished, suddenly drew the pistol he had taken from Ollie. With a quickness and lightness astonishing in one of his bulk and usually slow movements, the mountaineer leaped upon his big enemy. There was a short, sharp struggle, and Wash Gibbs staggered back, leaving the shining weapon in Young Matt's hand. "It might go off, you know," said the young fellow quietly as he tossed the gun on the ground at Ollie's feet.

With a mad roar, Gibbs recovered himself and rushed at his antagonist. It was a terrific struggle; not the skilful sparring of trained fighters, but the rough and tumble battling of primitive giants. It was the climax of long months of hatred; the meeting of two who were by every instinct mortal enemies.

It was soon evident that the big champion of the hills had at last met his match. As he realized this, a look of devilish cunning crept into the animal face of Gibbs, and he manoeuvred carefully to bring his enemy's back toward the wagon.

Catching a look from his friend, over Young Matt's shoulder, the man in the wagon slipped quickly to the ground, and Sammy saw with horror a naked knife in his hand. She glanced toward Ollie appealingly, but that gentleman was helpless. The man with the knife began creeping cautiously toward the fighting men, keeping always behind Young Matt. The young woman felt as though iron held her fast. She could not move. She could not speak. Then Gibbs went down, and the girl's scream rang out. "Behind you, Matt! Look quick!"

As he recovered his balance from the effort that had thrown Wash, Young Matt heard her cry, saw the girl's look of horror, and her outstretched hand pointing.

Like a lash he whirled, just as the knife was lifted high for the murderous blow. It was over in an instant. Sammy saw him catch the wrist of the uplifted arm, heard a dull snap and a groan, saw the knife fall from the helpless hand, and then saw the man lifted bodily and thrown clear over the wagon, to fall helpless on the rocky ground. The woman gave a low cry, "Oh, what a man!"

Wash Gibbs, too, opened his eyes, just in time to witness the unheard-of feat, and to see the bare-armed young giant who performed it turn again, breathing heavily with his great exertion, but still ready to meet his big antagonist.

The defeated bully rose from the ground. The other stepped forward to meet him. But without a word, Gibbs climbed into the wagon and took up the reins. Before they could move, Young Matt had the mules by their heads. "You have forgotten something," he said quietly, pointing to the man on the ground, who was still unconscious from his terrible fall. "That there's your property. Take it along. We ain't got no use for such as that on Fall Creek."

Sullenly Wash climbed down and lifted his companion into the wagon. As Young Matt stood aside to let him go, the bully said, "I'll see you again for this."

The strong man only answered, "I reckon you'd better stay on Roark. Wash Gibbs. You got more room there."

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

No word was spoken by either Sammy or her lover, while their horses were climbing the mill road, and both were glad when they reached the top of the ridge and turned into the narrow path where they would need to ride one before the other. It was not easy to ride side by side, when each was busy with thoughts not to be spoken.

At the gate, Ollie dismounted to help the girl from her horse. But before he could reach the pony's side, Sammy sprang lightly to the ground, unassisted. Opening the big gate, she turned Brownie loose in the yard, while the man stood watching her, a baffled look upon his face. He had always done these things for her. To be refused at this time was not pleasant. The feeling that he was on the outside grew stronger.

Turning to his own horse, Ollie placed

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ed his foot in the stirrup to mount, when Sammy spoke—perhaps she felt that she had been unkind. "You were going to stay to supper," she said.

"Not to-night," he answered, gaining his seat in the saddle, and picking up the reins.

But you are going to leave in the morning are you not? You—you must not go like this."

He dropped the reins to the horse's neck again. "Look here, Sammy, do you blame me because I did not fight that big bully?"

"Sammy did not reply.

"What could I do? You know there is not another man in the mountains beside Young Matt who could have done it. Surely you cannot blame

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me."
The young woman moved uneasily. "No, certainly not. I do not blame you in the least. I—but it was very fortunate that Young Matt was there, wasn't it?" The last sentence slipped out before she knew.

Ollie retorted angrily. "It seems to be very fortunate for him. He will be a greater hero than ever now, I suppose. If he is wise, he will stay in the backwoods to be worshipped, for he'll find that his size won't count for much in the world. He's a great man here, where he can fight like a beast, but his style wouldn't go very far where brains are of value. It would be interesting to see him in town; a man who never saw a railroad."

Sammy lifted her head quickly at this. "I never saw a railroad either; is it the railroads that make one so superior?"

The man turned impatiently in the saddle. "You know what you mean." Ollie lifted the reins again from his horse's neck, and fingered them nervously. "I'd better go, now; there's no use talking about this to-night. I won't leave in the morning, as I had planned. I—I—can't go like this. There was a little catch in his voice. "May I come again to-morrow afternoon, Sammy?"

"Yes, you had better go now, and come back to-morrow."

Then Ollie rode away, and Sammy, going to her pony, stood petting the little horse, while she watched her lover up the Old Trail.

As Ollie passed from sight around the hill above, the girl slipped out of the gate, and in a few minutes later stood at the Lookout, where she could watch Ollie riding along the ridge.

As she turned to go back, a step on the mountain side above caught her attention, and looking up, she saw Pete coming toward the big rock. Sammy greeted the youth kindly.

He threw himself down full length at the girl's feet, and said abruptly, "Pete was here that night, and God, He was here too. The gun went bang, bang all along the mountain side. And the panther just doubled up and died, Matt and Ollie was hurt nary bit. Pete says it was God that done that."

Sammy was startled. "What do you mean, boy? Will Pete please tell me all about it?"

The youth seated himself on the rock facing the valley below, saying in a low tone, "Ollie was a settin' like this, all still; just a smokin, and watchin' the moonlight things. Then it come creepin' and stealin' towards Ollie, and he never knowed nothin' about it. But Matt he knowed, and God He knowed too." Suddenly the boy sprang to the rock and facing the imaginary beast, cried in childish imitation of a man's deep voice, "Get out of the way; this here's my fight." Then in his own tones, "It was sure scared when Matt jumped on the rock and it got ready to jump at Ollie. Bang! Bang! God, He fired, and all the guns in the hills went off, and that panther just doubled up and died. It would sure got Ollie, though, if Matt hadn't jumped on the rock when he did."

It was all too clearly portrayed to be mistaken. "Sammy needn't be afeared," continued Pete, seeing the look on the girl's face. "It's plumb dead and Pete dragged it over on yon side of the ridge and the buzzards got it."

CHAPTER XXIX.

Sammy went home to find her father getting supper. Rushing into the cabin, the girl gave him a hug that caused Jim nearly to drop the coffee pot. "You poor abused Daddy, to come home from work, all tired, and find no supper, no girl, no nothing. Sit right down there now, and rest, and I'll finish things."

Jim obeyed with a grin of appreciation. "I didn't fix no taters; thought you wasn't comin'."

"Going to starve yourself, were you? just because I was gone?" replied the girl, with a pan of potatoes in her hand. "I see right now that I will have to take care of you always—always, Daddy Jim."

The smile suddenly left the man's face. "Where's Ollie? Didn't he come home with you?"

"Ollie's at home, I suppose. I have been up to the Lookout talking to Pete. Ollie's coming over here to-morrow afternoon. Then he's going away."

All during the evening meal the girl kept up a ceaseless merry chatter, changing the subject abruptly every time it approached the question that her father was most anxious to ask. And the man, delighted with her gay mood, responded to it, as he answered to all her moods, until they were like to school children in their fun.

(To be Continued.)

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