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The Shepherd Of The Hills

CHAPTER XXXII.

"What is it, Daddy Jim?"
"What answer will you give young Matt when he asks you what Ollie did?"

"But why must you know that before you go to-morrow?"

"Cause I want to be plumb sure I ain't makin no mistake in sidin' with the boy in this here trouble."

"You couldn't make any mistake in doing that, Daddy, whether I—no matter what—but perhaps Matt will not ask me what Ollie did."

"Just a ray of humor touched the dark face. 'I ain't makin' no mistake there. I know what the man will do.' He laid the gun on the table, and reaching up, caught the girl's hand."

"But I want to know what you will say when he asks you. Tell me honestly, honey, so I'll be plumb certain I'm doin' right."

Sammy lowered her head and whispered in his ear.

"Are you sure this time, girl, dear sure?"

"Oh, I'm so sure that it seems as if I—couldn't wait for him to come to me. I never felt this way before, never."

The mountaineer drew his daughter into his arms and held her close, as he said, "I ain't afraid to do it now, girl."

The young woman was so occupied with her own thoughts and the emotions aroused by her father's question that she failed to note the ominous suggestion that lay in his words. So she entered gaily into his plans for her during his two days' absence.

Jim would leave early in the morning, and Sammy was to stay with her friend, Mandy Ford, over on Jake's Creek. Mr. Lane had arranged with Jed Holland to do the milking, so there would be no reason for the girl's return until the following evening, and she must promise that she would not come home before that time. Sammy promised laughingly. He need not worry; she and Mandy had not had a good visit in weeks.

When his daughter said good-night, Jim extinguished the light, and slipping his big gun inside his shirt went to sit outside the cabin door with his pipe. An hour passed. Sammy was fast asleep. And still the man sat smoking. A half hour more went by. Suddenly the pipe was laid aside, and Jim's hand crept inside his shirt to find the butt of the revolver. His quick ear had caught the sound of a swiftly-moving horse coming down the mountain.

The horse stopped at the gate and a low whistle came out of the darkness. Leaving his seat, Sammy's father crossed the yard, and a moment later, the horse with its rider was going on again down the trail toward the valley below the distant river.

Jim waited at the gate until the sound of the horse's feet died away in the night. Then he returned to the cabin. But even as he walked toward the house, a dark figure arose from a clump of bushes within a few feet of the spot where Jim and the horseman had met. The figure slipped noiselessly away into the forest.

The next morning Jim carefully groomed and saddled the brown pony for Sammy, then, leading his own horse ready for the road, he came to the cabin door. "Going now, Daddy?" said the girl, coming for the good-bye kiss.

"My girl, my girl," whispered the man, as he took her in his arms. Sammy was frightened at the sight of his face, so strange and white. "Why, Daddy, Daddy Jim, what is the matter?"

"Nothin', girl, nothin'. Only—only you're so like your mother, girl. She used to come just like this way when I'd be leavin'. You're like her, and—and I'm glad. I'm glad you're like the old folks too. Remember now, stay at Mandy's until to-morrow evening. Kiss me again, honey. Good-bye."

He mounted hurriedly and rode away at a brisk gallop. Pulling up a moment at the edge of the timber, he turned in the saddle to wave his hand to the girl in the cabin door.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Sammy arrived at the Ford homestead in time for dinner, and was joyfully received by her friend, Mandy. But early in the afternoon, their pleasure was marred by a messenger from Long Creek on the other side of the river. Mrs. Ford's sister was very ill, and Mrs. Ford and Mandy must go at once.

"But Sammy can't stay here alone," protested the good woman. "Mandy, you'll just have to stay."

"Indeed she shall not," declared their guest. "I can't ride up Jake's

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"You'd better hurry up too," put in Mr. Ford. "There's a storm comin' fore long, and we got 't git across 't river before it strikes. I'll be here with 't horses by the time you get your bonnets on." He hurried away to the barn for his team, while the women with Sammy's assistance made their simple preparations.

As Mother Ford climbed into the big wagon, she said to Sammy, "It's awfully lonely on this trip for you, child; and you must start right away, so's 't be sure 't be there fore 't gets plumb dark. And don't get ketchin' on Jakey in a big rain whatever you do."

"Don't worry about me," returned the girl. "Brownie and I could find the way in the dark."

But when her friends were gone, Sammy, woman-like, busied herself with setting the disordered house aright before she started on her journey. Watching the clouds, she told

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herself that there was plenty of time for her to reach the post office before the storm. It might not come that way at all, in fact.

It was quite dark when Sammy reached the point near the head of the stream where the trail leads out of the canyon to the road on the ridge above. As she passed the spring, a few drops of rain came pattering down, and looking up, she saw, away and tossing in the wind, the trees that fringed the ridges above, and she heard the roar of the oncoming storm.

A short way up there was a deep cave-like hollow. Sammy knew the spot well. It would afford excellent shelter.

Pushing Brownie up the steep path

Daily Fashion Hints



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she had reached this ledge, when the rushing storm-cloud shut out the last of the light, and the hills shook with a deafening crash of thunder. Instinctively the girl turned her pony's head to the trail, and, following the cliff, reached the sheltered nook, just as the storm burst in all its wild fury.

It was over in a little while. The wind passed; the thunder rumbled and growled in the distance; and the rain fell gently; but the sky was still lighted by the red glare. Though it was so dark that Sammy couldn't see the trees and rocks, she was not frightened. She knew that Brownie would find the way easily, and, as for the wetting, she would soon be laughing at that with her friends at the post office.

But, as the girl was on the point of moving, a voice said, "It's a mighty good thing for us this old ledge happened to be here, ain't it?" It was a man's voice, and another replied, "It sure was. And it's a good thing, too, that this blow came early in the evening."

The first voice spoke again. "Jack got off in good time, did he?"

"Got a good start," replied the other. "He ought to be back with the posse by ten at the latest. I told him we would meet them at nine where this trail comes into the big road."

"And how far do you say it is to Jim Lane's place, by the road and the Old Trail?" asked the first voice.

At the man's words a terrible fear gripped Sammy's heart. "Posse," that could only mean one thing—officers of the law.

A match cracked. The light flared out, and a whiff of tobacco smoke came curling around the rock, as one of the men said: "Are you sure there is no mistake about their meeting at Lane's to-night?"

"Can't possibly be," came the answer. "I was lying in the brush, right by the gate, when the messenger got there, and I heard Jim give the order myself. Take it all the way through, unless we make a slip to-night, it will be one of the prettiest cases I ever saw."

"Yes," said the other; "but you must not forget that if all hinges on whether or not that bank watchman was right in thinking he recognized Wash Gibbs."

"The man couldn't be mistaken there," returned the other. "There is not another man in the country the size of Gibbs, except the two Matthews, and of course they are out of the question. Then, look! Jim Lane was ready to move out because of the drought, when all at once, after being away several days, the very time of the robbery, he changes his mind, and stays with plenty of money to carry him through. And now, here we are to-night, with that same old Bald Knobber gang, what's left them, called together in the same old way by Jim himself to meet in his cabin. Take my word for it, we'll bag the whole outfit, with the rest of the swag before morning. I'm glad that girl is away from home, though."

Sammy had heard enough. As the full meaning of the officers' words came to her, she felt herself swaying dizzily in the saddle and clung blindly to the pony's mane for support. Then something in her brain kept beating out the words, "Ride, Ride, Ride."

Never for an instant did Sammy doubt her father. It was all some horrible mistake. Her Daddy Jim would explain it all. Of course he would if—she could only get home first. But the men were between her and the path that led to the road.

Then she remembered that Young Matt had told her how Jake Creek hollow headed in the pinery below the ridge along which they went from Fall Creek to the Forks. It might be that this ledge would lead to a way out.

As quick as thought the girl slipped to the ground, and taking Brownie by the head began feeling her way along the narrow shelf. Dead leaves, tangled grass and ferns, all wet and sodden, made a soft carpet, so that the men behind the rock heard no sound. Now and then the lightning revealed a glimpse of the way for a short distance, but mostly she trusted blindly to the pony's instinct.

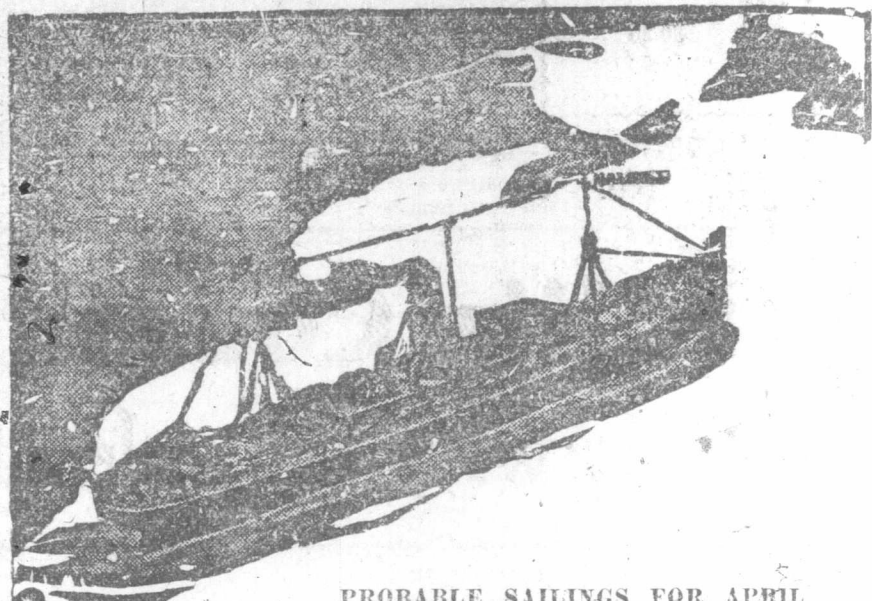
After a time that seemed hours, she noticed that the ledge was lost in the general slope of the hill. She had reached the head of the hollow. A short climb up the side of the mountain, and, pushing through the wet bushes, she found herself in the road. She had saved about three miles. It was still nearly five to her home. An instant later the girl was in the saddle and the pony was running his head.

At last they reached the top of the ridge. The way was easier now. Here and there, where the clouds were breaking, the stars looked thru them, but over the distant hills, the lightning still played, showing which way the storm had gone; and against the sky, now showing but dimly under ragged clouds and peeping stars, now outlined clearly against the flashing light, she saw the round treeless form of Old Dewey above her home.

(To be continued)

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