CHAPTER 1.

THE APPEARANCE OF A STRANGER. The little village of Beckett's Mill had never been in such a state of excitement in all its history.

Women, bareheaded and with rolled up siteves, rushed wildly to and fro across the town's single street or leaned from their open windows and called excitedly back and forth, asking a hundred questions that no one pretended to answer. The children huddled about their mothers, clinging to their skirts, their faces white and their eyes wide with wonder and fear. The men, awestricken, collected on the street corner in front of the postoffice and talked together in low, nushed tones.

The cause of all this excitement was the heavy booming of cannon away off to the south and the barely distinguishable rattle of musketry which told only too plainly that a battle was being fought and that men were being killed and mangled by their fellow men.

It was in the spring of 1861, at the beginning of the long and bloody war between the south and the north. The people at Beckett's Mill and all over that part of Missouri known as Possum Ridge had heard rumors of a coming war, but they had gone on in their quiet, uneventful way, giving little thought to what they hear and feeling confident that even if war came it

would not affect them.

And now, right at the beginning, a battle was being fought almost at their very doors. Just a few miles away General Sterling Price and his army of men in gray were laying siege to Lex-

ington and its garrison of men in blue. Unused as they were to war, the people of Possum Ridge saw a dreadful meaning in the rattle of the musketry and the booming of the heavy cannon. As bad as war is in reality, to the imagination of those people it was a thousandfold worse. It filled them with a feeling of awe and terror that is indescribable, and they could scarcely have. been more affected had they known that the end of time was at hand.

One old man known as Pap Sampson, who had long been looked up to as the village oracle, shook his head gravely and predicted sad and awful things to come.

"As I have said time an ag'in," he remarked, "the people have grown wicked an unruly in their stiff necked pride. he's a-gwine to he 'em, an he's a-gwine to humble 'em down into the very dust. I've see it a-comin for years, an I've knowed the mind of the Lord. I knowed he was patient an long sufferin; but I knowed he wa'n't a-gwine to bear with these people forever an that sooner or later he was a-gwine to humble 'em."

"Oh, my Lord, my Lord?" an old woman wailed as she paced slowly back and forth, frantically wringing her hands. "Oh, my Lord, jest a-listen to them cannons a-boomin an them guns a-poppin. Oh, Lordy, it's jest awful! They're a-killin an a-slaughterin an a slavin 'em by the thousands an afore it's over with they'll all be killed there won't be nary a one left. Oh, there won't be nary a one left. my Lord, my Lord, it's jest awful!"

"Well may you say that, Gran'ma Fell," another woman, a religious enthusiast, remarked, "an well may you trimble for all them thousands that are a-bein killed, for they are a-dyin in their sins an never stoppin to ax theirselves the question. 'Where are we a-gwine? It's the duty of good Christians to pray for 'em, an I'm a-gwine

Suiting her actions to her words, the woman knelt in the street and prayed long and fervently, but she prayed all alone. Everybody else was too excited to listen to her petitions even, much less take part in them.

"It's sholy awful," Jacob Hicks remarked, with an ominous shake of his head. "'Pears jest like the whole world is goin all to smash an that pretty soon there ain't goin to be no end to nothin. Seems like I can most hear the groans an the cries of the thousands that are mangled an dvin. My Lord, my Lord! I wonder what the world is ever goin to come to any-

"An the west ain't begin to come yit," Ebenezer Sparks said solemnly. "Lord, the war sin't fairly got started, an this fightin ain't nothin to what it will be before it's over. Jest wait till you've seed fightin as I've seed it, with thousands an thousands of men a-fightin an ever body a gittin killed! That thar's war shure enough."

"I wonder if that war'll git here?" some one asked in trembling and fear. At this question the men and women all looked inquiringly and with wide eyes in one another's face as if inviting an answer. After a short pause Ebenezer Sparks suid confidently:

"Land! Of course that war'll git here. How can it help it when it's so nigh? Yes, sir-ee You bet it'll git here. Why, them two armies will wallop each other all round over the country jest like a passel of dogs wallop one another all over ever whar when they git to fightin. Course that war'll git here, jest as shore as any-

"An we'll all be killed," one of the women exclaimed in terror. "Most shore to be," Ebenezer replied consolingly. "Don't see how it

can be belped wi b all them guns an

them cannons poppin away all the time ever which away. Yes, sir-ee! Ever body is most shore to git killed, women

an children as well as men." At this encouraging prospect the women set up a wailing and the children began to scream, while the faces of the men grew white and their limbs be-

gan to quake.
"Lord, Lord! Thar ain't no sparin nobody when them wars are a-gwine on," Ebenezer continued relentlessly, "an ever'body an ever'thing is jest shot all to pieces same as so many bogs. Yes, sir-ee! What one army don't git the other does, and atwist 'em they make a clean sweep, you bet. On, my, but them wars is dreadful things! I've fit in 'em enough to know, an to people that ain't pever had no experience they're jest awful. But thar ain't no use of bein skeered, an if you all had ever been in the tight places I have been in you wouldn't be neither. Land, I jest love war, an I ain't no more afraid of them guns than I would be of that many gnats. I'd rather fight than to eat, an if that battle keeps up much longer I don't believe I'm a-gwine to be able to bold myself out of it. I got to keep a powerful grip on myself to keep out of it now."

At that moment Jacob Hicks gave a start and stood listening intently. From the hard road leading south from the village there came the sound of a horse in full gallop. The rest all heard it and stood waiting in breathless silence. An inquiring glance passed from one to another through the group, but not a word was spoken.

Ten minutes passed, and then a lone horseman, wrapped in a cloud of dust, appeared on a little rise a quarter of a mile away. The women screamed, the children set up a cry and the men grew whiter than ever. Ebenezer Sparks-well, it was not until the excitement was over that any one knew what he did with bimself.

The horseman was bareheaded, and as he came madly charging into the village his hair was flying wildly in the wind, and his face looked almost ghostly in its pallor.

"Fly for your lives!" he shouted when he was near enough to make himself heard. "Fly quick, for they're a-comin, an you'll all be killed! Fly! Fly!" No one moved or spoke. They were all so terror stricken that they had lost power to move either limb or tongue

"They're a-comin; they're a-comin; a million of 'em!" the horseman shouted boarsely. "An they're a-killin an a-slavin an a-slaughterin an a-burnin as they go! Fly, fly, for your lives!"

Then as the full meaning of the borseman's words began to dawn on them a new and uncontrollable fear seized on the people. Some of them turned to run away as fast as their trembling limbs would carry them, some sat down and, hiding their faces, burst into lamentations, while two or three women fainted. The whole population of the village was on the verge of a wild panic, and in another moment there would have been a general stampede to the

eountry.
"Held!" suddenly cried a voice among them. It was a firm, confident voice and a voice to be heeded and obeyed. "Hold! There is no danger, and nobody is going to be burt."

The people looked around, and there in their midst they saw a tall, mild looking young man with a pair of keen, black eyes and a firm cast of countenance that were calculated to command respect and even obedience. He was a stranger there, and from whence



"Fly for your lives!" he had come and how he had so su

denly appeared in the village wer mysteries, but they were mysteries the people did not stop to consider just then. Had an angel from heaven apamong the denizens of Beckett's peared among the denizers of Beckett ly have considered it strange, for to them it was a day of strange and mysterious happenings.

"What do you mean?" the stranger demanded of the horseman. "And who

is it that is coming?" "Them armies," the horseman re plied. "Oh, my Lord, they're a-comin, a million of 'em, with guns an cannons, an they're a-killin an a-slaughterin an a-slayin an a burnin ever thing in their track. Ob, fly, fly before it's too late!"

The horseman spurred his horse and ttempted to ride on, but the stranger ook hold of the beidle with one hand and with the other drew a nistol from his pocket, which he pointed at the norseman's head.

"Damn you!" he said. "You make nother squeak or try to move another nch and I'll blow your head off. What do you mean by scaring all these women and children out of their lives? Haven't you got a particle of sense?" "But they're a-comin, I tell you," the other protested in trembling tones, his eyes starting from their sockets, "a million of"-

"Shut up, I tell you, or I'll shoot you down like a dog. Haven't you sense enough to know a drove of cattle from an army of men? Look behind you once, and you'll see what your millionof men amounts to."

The people had already looked and, realizing the ridiculousness of the situation, indulged in a little nervous laugh. Just coming over the rise was a herd of cattle which the farmers from near Lexington were hurrying back into the hills in order to save them from the depredations of the soldiers.

The horseman had caught a glimpse of the cattle back down the road and, being in a nervous state on account of



"Shut up, or I'll shoot you like a dog." the firing of the guns and cannon, had taken it for granted that the soldiers of both armies were coming.

The coolness and the firmness of the stranger reassured the people directly, and, casting aside a portion of their fear, they gathered about him and looked up to him as a superior being. The men admired him for his coolness, and the women admired him for that and magnificent and manly form.

One woman, young and beautiful and looked first on the stranger, then on

Lord, if he only was, if he only was!" The people, crowding about him, him and make over him, though he felt that he had done nothing to merit it. It was all very pleasant, and he enjoyed it, especially when he surprised young woman who had contrasted him right. with the horseman, and they had both that meeting of eyes there was recog-

nition-ave, more than recognition. Yes it was all very pleasant to the stranger until suddenly his past life flashed before him; then his face paled, and his heart grew sick, and a eyes. There was something there that nothing could blot out - nothing but

CHAPTER II.

SOME PEOPLE AND EVENTS. "You uns may all say jest what you uns pleases, but I've done said what I think an what I've said I stick to an I'll continer to stick to it till I know I'm wrong even if it kills ever bug in the boardin house an ever' calf in the old man's barn. I have said, an I still say, that that feller is a preacher an that he's on his way up to Deacon Smylar's to make an app'intment to preach at the Coon Run meetin house."

"Pap Sampson, you have said that, an you can jest keep on a-sayin it till the cows come home, but I tell you right now you ain't a-gwine to change my mind none. The words I spoke at first I speak ag'in, an them words is that that feller ain't no more a preach-

er than a rabbit is—nary a speck more."
"Jason Roberts, if that feller ain't no preacher, an you air so dead shore of it, maybe you'll jest be good enough to tell us what under the sun he may be." Pap Sampson thumped his cane down on the ground and straightene himself up with the air of one who has

thrown down the gauntlet and is waiting to see if anybody is going to be foolhardy enough to take it up. The young stranger, having quieted the fears of the people at Beckett's Mill, had departed on his way giving no account of himself further than to state that his name was James Melvin. He said nothing of whence he came nor whither he was going nor how he hap-

pened to be among them.

Very naturally the people were curious about him and equally as naturally they fell to discussing him as soon

as he was gone.
Pap Sampson being recognized as the village oracle very properly resented the audacity of Jason Roberts in dar-ing to dissent from his conjectures, and in uttering his last speech he felt that he had certainly put Jason down for

good and all. But Jason was more tenacious than Pap supposed, and after pendering the

"I may be mistaken, of course, an so may you, Pap, but mistaken or not my notion is that that feller is rich an that he has come here from somewhar to hav somethin"

Pap gave a contemptuous suiff and indulged in a little incredulous laugh. "You have said that, Jason Roberts," he remarked, "an mebby you have said true words an mebby you ain't. But if you thinks they are true words mebby you can go fudder an say what that feller is figurin on buyin." "Oh, I don't know," Jason replied.

"Most anything, I reckon." "That won't do, Jason. It won't nigh do. You can't edge out of a box in that sort of way. The fact is you ain't no notion under the sun what that feller is here for, an you mought jest as well

"An you ain't no notion neither, Pap, no more than I have.'

"I've said what he's here for, Jason, an I've said it boldly, an, as I remarked, the words what I have spoke I stick to, an I'll continer to stick to 'em as long as Gab'el's got a button left on his coat. That feller is a preacher, an --he's"-

"You have said that, Pap, an thar ain't no use in you chawin your hash over more than three times. But I know that feller ain't no preacher, 'cause when he come up here he cussed. He cussed Sim Banks, an he cussed him out plain. He said these words, Damn you, you make another squeak or try to move another inch, an I'll blow your head off.' Them was the identical words he said to Sim, for I heard him with my own ears, an I guess you heard him, too, Pap."

"I did, Jason. I heard him speak them very words. But what of it? Strictly speakin, 'damn' ain't no cuss word, an I 'low a preacher mought use it in a case of emergency, though it ain't jest proper.'

Jim Thorn, who had remained silent all this time, suddenly broke into the conversation by remarking with the air of one who has convictions and who is positive of their correctness: "You all have had your say about

that man, an now it's time I was havin mine. Some of you have reckoned one thing an some of you have reckoned another, but none of you ain't reckoned right. I know what that feller is, an I stand ready to bet a hoss

"What are the word you 'lows to speak, Jim Thorn." Pap Sampson asked contemptuously, "if you knows so much about it?"

"The word I 'low to speak is jest this, Pap Sampson, an you all will see it are a true word if you live long enough: That man ain't nothin more also for his handsome features and his | nor less than a rascal hidin out from the law. That's the word I speak, an it's a word I'll stand to if it kills me."

strangely unlike the people about her, | There was a moment of breathless silence while the people looked from the horseman. The first she regarded one to another, and nobody noticed with unmistakable admiration, but un- that one of the company colored and consciously that look changed to one after shooting a contemptuous glance of shame as she turned her eyes on the at Jim Thorn turned her face away. on was La "He's no such a man as that man and beautiful wife of Sim Banks, the there," she said to herself. "Oh, my | man who had fled before the advance of a herd of cattle.

The people of Beckett's Mill were would have made a hero of the stran- | like the rest of humanity in that they ger, and he allowed them to fawn on , were more ready to believe ill of a fellow creature than they were to believe good of him. For this reason the majority of those present fell at once in with Jim Thorn's idea and proceeded a look of admiration in the eyes of the to announce their belief that he was

To be sure, Pap Sampson shook his blushed and cast their eyes down. In head and thumped the earth with his cane and stoutly maintained that he was correct. So did Jason Roberts contend that he was right. Those two men had taken positions, and they felt that it was incumbent on them to maintain them, and nothing short of absowistful furtive expression came to his Jute conviction would induce them to recede so much as a hair's breadth. With the others, however, it was dif-

ferent. "Lord. I reckon Jim Thorn is shore right!" Hicks said, breaking the pause. Yes, sir-ee! Come to think of it, I had a sort of a sneakin notion while that feller was here that he wa'n't jest exactly plumb straight."

"I noticed," observed another, "that he had a sort of an uneasy look about the eye, like he was skeered that he mought be overtook an ketched up. Didn't none of you uns notice that?" "Lord, I reckon I did." another replied, "an I mind most distinctly that he didn't appear to act a bit nat'ral. It flashed over me in a minute that thar was somethin wrong about him some

"Shucks!" exclaimed a third. "I seed through that feller the very minute I clapped my eyes on him, an I knowed as well as if he'd told me that he was hidin from the law. I wouldn't never a-mentioned it, though, if somebody else hadn't a-mentioned it fust."

Jim Thorn listened in silence to all these men, a cold, incredulous smile on his face and a look of contempt shining in his eyes. He knew that every one of them was uttering a positive false-bood and that not one of them had thought of Jim Melvin as a rascal and a fugitive from justice until be had

suggested it. "Wonder what that chap's been up t now." some one said after a pause, "that he's had to take to hidin out this a-way?"

"Lord, I hope he aln't been an killed nobody," Hicks remarked, with a shudder, "but like enough that's jest what "Or it may be that he's stoled a hoss

nethin," another added. "I reckn he's most mean enough to do any thing, judgin by his looks." "Or he mought 'a' robbed a bank, for all we know. Land, like as not he's got a bushel of money hid about him

These were all merely surmises on the part of the speakers, for none of them knew a thing on earth about James Melvin. It is strange, however, how near to the truth a mere surmise

may sometimes draw. That James Melvin was a fugitive from the law was a fact and that some of the other surmises smacked strongly of the truth were also facts.

All at once at this point the attention of the villagers was drawn away from James Melvin and fixed on another subject. Mrs. Sparks had come dashing in among them, her face pale and haggard and her eyes wet with tears.

"Whar's my old man?" she cried. "Whar's Ebenezer? Hain't none of you uns seed nothin of him? Oh, my

Not until this moment had any one noticed that Ebenezer Sparks was absent, and consequently nobody was in a position to enlighten his other half as to his whereabouts. Mrs. Sparks looked eagerly from face to face, then broke forth in heartrending lamenta-

"Oh, my poor, brave, foolhardy Ebenezer!" she wailed. "I'll never git to him no more, never in all this world! He'll be killed! He's shore to be killed! I jest know he will!"

'Why; great granny, Mrs. Sparks." Hicks exclaimed, "whatever has got into you to make you talk that a-way Who or what is goin to kill Ebenezer, do you s'pose?"
"Oh, my Lord, Jake, the war'll kill

him! It's jest shore to, an I won't nevor git to lay my eyes on him ag'in." "Why land of Goshen, Mrs. Sparks, how do you go 'bout figgerin that out's How's the war gwine to kill Ebenezer when he ain't got nothin to do with it,

I'd like to know?" But he's a-goln to have somethin to do with it. Don't you all know that them cannons an them guns has done sot him plumb crazy an made him so wild to fight that he's jest put out over thar to fine the war?"

Some of the little group laughed out-Hicks did neither, although he was strongly tempted to laugh. He saw that Mrs. Sparks was intensely in earnest and sorely troubled, and he pitied her. Everybody knew Ebenezer Sparks was a braggart and a coward-everybody except his wife, the one person who should have known it better than

any one else on earth. The blind, unreasoning faith some wives repose in their husbands would be ridiculous were it not so pathetic, and Mrs. Sparks was of that class.

"I guess you ain't got no call to be' skeered about Ebenezer, Mrs. Sparks." Hicks remarked presently. "You can jest bet he ain't gone to jine no war an that he'll turn up here the fust thing you know."

The woman shook her head. "You can't fool me," she replied You uns all don't know Ebenezer like do. If you uns had ever heard him talk as I have, a-tellin about the times when he fit into the war an whupped the battles, you uns would know whar he is now. Time an ag'in I've heard him a-sighin an a-hopin for a war to git started; so's he could git a chanst to jine it an fight like he uster. He was shy, an he wouldn't tell you all

them things, but he told 'em to me, Even Hicks smiled at this. He could not help it when he remembered how often Ebenezer, sitting by the store stove of winter evenings, had boasted of his brave exploits in war and yearn ed, as a sick child yearns for its mother, for a chance to repeat them. Eben ezer's modesty, like his bravery, was a mere matter of assumption.

Just at that moment a boy came run

ning down the street in a high state of excitement, and, stopping in front of the group, panted out:

"You all better come an git Ebenezer Sparks outen the store cellar, 'cause



They found Ebenezer. if he stays thar much longer he'll be deader 'an a mackerel. He's most

played out now, I guess." There was a moment's silence; ther several of the men broke into a loud laugh. Presently Hicks turned to the boy and said: "Is Ebenezer in my store cellar?"

"You bet he is," the boy replied, "an he can't git out, nuther, 'less'n he's "What's happened to him?" "Why, he's all buried up under you

all's taters. They's most a thousand nels on top of him." Without another word Hicks led the way to the cellar, and there, sure enough, they found Ebenezer, the brave and the bold, buried under a mass of potatoes which had rolled

down over him when he had attempted to secrete himself by burrowing into He looked sheepish and cheap when he was hauled out, and when the me laughed at him he was in half a mind

to get angry, but he thought better of it and grinned instead. "Your woman 'lowed you war gwine to jine the war," Pap Sampson said, with a smile, "but we uns reckoned you warn't burtin so bad as all that to

whup no battles, an it looks like we ans war right." "I-I did start to jine the

Chenezer stammered, "but how could git to go any fudder when I done got kotched under them derned ta-

ters? "Did you 'low the war had done retched clean to Hicks' cellar," Pap Sampson asked, "an war you down thar lookin round 'mong them taters

for a battle to whup?" Ebenezer grinned, but made no reply. His wife, however, who had come up just in time to hear Pap's question, said.

"I reckon, Pap Sampson, you all thinks you uns is powerful smart. My land, didn't none of you uns never start nowhar an git lost on the way? Humph! Like as if Ebenezer couldn't 'a' fell into that cellar or got sort of rattled an run into it by mistake! Reckon the next thing you all 'ill be tryin to make out that Ebenezer are a

"Lord, Mis'us Sparks, we don't need to do nary sich a thing as that," Pap Sampson replied promptly. "Ebenezer has done made that all out as plain as the nose on your face hisself. Yes,

sir-ee." "Guess Ebenezer an Sim Banks has done showed jest how brave they are," Jason Roberts observed, with a laugh. "One of 'em a-hidin in a cellar an the other'n tearin down the road lippetyclippety, an all on account of a drove of old cows. Say, I bet the war'd soon be fit if they uns had a whack at it."

"Lord! Wouldn't it, though?" Pap said, with a chuckle. "Why, it'd jest be whupped all to frazzles in no time." Then everybody laughed-everybody except Sparks and Banks and their wives. The two first hung their heads in shame, Mrs. Sparks bristled up in her husband's defense, while Mrs. Banks gave her husband a look full of disgust and coolly turned her back on

right, while some of them only smiled. | Mrs. Mann noticed the conduct of Mrs. Banks and promptly called attention to it by saying:

"Lord, Loueesy, you ain't nigh quick to stand up for your husband as Betty Sparks is for her'n. You acts for all the world jest like you is plumb ashamed of Sim." "I am," Mrs. Ranks replied flatly.

"Who could help being ashamed of a coward, I'd like to know?" Sim looked up at his wife, a pained expression in his eyes and his face very

"Loueesy," he gasped, "you dast to talk that a-way about me an we uns jest been married a year?" "I dare to speak the truth," Mrs. Banks replied cuttingly, her lips curling with scorn. "I'm plumb ashamed

"Then you don't love me none," Sim whimpered broken heartedly. "A wife what loves her old man ain't goin to run him down afore other folks. Loueesy, you don't love me; you don't love

Mrs. Banks, instead of being touched, gave her husband one scornful glance and turned and walked away. With her utter want of tact Mrs.

"I guess, Sim Banks, Loueesy's been a-contrastin you with that Mr. Melvin, an I reckon she thinks you ain't much

shakes compared with him." Sim's eyes flashed fire in an instant, and, trembling with anger, he cried; "You are a-lyin, Mrs. Mann, when you say any sich a thing as that, an if you was a man I'd whup you till your hide wouldn't hold shucks. Hain't nobody got no call to speak nary a word ag'in Loueesy, an I ain't goin to stand still an let no sich a word be spoke. That's jest what I got to say, an I

Mrs. Mann sniffed contemptuously. "Sim Banks," she said, "you kin jest stand up for Loueesy all you pleases, but I mind she didn't stand up for you none, an my notion is she hain't goin to stand up for you, no matter what anybody says. I've got eyes, an what I see I see. Loueesy was plumb struck with that man, an you mark my words, Sim Banks, if she ever gits to know him she'll learn to love his little finger better than she'll ever love your whole body. You jest bear them words in mind, Sim Banks, an if you live you will find that they are the gospel truth." Mrs. Mann, though actuated by a selfish interest and influenced by that feeling of bitter enmity which a woman has for a successful rival in the af-

self supposed.

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