

Alone in The House.

JENNIE Bartlett's father and mother had been suddenly called away for the night to Parnassus Centre, where Mrs. Bartlett's sister had been taken very ill, and Jennie was left to keep the toll-gate alone. It was not a difficult task, for scarcely any one travelled over the Barrington Road after nine o'clock, and those who did passed through the open gate without paying toll.

But even if it had been harder, Jennie would have been equal to it. She had lived at the toll-gate ever since she was a baby, and knew perfectly well what to charge, and how to make proper change. Indeed, she often kept the gate for her father when he was at home, and people passing through would be apt to wonder how so bright and pretty a girl could grow up in so lonesome a place. Jennie, however, did not mind the lonesomeness. Her dearest wish was to go to boarding-school; but so long as she was at home it mattered little to her that Barrington was three miles off on the one road and Leicester ten miles on the other, and that there was scarcely a house between. She even liked the solitude, and was almost sorry when the telephone connecting Barrington with Leicester made a connection by the way with the toll-gate. Before, they seemed to be out of the world, and the people coming through the gate were like visitors from another sphere; now the frequent ringing of the call-bell reminded her that civilization was not so far distant, after all.

On this particular night there was not likely to be even the usual number of passers-by. It was dark and threatening. Looking out of the door about nine o'clock, Jennie could hardly see more than a hundred feet either up or down the road. It would be a bad night, she thought, for the gate to get accidentally shut; anybody coming along might run into it without warning; for that matter, people might run into the posts on either side. She hung a lantern on one post to prevent this accident, and going in the house, locked the door and went to bed. The fact that she was alone in the house did not disturb her in the least, and in a minute she was fast asleep.

Some time in the night she was suddenly awakened by the ringing of the telephone bell. She listened to hear whether it rang three times, which was the toll-gate signal; if often, to call up some of the other people on the same wire. Two of the connections she knew were in Leicester, the third and fourth was in Barrington Bank, the fifth in the tannery, and the sixth in the central office at Barrington. In her bewilderment Jennie could not at first determine how many times it did ring; but at last she decided it was six—for the Barrington central office. That did not mean the toll-gate, and Jennie prepared to turn over for another nap, when a sudden thought aroused her. It was certainly after midnight, and the central office did not keep open later than twelve o'clock. The bank, too, was shut up, and so was the tannery; on the whole line she was probably the only person who could hear the bell. What if it should be something important? Indeed, it would hardly ring at that time of night unless it were important. Quickly jumping out of bed, she ran to the instrument, put the receiver to her ear, and called through the transmitter, "Hello! hello!"

A voice came back to her so distinct that it seemed almost in the same room, saying, "Hello! is that the central office?" The tone was quick and sharp, and Jennie felt sure that something must have happened.

"No, sir, it's the toll-gate; I'm Jennie Bartlett," she called.

"Tell your father to come here right away," the voice said. "It's very important."

Jennie felt a sinking at her heart. "Father's away," she said, "and I'm here alone."

She heard a voice exclaim something in an impatient tone, and then the sound of two or three other people talking as though there was some doubt as to what could be done.

"Can I do anything?" she inquired, almost hoping that she could not.

Another conversation followed, which Jennie overheard; the speakers were no doubt nearer the telephone.

"Why do you want to let them get into Barrington at all?" one voice asked. "Why not stop them at the toll-gate?"

"To be sure!" said another. "If they get past the gate, like as not they'll turn down the Riverton road, and throw

Allen off the track. They can't turn off before they come to the gate; we are sure of them as far as that."

"Tell the girl!" and Jennie caught only a confusion of sounds.

Presently she heard another "Hello!"

"Hello!" she responded.

"The Leicester bank has been robbed," the voice went on, hurriedly, "by two men with a wagon and white horse. They have driven towards Barrington, with Mr. Allen and two constables in pursuit, half an hour behind. You must—"

Here the voice stopped as suddenly and completely as though it had had an extinguisher put over it. Even the hum of the electricity was cut off. It was in vain she rang the bell and called "Hello!" No one answered. Jennie felt once more the old sense that she was out of the world. Leicester seemed all at once hundreds of miles away.

But what was it she must or must not do? Why had not the connection lasted a minute longer, when her instructions would have been complete?

When were the robbers expected? Jennie had made a little calculation. If there had been some thirty minutes before any one started in pursuit, that would carry them, by fast driving half way to the toll-gate. If ten minutes had gone by before the telephone bell had rung, she might have looked for them within half an hour. What was she to do? The conversation which she had overheard came to her mind. "Stop them at the toll-gate," one of the voices had said. Very likely they would have told her to do that if the telephone had kept on. But how could a little girl arrest two armed and desperate men?

By this time she began to feel silly. She could not go to bed with this responsibility on her, even though she did not know how to meet it; so dressing herself, she opened the front door, and looked and listened. The night was darker than ever. A little space around the gate was lit up by the warning lantern. It would not help in stopping burglars, she suddenly thought, to illuminate their way; so going over to the light, she blew it out, and left the road in total darkness. That was at least one move toward the desired end.

All at once she thought of the gate.

"How stupid!" she said to herself. "Why didn't I think of that before?" It was fastened back against the front of the house but in a moment she had unlocked it and swung it around, until it stretched completely across the road. There was only a latch on the gate, but going into the house she brought out of one place a padlock, and from another a chain, with which she fastened it so securely that no ordinary strength could force it open. "They can't get through that," she said to herself; "and there isn't any way of getting around it." Then she went in the house, locked and bolted the door, rolled a bureau up against it, fastened all the windows, pulled down the shades and waited in the dark for the sound of wheels.

It was not long before they came, but to Jennie every minute seemed an hour, while every rustling leaf outside sounded like a man's stealthy tread. When at last she heard them coming, far up the road, her heart stood still. Nearer and nearer they came. Would they not see the gate? she wondered; the horse kept on; and instantly there was a sudden exclamation outside, a crash as though something had come into collision with the gate, the sound of splintering wood, and the noise of a plunging horse!

Jennie did not venture to move, she dared not go to the window, but sat in the middle of the room shaking with fear, and listening for what might be next. Presently steps sounded on the planks outside, and in a moment there was a rap on the door.

Jennie remained perfectly quiet, though her heart beat so loud that she thought they must hear it outside. In a moment the knocking ceased.

"Folks asleep," she could hear one of the men say.

"Asleep, or dead, or run away," the other one growled.

"Shall we try the window?"

Jennie trembled all over, but the sash held firm.

"Oh, come on!" exclaimed his companion. "Don't let's waste time; we can splice the shaft with the halter."

They moved off again, and Jennie breathed more freely. If the shafts were broken, it would take some time to mend them, and the pursuing party might arrive in time. Mr. Allen, whom Jennie knew to be the president of the Leicester