

JUST IN TIME.

THERE was something—I forget what—to take both grandmother and grandfather away from home one day in October of the year, long ago, when I lived with them in Burns Hollow.

There were two servants in the kitchen, Hannah Oaks and the lad, Anthony. I heard them laughing merrily together, for though Hannah was an old woman, she was full of fun, and in five minutes the door opened and Hannah came in with the tray.

"Please, miss," said she, as she set it down, "may I run over to Mapletown to-night?"

"You may go," I said, "but don't stay late. Grandma and grandpa may be away all night and I feel nervous. To be sure, there is Anthony, but I never rely on him. Be certain not to stay late."

Hannah promised, and after doing all that I required went away, and I heard her heavy shoes ten minutes after on the garden walk outside.

Early as it was I dropped the curtains and lit the wax candles on the mantel, and I sat a long time over my tea, finding a certain companionship in it, as women of all ages will.

I sat thus a long while, and was startled from my reverie by a rap at the door—a timid sort of a rap—so that I knew at once that it was neither a member of the house nor an intimate friend. I waited, expecting Anthony to open the door, but finding he did not, went to it myself.

It had grown quite dark, and the moon rose late that night. At first I could only make out a crouching figure at the bottom of the porch. But when I spoke it advanced, and by the light from the hall lamp I saw a black man. I had always had a sort of fear of the negro and instinctively shrank away, but as I did he spoke in a husky whisper:

"This is Marsa Morton's, isn't it, miss?"

"Yes," I replied. "But grandfather is out."

I retreated. He advanced.

"Please miss," he said, "Judge B—sent me here. He said Marsa Morton 'ud help me on. Let me stay here a night, miss. I's trabeled five days since I left him. Hidin' like. I's awful hungry—'pears like I'd drop, and old marsa is arter me. For de lub of heaven, miss, let me hide somewheres, and gib me jes' a crust. Marsa Judge promise Marsa Morton 'ud help me, an' it's kep me up. Missus will, I know."

I knew that my grandfather had given succor to some of these poor wretches before; but I felt that I might be doing wrong in admitting a stranger in his absence.

Caution and pity struggled within me. At last I said:

"You have a note from the Judge, I suppose?"

"I had some writin' on a paper," said the man, "but I's loss it. De night it rained so. Ah, miss, I's tellin' truff—Judge sent me, sure as I's a sinner. I's been help along so far, an' 'pears like I mus' git to Canady. Can't go back no ways. "Wife's dar an' de young uns. Got clar a year ago. Miss, I'll pray for you ebery day ob my life if you'll jess be good to me. Tank ye, miss."

For, somehow, when he spoke of wife and children I had stepped back and let him in.

It was the back hall door at which the rap had come and the kitchen was close at hand. I led him thither. When I saw how worn he was, how wretched, how his eyes glistened, and how under his rough blue shirt, his heart beat so that you could count the pulses, I forgot my caution.

The negro ate voraciously, as only a starving man could eat, and I left him to find Anthony, to whom I intended to give directions for his lodging through the night.

To my surprise, Anthony was nowhere in the house nor about the garden.

I longed for Hannah's return and listened very anxiously until the clock struck 9. Then, instead of her footsteps, I heard the patter of raindrops and the rumbling of thunder, and looking out saw that a heavy storm had suddenly come on.

Now, certainly grandpa and grandma would not return, and perhaps Hannah, waiting for the storm to pass, would not be home for hours. However, my fear of the negro was quite gone and I felt a certain pride in conducting myself bravely under these trying circumstances.

Accordingly I went upstairs, found in the attic sundry pillows and bolsters and carried them kitchenward.

"Here," I said, "make yourself a bed on the settee yonder and be easy for the night. No one will follow you in this storm, and no doubt grandpa will assist you when he returns. Good night."

"Good night, and God bless you, miss," said the negro, speaking still in the same husky whisper. And so I left him.

But not to go upstairs to my bedroom. I intended for that night to remain dressed and to sit up in grandpa's arm chair with candles and book to keep me company. Therefore I locked myself in, took the most comfortable position possible, and opening a book, composed myself to read.

Reading I fell asleep. How long I slumbered I cannot tell. I was awakened by a low sound like the prying of a chisel.

At first it mixed with my last dream thoroughly that I took no heed of it; but at last I understood that some one was working upon the lock of a door.

I sat perfectly motionless—the blood curdling in my veins, and still chip, chip, went the horrible little instrument until at last I knew whence the sound came.

Back of the sitting-room was grandpa's study. There, in a great, old-fashioned safe, were stored the family silver, grandpa's jewelry and sundry sums of money and important papers. The safe itself stood in a closet in a deep recess, and the closet the thief was at work.

The thief—ah! without doubt the negro I had admitted, and fed and sheltered.

I crept across the room out into the hall, and to the door. There, softly as I could, I unfastened bars and bolts; but alas! one was above my reach. I waited and listened.

Then I moved a hall chair close to the spot and climbed upon it. I doing so struck my shoulder against the door frame.

It was but a slight noise, but at that moment the chip of the chisel stopped. I heard a gliding foot, and, horror of horrors—a man came from the study, sprang toward me, and clutched me with both hands, holding my arms as in a vise, while he hissed in my ear:

"You'd tell, would ye? You'd tell help! You'd better have slept, you he! for, you see, you've got to pay for waking. I'd rather have let a chit like you off, but you know me know and I can't let ye live."

I stared in his face with horror, mingled with an awful surprise; for now that I was close to me I saw, not the negro, but our own hired man, Anthony—Anthony, whom I had supposed miles away with Hannah.

I pleaded with him wildly.

"Anthony—I never did you harm. I am young—I am a girl—don't kill me, Anthony. Take the money, but don't kill me, for poor grandpa's sake!"

"You'd tell on me," said Anthony doggedly. "Likely I'd be caught. But I've got to kill you."

As he spoke he took his hands from my shoulders and clutched my throat fiercely.

I had time to utter one suffocating shriek; then I was strangling, dying, with sparks before my eyes and a sound of roaring waves in my ears, and then—

What had sprang on my assassin with the swift silence of a leopard? What clutched me from him and stood over him with something glittering above his heart?

The mists cleared away—the blinding mists which had spread over my eyes, and as sight returned I saw the negro with foot upon Anthony's breast.

Ten minutes after—ten minutes