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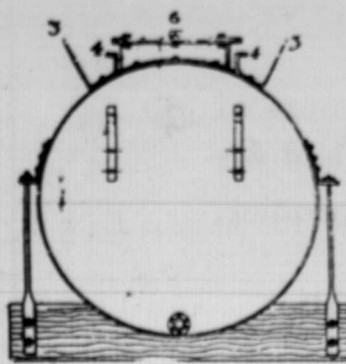
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Heroines Three

Continued from Page 8

Hiram Cherry cast back the door of a darkened chamber.

"The spare room 'll hold you like a penitentiary," he said briefly.

I glanced at Jim. I saw that he counselled resignation and prudence. Without a word I passed through the yawning portal. As soon as I had crossed the threshold, I turned. I saw nothing but the confining panels. The sound of a key turning in a lock fell on my ear. A click told me that a bolt had been shot home. I was a captive—shut up, immured, helpless.

I distinguished the tramp of Hiram Cherry's massive boots through the barrier. I detected the sound of Jim's lighter tread. The footsteps passed down the hall. By listening intently I could discover that Jim and his jailer had mounted to the story above. Soon I heard thuds over my head.

I cast my eyes about. The very appearance of the room was depressing. The hard board floor with the rag carpet by the bed looked cheerless. Here were Jim and I, who had started in pursuit of the fugitives, taken for the elopers. Here we were, boxed up in a perfectly strange farmhouse. Then the seriousness of it all as regarded Molly came back to me quite as quickly, and I sat motionless.

I heard Hiram Cherry coming down stairs. He passed my door. He went on to the room below. The house was the comfortable domicile of a fairly prosperous farmer. Hiram Cherry had gone outside. Gradually the sound of voices diminished. The people were going away. I could catch shouts and cries from the greater distance. Quiet gradually settled over all. As far as any stirring of life might indicate, the spot might have been deserted. I went to the window. The blinds were fastened. I did not need to open them, as I could look through. The ground was too far off to permit any hope of escape. I went back to my chair.

V

I started.

A gentle, rustling noise caught my attention. I jumped up and listened intently at the door. Something was moving outside. A faint scratching followed. I should have believed that it was the cat, only a cat would not have been fumbling with the knob. No cat would have inserted a key into the keyhole. I unquestionably heard some one breathe.

"Hush!"

"Who is it?" I whispered.

"Me," a girl's voice responded in tremulous tones. "It's me, Zelia—Zelia Cherry."

By this time she had unlocked the door. She swung it cautiously open and stood revealed to me—a sturdy, pretty, country girl of about eighteen years. She stole forward and closed the door again as carefully as she had opened it.

"Now," she said, her eyes shining and fairly panting in her excitement. "I only got home and heard what's happened. It's a sin an' a shame. Young people has rights in this country as well as old ones. I'm goin' to help you. Ma's over talking with Mrs. Tuttle, an' pa's gone down with the rest of the village to strut around about capturing you, an' get the news. There ain't no one home except me and Seth. I signalled to Seth the first thing. A dish-cloth in the south window 'll always bring him. An' now we're ready. The key to my room fitted this, an' now they'll see."

"What are you going to do?"

"Let you out, an' assist you in your flight—just as the noble Lady Gwendolin was assisted to fly from the baron's castle."

"But why are you doing this?" I asked, a momentary doubt overcoming me.

"Cause I know just how you feel, an' I'm there myself. Hasn't pa been set against Seth's an' my union and haven't we talked of eloping just as you have. When I heard that you'd been stopped in your desperate enterprise I made up my mind quick I'd do all I could to help you—an' I know that Seth would feel exactly as I do. He most always does, though you've no idea what a strong character he has—nor how he asserts himself—"

Again she opened the way into the hall and slid out before me. I followed and together we tip-toed down the stairs. I had felt like a criminal before, I felt like a conspirator now.

"Where are we going?" I inquired.

"To get Seth in the yard—"

"But Mr. Etheridge," I demurred.

"Hush!" she said mysteriously.

She thrust her head from the kitchen door. Immediately she stepped out boldly and I followed her. With practiced lips she gave a low whistle. A young man appeared from about the barn. He seemed to spring from the ground and I gazed in amazement at his tall, stooping figure.

"That's Seth Pringle," said Zelia as the man put one long leg over the rail fence and stood before me.

I acknowledged the informal presentation with a smile.

"Now, Seth," Zelia commanded, "get the ladder."

He disappeared for a moment within the open stable doors. When he emerged he carried a ladder which could have been borne only by such broad shoulders.

We followed him as he carried his burden round the corner of the building. The other side reached, we stood in a row and looked up. Underneath the eaves—lighting what was manifestly the attic—was a small, long window. The sash was open and as I gazed up I saw Jim's dusty face.

"Oh, Jim!" I exclaimed.

Tugging and straining, for even with his great strength the task was difficult, Seth Pringle elevated the ladder against the wall. I watched its upward course with eager anxiety. Measuring with my eyes the height seemed too great and I despaired of its ever serving as a means of escape. Slowly the top rose—slowly the bearer drew it toward the house. I could see that only a few feet intervened between the top and the sill from which Jim was leaning. Lightly he swung himself out; he began to descend.

"Oh, Jim," I exclaimed when at last he reached the earth. In my excitement I put both my hands on his shoulders and before I knew it,—for an instant,—he was holding me in his arms. I was brought to a realization of my position by observing the approving look on Zelia's round face, by hearing Seth Pringle's snigger. I freed myself with a rosy countenance and an effort to appear supremely unconscious.

"Shut up! Seth," ordered Zelia.

"Yes," said the devoted swain.

"Now, what can we do?" I asked quickly and with as business-like an air as I could assume at the moment.

"Your automobile was dragged with a team of horses into the yard behind the Columbia House," Zelia explained outlining her plan hurriedly. "If you can get that, giving them the slip will be easy. We'll show you."

"Lead on," cried Jim as he gave my hand a squeeze—this time without Zelia or Seth Pringle observing us.

In Indian file we made our way down into a little gully where a small brook gurgled through the farm. Concealed in that we advanced a hundred yards or so. Then the high bank stopped and coming out into a ploughed field we flew for the shelter of the fence. Stooping we stole along behind it.

The line of fence—the distance seemed endless as crouching and creeping we proceeded—ended abruptly at a narrow track through heavy trees. The way was little more than a cow path and screened as it was we promptly moved out into it and boldly stood erect. Down the lane we marched,—Zelia acting as our guide. Seth Pringle following as a kind of rear guard. I could see the dwellings of the village about me. Through the branches I observed the corner of a high brick building which I knew immediately was the Columbia House. Could we reach it?

"We're almost there," gasped Zelia.

"We—oh!"

A horrid little cur ran out and began to yelp shrilly. Startled by the barking and our approach, a flock of great, stupid geese waddled away with a tremendous clamor. Jim laughed.

"We are discovered," exclaimed Zelia in a tragic tone. "Some one's coming."

I heard the sound of a man running. I heard a boy's shout.

"Flight," announced Zelia, "is our only safety."

"We can't get to the automobile," said Jim, "that's clear. We'll have to take to our heels. Cross country's the only way."

I felt him seize my arm. Before I knew anything I found myself scurrying along at the top of my speed. Much tennis had put me in good condition. The short skirt which I wore made such a mad motion possible. On we went, taking everything as we came to it—jumping ditches, climbing fences. We reached the brook,

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