

THE REBELS

A STORY OF LOVE AND STRIFE IN THE THIRTIES

By MABEL BURKHOLDER

"YOU say he took the black mare, lad?"

"Boss, as sure's I'm alive, Sandy saddled black Jinny, and sneaked off, after dusk, down the plains road to Dundas Street."

Sandy's aged father groaned, and the callow youth, enjoying his advantage, repeated the news to an ever-increasing throng of thoughtful-browed men.

"What then, Hank?" asked Big Jim, the blacksmith, for it was around his forge that the discussion had arisen. "What inference do you draw from seein' a lad ride down Dundas Street at dusk?" Big Jim put on some superfluous h's when he got excited.

The others fattered. "What inference, indeed!" leered Sam Slip.

"If you mean to infer that the lad—that Sandy has—that is, that he is—well, that he has turned—"

"Rebel," finished Sam Slip, boldly. The word was out. The men, rough but honest, stood out in voiceless sympathy around Major Strong, the staunch old Loyalist, whose only son was being accused of having rebel leanings.

"Who said 'rebel'?" shouted the trembling old soldier, shaking his thin, white locks, wrathfully. "Let him step out, and I'll cram the lie down his throat with my sword. Sandy, who has served Colonel Allan Macnab at Dundurn Castle these two years; Sandy, who would have enlisted with the gallant men of Gore, when Macnab mustered them in Hamilton, only 'or his youth preventing it—Sandy, a rebel—Sandy, turned over to Mackenzie's gang in this troublous and bloody day! Who said 'rebel'? Let him come out!"

Sam Slip stepped out, pugnaciously; Big Jim shoved him back. "Cawn't a man go down Dundas Street," he said, his homely, honest face working with sympathy, "and mean nothing more than to trade at York?"

"That's so, by Jing," muttered Hank, with an ugly squint; "but tell me why he got a second horse, and led it behind the mare?"

"Did Sandy do that?"

"Aye." The bony, yellow-skinned fingers locked and unlocked joyously.

"The rebels all through these parts have been supplyin' horses to Mackenzie's men," insinuated Sam Slip; "and, as for Sandy's workin' up at Dundurn, that would account for his accurate knowledge of the situation—"

"It's a lie!" shrieked Major Strong. "Would you make him out a villainous spy?" Once more Big Jim interposed to prevent trouble between the two men.

"Hank," said the blacksmith with stern emphasis, "We know you hate Sandy Strong because of pretty Barbara Burns—God bless her red, Irish head—who is bound out to your grandfather, Stanford! We 'ave heard how Sandy, more than once, hinterfered, when he thought your family treated the girl unjustly. I warn you not to let this petty dislike give too strong a colouring to the tale you tell. Speak the truth, boy, or, by Jove, I'll make your head into jelly with my hammer!"

"There's the letter," muttered Hank, in fine disregard of the blacksmith's solemn mien.

"What letter? Tell us about it," commanded Big Jim.

"Well," said Hank, twisting his body into many snaky contortions, "it was this way. While Sandy was saddlin' the mare, I dropped in on him kinder unawares like. There I finds him in the old dark shed, strainin' his eyes to make out the words on a scrap of paper—a ragged bit torn off a sugar-bag, and scribbled over with lead pencil. By Jing, just as I looked in he was hugging it to his bosom. So says I, 'What's the news?' 'Nawthin'," says he, kinder short. 'From yer best girl?' says

I. 'None of yer business,' says he, curt-like. So I, fer sport, grappled fer it. I got it fer a second, then he jerked it away, and tore it as fine as pin-heads, and stamped on it. But I had seen enough. I had seen these yer words: 'To-morrow night is the time fer action. Come, with horses, to—' then he grabbed it."

At the end of this thrilling recital Hank gathered up his scraggy form, and stood at least a foot taller in his shoes. His hearers stood aghast at the bold evidence. They looked around for the Major; but as the recital progressed, the old father had drawn his cloak around him, and tottered away. When he was out of hearing, Big Jim said, solemnly: "This is, indeed, serious evidence of the poor, daft laddy's guilt. Shan't we take measures to protect the Burlington Plains and Hamilton?" And they answered with one accord: "Let every fighting man arm himself with what he has, and muster at Pete Smith's tavern at moon-rise."

Just then a dishevelled woman pushed into the centre

of the crowd. "Has York been taken? Have the brave men of Gore been defeated?" she cried, shuddering.

"Where is Macnab?" piped another thin, female voice.

"Macnab is not alive, depend upon it," someone made answer, "or the rebels would not be advancing without opposition."

This, taken home, and repeated with exaggeration by the excited women, soon became the alarm which roused the neighbourhood. "Colonel Macnab is killed, and the rebels are advancing, without opposition, against Hamilton."

Moonrise saw a motley crowd assembled in Pete Smith's tavern. The masculine portion of the population of Burlington Plains was out en masse, grotesquely, and, too often, inadequately clothed, for the exploit in hand that dark December night. There were women, too, who pressed upon the men their own scanty clothing, and tore the thin scarfs from their shivering breasts to wrap around their husbands' throats. Axes, pitchforks and cudgels were the weapons most in evidence, with, very rarely, a sword or gun. There is no order; nor, indeed, any that cared to enforce discipline of such a motley host. But they drank Pete's good "black strap" and shouted for the King and Constitution, until, in their frenzied fancy, they had already vanquished the rebels.

Presently, into their midst stalked an old man. His face was as white as the thin locks on his temples, but his eyes were flames. He had the erect bearing of the soldier, and handled a broadsword with great precision.

It was Major Strong. His eye singled out Sam Slip at once, for he went to him manfully, and held out his hand. "I take it back, Sam," he said, huskily.

"Let that go," said Sam Slip, hiccoughing. Then, to further prove his magnanimity, he added: "Boys, what d'yeh say to makin' the Major our leader?" Instantly the men took up the cry: "Let the Major lead! We follow the Major!"

Major Strong looked them over with fine contempt, opened his lips, but allowed the words to die away in a comical grimace. "Come on then, boys!" was all the crowd heard him say.

Solemnly they filed out of the little tavern, adjusting their caps and scarfs as they felt the needles of sleet prick their faces. An east wind drove up from the lake a raw and marrow-penetrating mist which fraze as it fell, and swathed the land in ice. Thick clouds scudded across the sky, obliterating the light of the young moon. The women hung on the skirts of the little army, admonishing, sobbing, praying; but the men were warm



"Who said Rebel?" shouted the trembling old soldier, shaking his thin white locks wrathfully.