

## Choice Literature.

## FOURTEEN TO ONE.

## A TRUE STORY.

BY ELIZABETH STUART PHILIPS, IN "THE CENTURY"

(Concluded.)

"Very well," said his wife, "if you've had your supper, I'll put away the dishes first."

She did so, methodically and quietly, as if nothing out of the common course of events had happened, or were liable to. Her matter-of-fact, housewifely motions calmed him, as she thought they would. It made things seem natural, home-like, safe, as if danger were a delirious dread, and home and love and peace the foundations of life, after war, in Ken-nessee.

When she had washed her hands and taken off her apron she came back to the lounge and brought the family Bible with her, and the hymnbook. They sang together one verse of their favourite hymn, "How firm a foundation," with the quavering, untrained voices that had "led the choir" of mountain meetings for almost thirty years of patient, self-denying missionary life. Then the parson read, in a firm voice, a psalm—the ninety-first, and then he took the hand of his wife in his, and they both knelt down by the lounge, and he prayed aloud, his usual, simple, trustful, evening prayer.

"O Lord, our heavenly father, Thy mercies are new every morning, and fresh every evening. We thank Thee that though danger walketh in darkness, it shall not come nigh us. We bless Thee that Thou art so mindful of Thine unworthy servant and handmaiden. We thank Thee that for nearly thirty years we have dwelt in conjugal love and peace beneath this comfortable roof. We thank Thee that no disaster hath rendered us homeless, and that the hand of violence hath not been raised against us. We pray Thee that Thou wilt withhold it from us this night, and that we may sleep in peace, and awake in safety—"

"Levi!"

A curdling whisper in his ear interrupted the old man's prayer. Levi! There are footsteps in the corn!"

"And awake in safety," proceeded the minister firmly, "to bless Thy tender care—"

He did not rise from his knees, but prayed on in a strong voice. So well trained to the religious habit was the woman that she did not cry out, nor interrupt him again, nor did she either arise from her knees before the old lounge.

Suddenly voices clashed, cries upsprang, and a dim sur- rounded the house.

"Come out! Come out! Out with the Yankee parson! Out with the nigger-praying preacher! Show yourself!"

The old man's hand tightened upon the hand of his old wife; but neither rose from their knees. The confusion was redoubled. Calls grew to yells. Heavy steps dashed foraging about the house. Cries of alarm from the outbuildings showed that the animals, which were the main support of the simple home, were attacked, perhaps destroyed. Then came the demand:—

"Come out! Come out to us! Show yourself, you sneak- ing Yankee parson! Out to us!"

A terrific knock thundered on the door. Steadily the calm voice within prayed on:—

"We trust Thee, O Lord, and we bless Thee for thy mercy to us ward—"

"Open the door, or we will pull your shanty down to hell!"

"Preserve us, O Lord, for Thy loving-kindness endureth forever—"

"Open the door or we'll set the torches to it, and burn you out!"

"Protect us, O God—"

The light lock yielded, and the old door broke down. With a roar the mob rushed in. They were not over sixteen, but they seemed sixty, storming into the little room. They were all masked, and all armed to the teeth.

Before the sight which met his eyes the leader of the posse fell back. He was a tall, powerful fellow, evidently by nature a commander, and the men fell back behind him.

"For Christ's sake, Amen," said the parson. He rose from his knees, and his wife rose with him. The two old people confronted the desperadoes silently. When the leader came closer to them he saw that the Rev. Mr. Matthew's hands were both occupied. With the left he grasped the hand of his wife. In the right he held his rusty pistol. The hymn-book had fallen to the floor; but the family Bible had been reverently laid with care upon the lounge, its leaves yet open at the ninety-first psalm.

"Gentlemen," said the parson, speaking for the first time, "I would not seem inhospitable, but the manner of your entering has perturbed my wife and interrupted our evening prayer, which it is our custom never to cut short for any insufficient cause. Now I am ready to receive you. Explain to me your errand."

"It's a short one," said a voice from the gang; "a rope and a tree will explain it easy enough."

"And nothing less!" cried a hoarse man. "We haven't come on any boys' play this time. We've had chase enough to find you for one night."

"That's so. It's no fool's errand, you bet. We ain't a tar-and-feathering party. We mean business."

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" pleaded the parson. He took the hand of his wife as he spoke, and lifted it to his shrunken breast, and held it there, delicately.

It was the piteous instinct of manly protection powerless to protect.

"In the name of civil justice, O my neighbours, wherein have I offended you?"

"That's our business. It's a serious one, too," cried the hoarse man. "Your pious prayer meetings have been a nur- sery of sentiments we don't approve, that's all. You've admitted a darkey among respectable white citizens. Come now, haven't you? Own up!"

"Certainly," replied the parson, promptly. "There was one coloured brother present at the means of grace on one or two occasions. I regretted that my congregation did not altogether welcome him. He was converted, by the mercy of

God, beneath my ministrations. Would ye that I denied him the poor benefit of my prayers? Nay, then, as God hears me, I did not, nor I would not."

The old man's dim eyes flashed. He raised his rusty pistol, examined it, and laid it down. Before sixteen well- armed men he began to comprehend the uselessness of his old weapon. He looked upon the array of grotesque and ghastly masks steadily; they rose like a row of demons before his biblically trained imagination. Mr. Matthews believed in demons, in a simple, unquestioning way.

"And you've preached against that which was no business of yours. Come now, own to it! You've meddled with the politics and justice of the State. You have preached against the movements of the Klan—what's left of it?"

"I own to it," said the parson, quietly. "I have delivered a discourse upon the topic of your organization. I felt called of heaven to do it. Is that all ye have against me? I pray you, for my wife's sake, who is disquieted by your presence, as you see, to leave us to ourselves and go your way—from under my roof."

"Have him out! Right smart now!" yelled the hoarse man. "Have him out without more words? A rope! A rope! Where's a rope?"

In a moment there was melee in the house. Cries arose to the effect that the rope was left in the corn. But a fellow who had been browsing about outside ran in with a rope in his hand and handed it to the hoarse man. The rope was Mrs. Matthews' clothes-line—Hezekiah's reins. The hoarse man gave it to the leader with an oath. The leader seemed to hesitate, and conferred in a whisper with the hoarse man and with others; but he was apparently overborne in his hesita- tion; he took the rope, and advanced with a certain respect to the parson, death in his hand, but who knew what pity in his heart? The mask hid it if any were there. The noise from the gang now increased brutally. Cries, oaths, curses, calls to death resounded through the pure and peaceful room. The hoarse man lasoed the rope and threw it around the parson's neck. At this moment a terrible sound rang above the confusion.

It was the cry of the wife.

She had possessed herself magnificently up to this time; the Puritan restraint set upon her white, old face; she had not said a word. No murderer of them all had seen a tear upon her withered cheek. But now nature had her way. She flung herself to her knees before the members of the Klan; then upon her husband's neck; back upon her knees—and so, in a passion wavering between agony and entreaty, pleaded with them. She cried to them for the love of heaven, for the love of God, for the sake of "Jesus Christ, His Son, their Saviour," so she put it, with the lack of tact and instinct for scriptural phraseology belonging to her devout, secluded life.

The phrase raised a laugh.

She cried to them for the love of their own wives, for the sake of their mothers, by the thought of their homes, for the sake of wedded love, and by his honourable life who had min- istered respected among them for nearly thirty years—by the misery of widowhood, and by the sacredness of age. In her piteous pleading she continued to give to the murderers, at the very verge of the deed, the noblest name known to the usages of safe and honourable society.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! For the sake of his gray hair! For the sake of an old wife—"

But there they pushed her off. They struck her hands from their knees; they tore her arms from his neck, and so were dragging him out, when the parson said in a clear voice:—

"Men! Ye are at least men. Give way to the demand of my soul before ye hurl it to your Maker. I pray you to leave me alone, for the space of a moment, with this lady, my wife, that we may part one from the other and no man witness our parting."

At a signal from the big leader the Klan obeyed this request. The men hustled out of the broken door. The leader stood within it.

"Watch 'em! Watch 'em like a lyax!" cried the hoarse man. But the leader turned his back.

"Deborah! Kiss me, my dear. You've been a good wife to me. I think you'd better go to your brother—in New Hampshire—I don't know. I haven't had much time to plan it out for you. Tell him I would have written to him if I had had time. Tell him to take good care of you. Oh—God bless you, my dear. Why don't you speak to me? Why don't you kiss me? Your arms don't stay about my neck, What! Can't you hold them there—at this last minute? Pray for me, Deborah. Deborah! why don't you answer me? O, my wife, my wife, my wife!"

But she was past answering; past the sacred agony of that last embrace. She had dropped from his breast, and lay straight and still as the dead at his feet.

"God is good," said the old man, solemnly. "Let her be as she is. I pray you do not disturb her. Leave her to the swoon which He has mercifully provided for her relief at this moment—and do with me as you will, before she awakens."

A certain perceptible awe fell upon the gang as the old man stepped around the unconscious form of his wife and presented himself in the doorway.

"He seems to be a grateful old cove," said one man in a low voice. "I don't know's I ever heard a fellow in his cir- cumstances give God a good name before."

"No snivelling!" cried the hoarse man. "Have it over!"

They took him out, and arranged to have it over as quickly as might be. It must be admitted that the posse were nerv- ous. They did not enjoy that night's work as much as they had expected to. They were in a hurry now to be done with it and away.

The old man offered no useless resistance. He walked with dignity, and without protest. He limped more than usual. His head was bare. His gray hair blew in the rising wind. The rope was around his neck.

Some one had wheeled out the blue waggon and rolled it under the locust tree. As this was done the old horse whinnied for his master from the stall. The parson was pushed upon the cart. Short work was made of it. As the leader of the gang stooped to help the hoarse man sling the rope over the burned bare limb of the tree and to adjust the noose about the old man's neck—which he made insistence on doing himself—a mask dropped. It was the face of the chief him- self which was thus laid bare, and alas, and behold, it was even no other than the face of—

"Deacon Memminger!" cried the old minister, speaking for the first time since he had been dragged from the house. The leader restored his mask to his downcast face, with evi- dent embarrassment.

"You!" said the parson. "I thought," he added gently, "that you had found a Christian hope. You communed with me at the sacrament two weeks ago. I administered it to you. I am sorry—Deacon Memminger."

The deacon muttered something, heaven knew what, and fell back a step or two. Some one else prepared the rope to swing the old man off. He who was known as Deacon Mem- minger dropped to the rear of the gang, surveyed it carefully, then advanced to his place at the front, nearest to the victim. Every man awaited his orders. He was their chief. They had organized and they obeyed, even in their decline, a mili- tary government. There was a moment's pause.

"I would like," said the doomed man, gently, "a moment to commend my soul to God."

This was granted him, and he stood with his gray head bowed. His hands were tied behind him. His face was not muffled; it had a high expression. His lips moved. Those who were nearest thought they heard him murmur the first words of the Lord's prayer. "Hallowed be Thy name," he said, and paused.

He said no more, nor seemed to wish it. So they ranged themselves, every man of them, to swing him off, each stand- ing with both hands upon the rope, which had been spliced by another to a considerable length. He who was called Memminger stood, as he was expected, to give the final order. There were fourteen of them—and Memminger the chief. Beside him stood an idle fellow, masked like the rest, but apparently a servant, a tool of Memminger's, who had especial service for him, perhaps. If the old man struggled too much or an accident happened—it was well to have an unoccupied hand. Memminger, in fact, had been well known in the gang for a good while, and was implicitly trusted and obeyed.

In putting their hands to the rope every man had of neces- sity to lay down his arms, both hands being clenched upon the rope, for a strong pull. They meant to break the old man's neck, and be done with it. Really, nobody cared to torture him.

"We're ready," said the hoarse man. "Give the signal, Cap'n. Hurry up."

The light of their lanterns and torches revealed the old man clearly—the long arm of the locust above his head—the stormy sky above. Death was no paler than the parson, but he did not struggle. His lips moved still in silent prayer. His eyes were closed. The men bent to the rope. The chief raised his hand. The last signal hung upon his next motion.

Then there was a cry. Then his mask dropped, and from the face of the man beside him another fell, and it was the face of a negro, obedient and mute. Then the powerful figure of the leader straightened. His familiar eye flashed with a perfectly unfamiliar expression. Two muscular arms shot out from his body; each hand held a revolver sprung at full cock and aimed.

"Boys!" he cried in an awful voice, "I am an officer of the United States! and the first man of you who lets go that rope, drops!"

In an instant, armed as he was, he covered them, every man of the unarmed and standing as they were. His negro servant sprang to his aid.

"The first man of you who stirs a muscle on that rope, dies!" thundered the quasi "Deacon" Memminger. "I am a deputy marshal, authorized by the National Government to investigate the Ku Klux Klan, and, in the name of the Stars and Stripes, and law and order, I arrest you, every man!"

And, in the name of simple wonder and astounding history, it was done. The negro servant, whose person bulged with hidden handcuffs, bound the men, one at a time, fourteen of them, while his master's experienced weapons covered the gang. They behaved with the composure of intelligent and dumbfounded men. One of them ventured an observation. It was the hoarse man.

With a volley of oaths he struggled mightily with his hand- cuffs and then held his tongue. The whole posse, by means of this simple stratagem, and by the help of that cowardice elemental in all brutes, was marched to the nearest sheriff; then delivered intact to the power of the law which the great mass of Kennebec citizens were ready to respect and glad to see defended. The county rang with the deed. Then whis- pers arose to hush it, for shame's sake. But it crept to Nor- thern ears, and I record it as it was related to me.

"How is it, Parson?" said Deacon Memminger with a bright, shrewd smile, as he cut the old man down, and helped him, trembling as he was, to dismount the shaky cart. "How is it, sir? Are you sorry I came to Church at your place—now? I thought—under the circumstances—and I was bound to save you. I and my ducky boy have been ferreting out this thing for a hundred days. I joined 'em the first week I came down here. I came on from Washington to do it. We mean to make a thorough job of it—and I guess we've done for 'em, this time. You'll excuse me, sir, but I've got to get 'em to the sheriff, and—I'd go back and see my wife now, if I were you."

She came to herself and to her misery soon enough, lying there upon the floor beside the lounge. The first thing which she saw distinctly was the Bible, opened at the psalm which has calmed more souls in shocks of danger and in the con- vulsions of lawless times than any other written words known to the literature of the race.

But the first thing which she heard was his precious voice, pitched low, and modulated tenderly, so as not to frighten her.

"Deborah! Deborah! Don't be scared, my dear. They have not hurt me—and I'm coming back to you."

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