

Reid Mayne

# The Fatal Cord, and The Falcon Rover



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**The Fatal Cord, and The Falcon Rover**

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# Mayne Reid

## The Fatal Cord and The Falcon Rover

### Story 1-Chapter I. A Bivouac of Boy Hunters

A Hunters' bivouac under the shadows of a Mississippian forest, in a spot where the trees stand unthinned by the axe of the woodman.

It is upon the Arkansas side of the great river, not far from the town of Helena, and in the direction of Little Rock, the capital of that State.

The scene is a small glade, surrounded by tall cottonwood trees, one of which on each side, conspicuously "blazed," indicates a "trace" of travel. It is that leading from Helena to a settlement on the forks of the White River and Caché.

The time is a quarter of a century ago, when this district of country contained a heterogeneous population, comprising some of the wildest and wickedest spirits to be found in all the length and breadth of the backwoods border. It was then the chosen home for men of fallen fortunes, lawyers and land speculators, slave-traders and swindlers, hunters, who lived by the pursuit of game, and sportsmen, whose game was cards, and whose quarry consisted of such dissolute cotton planters as, forsaking their homes in Mississippi and Tennessee, had re-established themselves on the fertile bottoms of the Saint Francis, the White and the Arkansas.

A glance at the individuals comprising the bivouac in question forbids the supposition that they belong to any of the above. There are six of them; all are boys, the oldest not over twenty, while the youngest may be under sixteen. And though at the same glance you are satisfied that they are but amateur hunters, the game they have succeeded in bringing down shows them gifted not only with skill but courage in the chase.

The carcase of a large bear lies beside them on the sward, his skin hanging from a tree, while several steaks cut from his fat rump, and impaled upon sapling spits, sing pleasantly over the camp fire, sending a savoury odour far into the forest around.

About a dozen huge bear-hounds, several showing scars of recent conflict, lie panting upon the grass, while just half this number of saddled horses stand "hitched" to the trees.

The young hunters are in high glee. They have made a creditable day's work of it, and as most of them have to go a good way before reaching home, they have halted in the glade to refresh themselves, their hounds, and their horses.

The chase has provided them with meat of which all are fond; most of them carry a "pine" of corn bread in their saddle-bags, and not a few a flask of corn-whiskey. They would not be the youth of Arkansas if found unprovided with tobacco. Thus furnished with all the requisites of a backwoods bivouac they are sucking it in gleesome style.

Scanning these young fellows from a social point of view you can see they are not all of equal rank. A difference in dress and equipments bespeaks a distinct standing, even in backwoods society, and this inequality is evident among the six individuals seated around the camp fire. He whom we have taken for the oldest, and whose name is Brandon, is the son of a cotton planter of some position in the neighbourhood. And there is wealth too, as indicated by the coat of fine white linen, the white Panama hat, and the diamond pin sparkling among the ruffles in his shirt-bosom.

It is not this, however, that gives him a tone of authority among his hunting companions, but rather an assumption of superior age, combined with perhaps superior strength, and certainly a dash

of *bullyism* that exhibits itself, and somewhat offensively, in both word and action. Most of the dogs are his, as also the fine sorrel horse that stands proudly pawing the ground not far from the fire.

Next to Master Brandon in degree of social standing is a youth, who is also two years his junior, by name Randall. He is the son of a certain lawyer, lately promoted to be judge of the district – an office that cannot be called a sinecure, supposing its duties to be faithfully performed.

After Randall may be ranked young Spence, the hopeful scion of an Episcopal clergyman, whose cure lies in one of the river-side towns, several miles from the scene of the bivouac.

Of lower grade is Ned Slaughter, son of the Helena hotel-keeper, and Jeff Grubbs, the heir apparent to Jeff Grubbs, senior, the principal dry goods merchant of the same respectable city.

At the bottom of the scale may be placed Bill Buck, whose father, half horse trader, half corn planter, squats on a tract of poor land near the Caché, of which no one cares to dispute his proprietorship.

Notwithstanding these social distinctions, there is none apparent around the camp fire. In a hunter's bivouac – especially in the South-Western States, still more notably within the limits of Arkansas – superiority does not belong either to fine clothes or far stretching lineage. The scion of the “poor white hack” is as proud of his position as the descendant of the aristocratic cotton planter; and over the camp fire in question Bill Buck talked as loudly, ate as choice steaks, and drank as much corn whisky as Alf Brandon, the owner of the hounds and the splendid sorrel horse.

In their smoking there might be noted a difference, Bill indulging in a council pipe, while the son of the planter puffs his principle that has come through the custom-house from Havanna. Luncheon over, it still seems too early to separate for return home, and too late to set the dogs on a fresh bear trail. The corn juice inspires to rouse a kind of diversion, suggesting trials of death or skill. Among these sons of Arkansas cards would have come in; but to their chagrin no one is provided with a pack. Bill Buck regrets this, and also Alf Brandon, and so, too, the son of the Episcopal preacher. They are too far from any settlement to send for such things. Pitch and toss is not sufficiently scientific; “hokey in the hole” is too childish, and it ends in a trial of strength and activity. There is wrestling, jumping over a string, and the leap horizontal. In all of these Alf Brandon proves superior, though closely tackled by the son of the squatter. Their superiority is actually owing to age, for these two are the oldest of the party.

The ordinary sports exhausted, something else is sought for. A new kind of gymnastics suggest itself or is suggested, by the stout branch of a cottonwood, stretching horizontally into the glade. It is nearly nine feet from the ground. Who can spring up, seize hold of it, and hang on longest?

Alf Brandon pulls out his gold repeater, formed with a moment hand, and the trial is attempted.

All six succeeded in reaching the limb, and clutching it. All can hang for a time; but in this Bill Buck beats his companions, Brandon showing chagrin. Who can hang longest with one hand? The trial is made, and the planter's son is triumphant.

“Bah!” cries the defeated Buck. “Who can hang longest by the neck? Dare any of you try that?”

A yell of laughter responds to this *jeu d'esprit* of the young jean-clad squatter.

## Story 1-Chapter II. Two Travellers

The silence succeeding is so profound that the slightest sound may be heard to a considerable distance. Though not professional hunters, these young Nimrods of the backwoods are accustomed to keep open ears. It is a rustling among the reeds that now hinders them from resuming conversation – the canes that hang over the trace of travel. There are footsteps upon it, coming from the direction of Helena. They are soft as the fall of moccasined or female foot. For all this, they are heard distinctly in the glade – hunters, horses, and hounds having pricked up their ears to listen.

Who comes from Helena?

The question has scarce shaped itself when the answer also assumes shape. There are two upon the trace – the foremost, a youth of about eighteen, the other, a girl, at least two years younger.

They are not like enough to be brother and sister. They may be of the same mother, but not father. If their father be the same, they must have come from two mothers.

Both are of interesting personal appearance, strikingly so. The youth is tall, tersely and elegantly formed, with features cast in a mould that reminds one of the Romagna; the same facial outline, the prominent nose and chin, the eagle eye, that in childhood has glanced across the Teverino, or the Tiber, and a complexion equally suggestive of Italian origin, a tinge of olive in the skin, slightly damasked upon the cheeks, with, above all, a thick *chevelure*, black as the plumage of a buzzard. While different in mien, this youth is dressed altogether unlike any of the young hunters who regard him from the glade. He is in true hunter costume, slightly partaking of the garb more especially affected by the Indian. His feet are in mocassins, his limbs encased in leggings of green-baize cloth, a calico hunting shirt covers his shoulders; while, instead of cap or hat, he wears the “toque,” or turban, long since adopted by the semi-civilised tribes of the frontier. He is equipped with powder-horn and bullet-pouch, slung crossways under his arm, armed with a long pea-rifle resting negligently over his left shoulder.

His companion has been spoken off as a girl. The designation stands good; but to describe her will require less minuteness of detail. Sixteen in countenance; older to judge by the budding promise of her beauty; clad in a gown of common homespun, copperas-dyed, ill stitched, and loosely adjusted; a skin soft as velvet, and ruddy as rude health can make it; hair to all appearance unacquainted with combs; yet spreading as the sun through a southern window; eyes like stars clipped from the blue canopy of the sky. Such was she who followed, or rather accompanied, the youth in the calico hunting shirt.

A sudden fire flashes into the eyes of Alf Brandon. It is the expression of a spirit not friendly to one of the new comers, which may be easily guessed, for the girl is too young and too fair to have excited hostility in the breast of any one. It is her companion against whom the son of the planter feels some secret resentment.

He shows it more conspicuously on a remark made by Bill Buck.

“That skunk is always sneaking about with old Rook’s gal. Wonder her dad don’t show more sense than let her keep company wi’ a nigger. She ain’t a goslin any more —*she ain’t.*”

Buck’s observation displays an animus ill concealed. He, too, has not failed to note the hidden beauty of this forest maiden, who is the daughter of an old hunter of rude habits, living in a cabin close by.

But the sentiments of the horse-dealer’s son, less refined, are also less keenly felt. His remarks add fuel to the fire already kindled in the breast of Brandon.

“The nigger thinks entirely too much of himself. I propose, boys, we take the shine out of him,” said Brandon, who makes the malicious challenge.

“Do the nigger good,” chimes in Slaughter.

“But is he a nigger?” asks Spence, to whom the strange youth has been hitherto unknown. “I should have taken him for a white.”

“Three-quarters white – the rest Indian. His mother was a half-bred Choctaw. I’ve often seen the lot at our store.”

It is Grubbs who gives this information.

“Injun or nigger, what’s the difference?” proceeded the brutal Buck. “He’s got starch enough for either; and, as you say, Alf Brandon, let’s take it out of him. All agreed, boys?”

“All! all!”

“What do you say, Judge Randall! You’ve not spoken yet, and as you’re a judge we wait for your decision.”

“Oh, if there’s fun to be had, *I’m* with you. What do you propose doing with him?”

“Leave that to me,” says Brandon, turning to the quarter-bred, who at this moment has arrived opposite the camp fire. “Hilloa Choc! What’s the hurry? We’ve been having a trial of strength here – who can hang longest by one arm to this branch? Suppose you put in too, and see what you can do?”

“I don’t desire it; besides, I have no time to spare for sport.”

The young hunter, halted for only a moment, is about to move on. The companionship thus offered is evidently uncongenial. He suspects that some mischief is meant. He can read it in the eyes of all six; in their faces flushed with corn-whiskey. Their tone, too, is insulting.

“You’re afraid you’ll get beat,” sneeringly rejoins Brandon. “Though you have Indian blood in you, there ought to be enough white to keep you from showing coward.”

“A coward! I’ll thank you not to repeat that Mr Alfred Brandon.”

“Well, then, show yourself a man, and make the trial. I’ve heard that you boast of having strong arms. I’ll bet that I can hang longer to that branch than you – that any of us can.”

“What will you bet you can?” asks the young hunter, stirred, perhaps, by the hope of employing his strength to a profitable purpose.

“My rifle against yours. Looking at the value of the guns, that is quite two to one.”

“Three to one,” says the son of the store-keeper.

“I don’t admit it,” answers the hunter. “I prefer my piece to yours, with all its silvering upon it. But I accept your challenge, and will take the bet as you have proposed it.”

“Enough. Now, boys, stand by and see fair play. You, Slaughter, you keep time. Here’s my watch.”

The girl is going away; Brandon evidently wishes she should do so. He has some design – some malice *prepense*, of which he does not desire her to be a witness. Whatever it is he has communicated it to his fellows, all of whom show a like willingness for Lena Rook – such is her name – to take her departure. Their free glances and freer speech produce the desired effect. Her father’s shanty is not far off. She knows the road without any guidance, and moves off along it, not, however, without casting a glance towards her late travelling companion, in which might be detected a slight shadow of apprehension.

She has not failed to notice the bearing of the boy hunters, their insulting tone and attitude towards him of Indian taint, who, for all that, has been the companion of her girlhood’s life – the sharer of her father’s roof, rude and humble as it is. Most of those left in the glade she knows – all of them by name – Buck and Brandon with a slight feeling of aversion.

But she has confidence in Pierre – the only name by which she knows her father’s guest – the name given by the man who some six years before entrusted him to her father’s keeping; she knows that he is neither child nor simpleton, and against any ordinary danger can well guard himself.

By this sweet reflection allaying her fears she flits forward along the forest path like a young fawn, emboldened by the knowledge that the lair of the protecting stag is safe and near.

## Story 1-Chapter III. Hanging by One Hand

“How is it to be?” asks Slaughter, holding the watch as if he were weighing it. “By one hand or both?”

“One hand, of course. That was the challenge.”

“I propose that the other be tied. That will be the best way, and fair for both parties. There will then be no balancing, and it will be a simple test of strength in the arm used for suspension. The right, of course. Let the left be tied down. What say you, boys?”

“There can be no objection to that. It’s equal for both,” remarks Randall.

“I make no objection,” says Brandon.

“Nor I,” assents the young hunter; “tie as you please, so long as you tie alike.”

“Good!” ejaculates Bill Buck, with a sly wink to his companions, unseen by the last speaker.

The competitors stand under the branch of the tree ready to be tied. A minute or two sufficed for this. It is done by a piece of string cord looped upon the left wrist, and then carried round the thigh. By this means the left arm is secured against struggling or in anyway lessening the strain upon the right.

Thus pinioned, both stand ready for the trial.

“Who goes first?” is the question asked by Slaughter. “The challenger, or the challenged?”

“The challenged has the choice,” answers Randall. “Do you wish it, Choc?” he adds, addressing himself to the quarter-bred Indian.

“It makes no difference to me whether first or last,” is the simple reply.

“All right, then; I’ll go first,” says Brandon, springing up, and clutching hold of the limb.

Slaughter, entrusted with the duty, appears to take note of the time.

One – two – three – three minutes and thirty seconds – told off on the dial of his watch, and Brandon drops to the ground.

He does not appear to have made much of an effort. It is strange he should be so indifferent to the losing of a splendid rifle, to say nothing of the humiliation of defeat.

Both seem in store for him, as the young hunter, bracing himself to the effort, springs up to the branch.

One – two – three – four – five. Five minutes are told off, and still does he remain suspended.

“How much longer can you stand it, Choc?” asks Bill Buck, with a significant intonation of voice. “Most done, ain’t ye?”

“Done!” scornfully exclaimed the suspended hunter. “I could stand it three times as long, if needed. I suppose you’re satisfied I’ve won?”

“A hundred dollars against my own rifle you don’t hang five minutes more.”

This comes from Brandon.

“I’ll take the bet,” is the rejoinder.

“Since you’re so confident, then, you’ll have to win or be hanged.”

“What do you mean by that? What are you doing behind me?” asked the young hunter.

These questions are put under a suspicion that some trick is being played. He hears a whispering behind him, and a rustling of leaves overhead.

“Only taking the precaution that you don’t hurt yourself by the fall,” is the answer given to the last.

It is followed by a peal of loud laughter, in which all six take part.

The young gymnast, still clinging to the branch, wonders what is making them so merry. Heir speeches have suggested something sinister, and glancing upward he discovers the trick played upon

him. There is a rope around his neck, with a running nose, its other end attached to a branch above. It has been adjusted in such manner that were he to let go his hold the noose would close around his throat, with his feet still dangling in the air.

“Hang on!” cried Slaughter, in a mocking tone. “Hang on, I advise you. If you let go you’ll find your neck in a noose.”

“You’ll keep the time, Slaughter,” directs Brandon, “Five minutes more. If he drops within that time, let him do so. Well, then, see how long the nigger can hang *by his neck*.”

Another loud laugh rings through the glade, echoed by all except him who is the subject of it.

The young hunter is furious – almost to frenzy. His cheek has turned ashy pale – his lips too. Fire flashes in his coal-black eyes. Could he but descend safely from the tree, at least one of his torturers would have reason to repent the trick they have put upon him.

He dare not let go his hold; he sees the set snare, and knows the danger of falling into it. He can only await till they may please to release him from his perilous position.

But if patient, he is not silent.

“Cowards!” he cries, “cowards every one of you; and I’ll make every one of you answer for it: you’ll see if I don’t.”

“Come, come, nigger,” retorts Brandon, “don’t talk that way, or we’ll not let you down at all. As good as you have been hanged in these woods for too much talking. Ain’t he a nice looking gallows bird just now? Say, boys! Suppose we call back the girl, and let her have a look at him? Perhaps she’d help him out of his fix. Ha! ha! ha!”

“You’ll repent these speeches, Alfred Brandon,” gasps the young man, beginning to feel his strength failing him.

“You be hanged – yes, hanged, ha! ha! ha!”

Simultaneous with the laugh a deer-hound, straying by the edge of the glade, gave out a short, sharp growl, which is instantly taken up by those lying around the camp fire. At the same instant is heard a snort, perfectly intelligible to the ears of the amateur hunters.

“A bear! a bear!” is the cry uttered by all, as the animal itself is seen dashing back into the cane-brake, out of which it had come to reconnoitre.

In an instant the hounds are after it, some of them already hanging to its hams, while the six hunters suddenly rush to their guns, and flinging themselves into their saddles, oblivious of all else, spur excitedly after.

In less than twenty seconds from the first howl of the hound there is not a soul in the glade, save that now in real danger of parting from the body that contains it.

The young hunter is left hanging – alone!

## Story 1-Chapter IV. A Forced Freedom

Yes. The young hunter is left hanging alone; hanging by hand and arm; soon to be suspended by the neck.

Good God! is there no alternative? No hope of his being rescued from his perilous situation?

He sees none for himself. He feels that he is powerless; his left hand is fastened to his thigh with a cord that cannot be stretched or broken. He tries wrenching the wrist with all his strength, and in every direction. The effort is idle, and ends only in the laceration of his skin.

With the right hand he can do nothing. He dare not remove it from the limb; he dare not even change its hold. To unclasp it would be certain strangulation.

Can he not throw up his feet, and by them elevate himself upon the branch? The idea at once suggests itself; and he at once attempts its execution. He tries once, twice, thrice, until he proves it impossible. With both arms it would have been easy; or with one at an earlier period. But the strain has been too long continued, and he sees that the effort is only bringing him nearer to his end. He desists, and once more hangs vertically, from the limb.

Is there no hope from hearing? He listens. There is no lack of sounds. There is the baying of dogs at intervals, culminating in grand chorus, or breaking into short, sharp barks, as the bear gives battle; there is the bellowing of bruin himself, mingled with the crackling of cane, as he makes his way through the thick-set culms; and, above all, the shouts and wild yelling of his human pursuers.

“Are they human?” asks he whom they have left behind. “Can it be that they have abandoned me to this cruel death?”

“It can – they have,” is the agonised answer, as the sounds of the chase come fainter from the forest. “They have – they have,” he repeats, and then, as the tide of vengeance surges up in his heart, he cries, through clenched teeth, “O God; give me escape – if but to avenge myself on those villains who have outraged your own image. O God! look down in mercy! Send some one to deliver me!”

Some one to deliver him! He has no hope that any of his late tormentors will return to do it. He had but little from the first. He knows them all, except Spence, the son of the clergyman; and from the late behaviour of this youth, he has seen that he is like the rest. All six are of the same stamp and character, the most dissolute scamps in the country. No hope now; for the bear hunt has borne them far away, and even their yells are no longer heard by him.

Hitherto he has remained silent. It seemed idle to do otherwise. Who was there to hear him, save those who would not have heeded. And his shouts would not have been heard among the howling of hounds, the trampling of horses, and the shrill screeching of six fiends in human form.

Now that silence is around him – deep, solemn silence – a new hope springs up within his breast. Some one *might* be near, straying through the forest or travelling along the trace. He knows there is a trace. Better he had never trodden it!

But another might be on it. Some one with a human heart. Oh, if it were only Lena!

“Hilloa!” he cries, again and again; “help, help! For the love of God, give help!”

His words are repeated, every one of them, and with distinctness. But, alas, not in answer, only in echo. The giant trunks are but taunting him. A fiend seems to mock him far off in the forest!

He shouts till he is hoarse – till despair causes him to desist. Once more he hangs silent. A wonder he has hung so long. There are few boys, and perhaps fewer men, who could for such a time have sustained the terrible strain, under which even the professional gymnast might have sunk. It is explained by his training, and partly by the Indian blood coursing through his veins. A true child of the forest – a hunter from earliest boyhood – to scale the tall tree, and hang lightly from its limbs,

was part of his education. To such as he the hand has a grasp prehensile as the tail of the American monkey, the arm a tension not known to the sons of civilisation.

Fortunate for him it is thus, or perhaps the opposite, since it has only added to his misery by delaying the fate that seems certainly in store for him.

He makes this reflection as he utters his last cry, and once more suffers himself to droop despairingly. So strongly does it shape itself, that he thinks of letting go his hold, and at once and for ever putting an end to his agony.

Death is a terrible alternative. There are few who do not fear to look it in the face – few who will hasten to meet it, so long as the slightest spark of hope glimmers in the distance. Men have been known to spring into the sea, to be swallowed by the tumultuous waves; but it was only when the ship was on fire, or certainly sinking beneath them. This is but fleeing from death to death, when all hope of life is extinguished. Perhaps it is only madness.

But Pierre Robideau – for such is the name of the young hunter – is not mad, and not yet ready to rush to the last terrible alternative.

It is not hope that induces him to hold on – it is only the dread horror of death.

His arm is stretched almost to dislocation of its joints – the sinews drawn tight as a bow-string, and still his fingers clutch firmly to the branch, lapped like iron round it.

His cheeks are colourless; his jaws have dropped till the lips are agape, displaying his white teeth; his eyes protrude as if about to start forth from their sockets.

And yet out of these wild eyes one more glance is given to the glade – one more sweep among the trunks standing around it.

What was seen in that last glaring look?

Was it the form of a fair girl dimly outlined under the shadow of the trees? or was it only that same form conjured up by a fancy flickering on the edge of eternity?

No matter now. It is too late. Even if Lena were there she would not be in time to save him. Nature, tortured to the last throes, can hold out no longer. She relaxes the grasp of Pierre Robideau's hand, and the next moment he is seen hanging under the branch, with the tightened noose around his neck, and his tongue protruding between his lips, livid with the dark mantling of death!

## Story 1-Chapter V. Two Old Chums

“Bound for Kaliforny, air ye?”

“Yes; that’s the country for me.”

“If what you say’s true, it oughter be the country for more’n you. Air ye sure ’beout it?”

“Seems believing. Look at this.”

The man who gave utterance to the old saw pulled from his pocket a small packet done up in fawn skin, and untying the string, exhibited some glistening nodules of a yellowish colour.

“True; seein’ air believin’, they do say, an’ feelin’ air second nater. Let’s lay my claw on’t.”

The packet was passed into his hands.

“Hang me eft don’t look like gold! an’ it feel like it, too; an’, durn me, ef’t don’t taste like it.”

This after he had put one of the nodules in his mouth, and rolled it over his tongue, as if testing it.

“It *is* gold,” was the positive rejoinder.

“An’ ye tell me, Dick Tarleton, they find these sort o’ nuts in Kaliforny lyin’ right on the surface o’ the groun’?”

“Almost the same. They dig them out of the bed of a river, and then wash the mud off them. The thing’s been just found out by a man named Captain Sutter while they were clearing out a mill-race. The fellow I got these from’s come direct from there with his bullet-pouch chock full of them, besides several pounds weight of dust in a canvas bag. He was in New Orleans to get it changed into dollars; an’ he did it, too, five thousand in all, picked up, he says, in a spell of three months’ washing. He’s going right back.”

“Burn me ef I oughten’t to go too. Huntin’ ain’t much o’ a bizness hyar any longer. Bar’s gettin’ pretty scace, an’ deer’s most run off altogether from the settlements springin’ up too thick. Besides, these young planters an’ the fellers from the towns air allers ’beout wi’ thar blasted horns, scarin’ everything out of creashun. Thar’s a ruck o’ them kine clost by hyar ’beout a hour ago, full tare arter a bar. Burn ’em! What hev they got to do wi’ bar-huntin’ – a parcel o’ brats o’ boys? Jess as much as this chile kin do’ to keep his ole karkidge from starvin’; and thar’s the gurl, too, growin’ up, an’ nothin’ provided for her but this ole shanty, an’ the patch o’ gurdun groun’. I’d pull up sticks and go wi’ ye, only for one thing.”

“What is that, Rook?”

“Wal, wal; I don’t mind tellin’ you, Dick. The gurl’s good-lookin’, an’ thar’s a rich young feller ’pears a bit sweet on her. I don’t much like him myself; but he *air* rich, or’s boun’ to be when the old ’un goes under. He’s an only son, an’ they’ve got one o’ the slickest cotton plantations in all Arkansaw.”

“Ah, well; if you think he means marrying your girl, you had, perhaps, better stay where you are.”

“Marryin’ her! Burn him, I’ll take care o’ thet. Poor as I am myself, an’ as you know, Dick Tarleton, no better than I mout be, she hain’t no knowin’ beout that. My little gurl, Lena, air as innocent as a young doe. I’ll take precious care nobody don’t come the humbugging game over her. In coorse you’re gwine to take your young ’un along wi’ ye?”

“Of course.”

“Wal, he’ll be better out o’ hyar, any how. Thar a wild lot, the young fellars ’beout these parts; an’ I don’t think over friendly wi’ him. ’Tall events, *he* don’t sort wi’ *them*. They twit him ’beout his Injun blood, and that sort o’ thing.”

“Damn them! he’s got *my* blood.”

“True enuf, true enuf; an’ ef they knew thet, it wudn’t be like to git much favour for him. You dud well in makin’ him grass under the name o’ the mother. Ef the folks ’beout hyar only knowed he war the son o’ Dick Tarleton – Dick Tarleton thet – ”

“Hush! shut up, Jerry Rook! Enough that you know it. I hope you never said a word of that to the boy. I trusted you.”

“An’ ye trusted to a true man. Wi’ all my back-slidin’s I’ve been, true to you, Dick. The boy knows nothin’ ’beout what you’re been, nor me neyther. He air as innocent as my own gurl Lena, tho’ of a diffrent natur altogither. Tho’ he be three parts white, he’s got the Injun in him as much as ef he’d been the colour o’ copper. Le’s see; it air now nigh on six year gone since ye seed him. Wal, he’s wonderful growed up an’ good-lookin’; and thar arn’t anythin’ ’beout these parts kud tackle on to him fur strenth. He kin back a squirrel wi’ the pea-rifle, tho’ thet won’t count for much now ef ye’re gwine to set him gatherin’ these hyar donicks an’ dusts. Arter all, thet may be the best for him. Huntin’ ain’t no account any more. I’d gi’e it up myself ef I ked get some eezier way o’ keepin’ my wants serplied.”

The man to whom these remarks were made did not give much attention to the last of them.

A proud fire was in his eye as he listened to the eulogy passed upon the youth, who was his son by Marie Robideau, the half-breed daughter of a famous fur-trader. Perhaps, too, he was thinking of the youth’s mother, long since dead.

“He will soon be here?” he inquired, rousing himself from his reverie.

“Oughter,” was the reply. “Only went wi’ my gurl to the store to git some fixin’s. It air in Helena, ’beout three mile by the old trace. Oughter be back by this. I war expectin’ ’em afore you kim in.”

“What’s that?” asked Tarleton, as a huge bear-hound sprang from his recumbent position on the hearth, and ran growling to the door.

“Them, I reck’n. But it moutn’t be; thar’s plenty o’ other people abeout. Make safe, Dick, an’ go in thar’, into the gurl’s room, till I rickaneitre.”

The guest was about to act upon the hint, when a light footstep outside, followed by the friendly whimpering of the hound, and the soft voice of her on whom the dog was fawning, caused him to keep his place.

In another second, like a bright sunbeam, a young girl – Lena Rook – stepped softly over the threshold.

## Story 1-Chapter VI. A Cry of Distress

Lena Rook knew the father of Pierre, and curtsied as she came in.

It was six years since she had seen him; but she still remembered the man who had stayed some days at her father's house, and left behind him a boy, who had afterwards proved such a pleasant playmate.

"Whar's Pierre?" asked her father. "Didn't he kum back from Helena along wi' ye?"

The guest simultaneously asked a similar question, for both had noticed a slight shadow on the countenance of the girl.

"He did," answered she, "as far as the clearing in the cane-brake, just over the creek."

"He stopped thar. What for?"

"There was a party of hunters – boys."

"Who mout they be?"

"There was Alf Brandon, and Bill Buck, and young Master Randall, the judge's son, and there was Jeff Grubbs, the son of Mr Grubbs, that keeps the store, and Slaughter's son, and another boy I don't remember ever seeing before."

"A preecious pack o' young scamp-graces, every mother's son o' 'em, 'ceptin the one you didn't know, an' he can't be much different, seein' the kumpany he air in. What war they a doin'?"

"They had hounds and horses. They had killed a bear."

"Killed a bar! Then that's the lot that went scurryin' up the crik, while ago. Durn 'em! they never killed the bar. The houn's dud it for 'em. Ye see how it air, Dick? Who the Eternal ked make his bread out o' huntin' hyar, when sech green goslines as them goes screamin' through the woods wi' a hul pack o' houn's to drive the game hillward! How d'ye know, gurl, thet they killed a bar?"

"I saw it lyin' on the ground, and the skin hanging to a tree."

"Skinned it, too, did they?"

"Yes. They had a fire, and they had been roasting and eating some of it. I think they had been drinking too. They looked as if they had, and I could smell whiskey about the place."

"But what kept Pierre among 'em?"

"They were trying who could hang longest to the branch of a tree. As Pierre was coming past, Alf Brandon stopped him, and challenged him to try too; then offered to make a bet – their rifles, I think – and Pierre consented, and I came away."

"Pierre should have kum along wi' ye, an' left them to theirselves. I know Alf Brandon don't owe the boy any goodwill, nor Bill Buck neyther, nor any o' that hul lot. I reckon they must a riled him, and roused his speerit a bit."

As the old hunter said this, he stepped over the threshold of the door, and stood outside, as if looking out for the coming of Dick Tarleton's son.

Seeing that he was listening, the other two, to avoid making a noise, conversed in a low tone.

"I kin hear the houn's," remarked Rook, speaking back into the cabin. "Thar's a growl! Durn me, ef they hain't started suthin'. Thar they go, an' the curs yellin' arter 'em as ef hell war let loose. Wonder what it kin mean? Some varmint must a crawled right inter thar camp. Wal, Pierre ain't like to a gone along wi' 'em, seein' as he's got no hoss. I reck'n we'll soon see him hyar, an' maybe Alf Brandon's rifle along wi' him. Ef it's bin who kin hang longest to the branch of a tree, I'd back him agin the toughest-tailed possum in all these parts. Ef that be the tarms o' the wager, he'll git the gun."

The old hunter returned chuckling into the cabin.

Some conversation passed between him and his daughter, about getting dinner for their guest; and then, thinking that the expected Pierre was a long time in showing himself, he went out again, and stood listening as before.

He had not been many moments in this attitude, when he was seen to start, and then listen more eagerly with an uneasy look.

Tarleton, looking from the inside, saw this, and so too the girl.

“What is it, Jerry?” inquired the former, moving hastily towards the door.

“Durned if I know. I heerd a shriek as ef some’dy war in trouble. Yes, thar ’tis agin! By the Eternal, it’s Pierre’s voice!”

“It is father,” said Lena, who had glided out, and stood listening by his side. “It is his voice; I could tell it anywhere. I fear they have been doing something. I’m sure those boys don’t like him, and I know they were drinking.”

“No, Dick! don’t you go. Some of them young fellurs might know you. I’ll go myself, and Lena kin kum along wi’ me. My gun, gurl! An’ you may turn, too, ole Sneezer; you’d be more’n a match for the hul pack o’ thar curs. I tell ye, you shan’t go, Dick! Git inside the shanty, and stay thar till we kum back. Maybe, ’tain’t much; some lark o’ them young scamp-graces. Anyhow, this chile’ll soon see it all straight. Now, Lena! arter yur ole dad.”

At the termination of this chapter of instructions, the hunter, long rifle in hand, hound and daughter close following upon his heels, strode off at the double-quick in the direction in which he had heard the cries.

For some moments their guest stood outside the door, apparently unresolved as to whether he should stay behind or follow his host. But, a shadow passing over his face, showed that some sentiment – perhaps fear – stronger than affection for his son, was holding him in check; and, yielding to this, he turned, and stepped back into the shanty.

A remarkable-looking man was this old acquaintance of Jerry Rook; as unlike the hunter as Hyperion to the Satyr. He was still under forty years of age, while Jerry had outlived the frosts of full sixty winters. But the difference between their ages was nothing compared with that existing in other respects. While Jerry, crooked in limb and corrugated in skin, was the beau ideal of an old borderer, with a spice of the pirate in him to boot, Richard Tarleton stood straight as a lance, and had been handsome as Apollo.

Jerry, clad in his half-Indian costume of skin cap and buck-leather, looked like the wild woods around him, while his guest in white linen shirt and shining broadcloth, seemed better suited for the streets of that city from which his conversation showed him to have lately come.

What strange chance has brought two such men together? And what stranger episode had kept them bound in a confidence neither seemed desirous of divulging?

It must have been a dark deed on the side of Dick Tarleton – a strong fear that could hinder a father from rushing to the rescue of his son!

## Story 1-Chapter VII. The Body Taken Down

The glade is silent as a graveyard, with a tableau in it far more terribly solemn than tombs. A fire smoulders unheeded in its centre, and near it the carcass of some huge creature, upon which the black vultures, soaring aloft, have fixed their eager eyes.

And they glance too at something upon the trees. There is a broad black skin suspended over a branch; but there is more upon another branch – there is a *man*!

But for the motions lately made by him the birds would ere this have descended to their banquet.

They may come down now. He makes no more motions, utters no cry to keep them in the air affrighted. He hangs still, silent, apparently dead. Even the scream of a young girl rushing out from the underwood does not stir him, nor yet the shout of an old man sent forth under like excitement.

Not any more when they are close to the spot with arms almost touching him – arms upraised and voices loud in lamentation.

“It is Pierre! Oh, father, they have hanged him! Dead – he is dead!”

“Hush gurl! Maybe not,” cries the old man, taking hold of the loose limbs and easing the strain of the rope. “Quick! come under here, catch hold as you see me, an’ bear up wi’ all your strength. I must git my knife out and spring up’ard to git at the durned rope. Thet’s it. Steady, now.”

The young girl has glided forward, and, as directed, taken hold of the hanging limbs. It is a terrible task – a trying, terrible task even for a backwoods maiden. But she is equal to it; and bending to it with all her strength, she holds up what she believes to be the dead body of her playmate and companion. Her young heart is almost bursting with agony as she feels that in the limbs embraced there is no motion – not even a tremor.

“Hold on hard,” urges her father. “Thet’s a stout gurl. I won’t be a minnit.”

While giving this admonition, he is hurrying to get hold of his knife.

It is out, and with a spring upward, as if youth had returned to his sinews, the old hunter succeeds in reaching the rope. It is severed with a “snig!” and the body, bearing the girl along with it, drops to the ground.

The noose is instantly slackened and switched off; the old hunter with both hands embraces the throat, pressing the windpipe back into it; then, placing his ear close to the chest, listens.

With eyes set in agonised suspense, and ears also; Lena listens, too, to hear what her father may say.

“Oh! father, do you think he is dead? Tell me he still lives.”

“Not much sign o’ it. Heigh! I thort I seed a tremble. You run to the shanty. Thar’s some corn whisky in the cubberd. It’s in the stone bottle. Bring it hyar. Go, gurl, an’ run as fast as your legs kin carry ye!”

The girl springs to her feet, and is about starting off.

“Stay, stay! It won’t do to let Dick know; this’ll drive *him* mad. Durn me, if I know what ter do. Arter all he may as well be told on’t. He must find it out, sooner or later. That must be, an’ dog-gone it ’twon’t do to lose time. Ye may go. No, stay! No, go – go! an’ fetch the bottle; ye needn’t tell him what it’s for. But he’ll know thars suthin’ wrong. He’ll be sure to know. He’ll come back along wi’ ye. That’s equilly sartin. Well, let him. Maybe thet’s the best. Yes, fetch him back wi’ ye. Thar’s no danger o’ them chaps – showin’ here arter this, I reck’n. Hurry him along but don’t forget the bottle. Now, gurl, quick as lightnin’, quick!”

If not quite so quick as lightning, yet fast as her feet can carry her, the young girl starts along the trace leading to the shanty. She is not thinking of the sad tidings she bears to him who hides in her father’s cabin. Her own sorrow is sufficient for the time, and stifles every other thought in her heart.

The old hunter does not stand idly watching her. He is busy with the body, doing what he can to restore life. He feels that it is warm. He fancies it is still breathing.

“Now, how it came about?” he asked himself, scanning the corpse for an explanation. “Tied one o’ his hands an’ not the tother! Thar’s a puzzle. What can it mean?”

“They must a meant hangin’ anyhow, poor young fellar! They’ve dud it sure. For what? What ked he hev done, to hev engered them? Won the rifle for one thing, an’ thet they’ve tuk away.

“The hul thing hez been a trick; a durned, infernal, hellniferous trick o’ some sort.

“Maybe they only meant it for a joke. Maybe they only intended scarin’ him; an’ jess then that varmint kim along, an’ sot the houn’s on to it, an’ them arter, an’ they sneaked off ’thout thinkin’ o’ him? Wonder ef that was the way.

“Ef it warn’t, what ked a purvoked them to this drefful deed? Durn me ef I kin think o’ a reezun.

“Wal, joke or no joke, it hev ended in a tregidy – a krewel tregidy. Poor young fellar!

“An’ dog-gone my cats! ef I don’t make ’em pay for it, every mother’s chick o’ ’em. Yes, Mr Alf Brandon, an’ you, Master Randall, an’ you, Bill Buck, an’ all an’ every one o’ ye.

“Ya! I’ve got a idea; a durned splendifirous idea! By the Eternal, I kin make a good thing out o’ this. Well thought o’, Jeremiah Rooke; ye’ve hed a hard life o’t lately; but ye’ll be a fool ef ye don’t live eezier for the future, a darned greenhorn o’ a saphead! Oh, oh! ye young bloods an’ busters! I’ll make ye pay for this job in a way ye ain’t thinkin’ o’, cussed ef I don’t.

“What’s fust to be done? He musn’t lie hyar. Somebody mout kum along, an’ that ’ud spoil all. Ef ’twar only meent as a joke they mout kum to see the end o’t. I heerd shots. That must a been the finish o’ the anymal. ’Tain’t likely they’ll kum back, but they may; an’ ef so, they musn’t see this. I’ll tell them I carried the corp away and berried it. They won’t care to inquire too close ’beout it.

“An’ Dick won’t object. I won’t let him object. What good would it do him? an’ t’other ’ll do me good, a power o’ good. Keep me for the balance o’ my days. Let Dick go a gold gatherin’ his own way, I’ll go mine.

“Thar ain’t any time to lose. I must toat him to the shanty; load enough for my old limbs. But I’ll meet them a comin’, an’ Dick an’ the gurl kin help me. Now, then, my poor Pierre, you come along wi’ me.”

This strange soliloquy does not occupy much time. It is spoken *sotto-voce*, while the speaker is still engaged in an effort to resuscitate life; nor is he yet certain that Pierre Robideau is dead, while raising his body from the ground and bearing it out of the glade.

Staggering under the load, for the youth is of no light weight, he re-enters the trace conducting to his own domicile. The old bear-hound slinks after with a large piece of flesh between his teeth, torn from the carcass of the butchered bear.

The vultures, no longer scared by man’s presence, living or dead, drop down upon the earth, and strut boldly up to their banquet.

## Story 1-Chapter VIII. The Oath of Secrecy

While the black buzzards are quarrelling over the carcase, not far off there is another carcase stretched upon the sward, also of a bear.

But the grouping around it is different; six hunters on horseback and double the number of dogs.

They are the boy hunters late bivouacking in the glade, and the bear is the same that had strayed unwittingly into their camp.

The animal has just succumbed under the trenchant teeth of their dogs, and a bullet or two from their rifles. Nor have the hounds come off unscathed. Two or three of them, the young and rash, lie dead beside the quarry they assisted in dragging down.

The hunters have just ridden up and halted over the black, bleeding mass. The chase, short and hurried, is at an end, and now for the first time since leaving the glade do they seem to have stayed for reflection. That which strikes them is, or should be, fearful.

“My God!” cries young Randall, “the Indian! We’ve left him hanging.”

“We have, by the Lord!” seconds Spence, all six turning pale, and exchanging glances of consternation.

“If he have let go his hold – ”

“If! He must have let go; and long before this. It’s full twenty minutes since we left the glade. It isn’t possible for him to have hung on so long – not possible.”

“And if he’s let go?”

“If he has done that, why, then, he’s dead.”

“But are you sure the noose would close upon his neck? You, Bill Buck, and Alf Brandon, it was you two that arranged it.”

“Bah!” rejoins Buck; “you seed that same as we. It’s bound to tighten when he drops. Of course we didn’t mean that; and who’d a thought o’ a bar runnin’ straight into us in that way? Darn it, if the nigger has dropped, he’s dead by this time, and there’s an end of it. There’s no help for it now.”

“What’s to be done, boys?” asks Grubbs. “There’ll be an ugly account to settle, I reckon.”

There is no answer to this question or remark.

In the faces of all there is an expression of strange significance. It is less repentance for the act than fear for the consequences. Some of the younger and less reckless of the party show some slight signs of sorrow, but among all fear is the predominant feeling.

“What’s to be done, boys?” again asks Grubbs.

“We must do something. It won’t do to leave things as they are.”

“Hadn’t we better ride back?” suggests Spence.

“Thar’s no use goin’ now,” answers the son of the horse-dealer. “That is, for the savin’ of him. If nobody else has been thar since we left, why then the nigger’s dead – dead as pale Caesar.”

“Do you think any one might have come along in time to save him?”

This question is asked with an eagerness in which all are sharers. They would be rejoiced to think it could be answered in the affirmative.

“There might,” replies Randall, catching at the slight straw of hope. “The trace runs through the glade, right past the spot. A good many people go that way. Some one might have come along in time. At all events, we should go back and see. It can’t make things any worse.”

“Yes; we had better go back,” assents the son of the planter; and then to strengthen the purpose, “we’d better go for *another purpose*.”

“What, Alf?” ask several.

“That’s easily answered. If the Indian’s hung himself, we can’t help it.”

“You’ll make it appear suicide? You forget that we tied his left arm. It would never look like it. He couldn’t have done that himself!”

“I don’t mean that,” continues Brandon.

“What, then?”

“If he’s hanged, he’s hanged and dead before this. We didn’t hang him, or didn’t intend it. That’s clear.”

“I don’t think the law can touch us,” suggests the son of the judge.

“But it may give us *trouble*, and that must be avoided.”

“How do you propose to do, Alf?”

“It’s an old story that dead men tell no tales, and buried ones less.”

“Thar’s a good grist o’ truth in that,” interpolates Buck.

“The suicide wouldn’t stand. Not likely to. The cord might be cut away from the wrist; but then there’s Rook’s daughter. She saw him stop with us, and to find him swinging by the neck only half-an-hour after would be but poor proof of his having committed self-murder. No, boys, he must be put clean out of sight.”

“That’s right; that’s the only safe way,” cried all the others.

“Come on, then. We musn’t lose a minute about it. The girl may come back to see what’s keeping him, or old Rook, himself, may be straying that way, or somebody else travelling along the trace. Come on.”

“Stay,” exclaimed Randall. “There’s something yet – something that should be done before any chance separates us.”

“What is it?”

“We’re all alike in this ugly business – in the same boat. It don’t matter who contrived it, or who fixed the rope. We all agreed to it. Is that not so?”

“Yes, all. I for one acknowledge it.”

“And I!”

“And I!”

All six give their assent, showing at least loyalty to one another.

“Well, then,” continues Randall, “we must be true to each other. We must swear it, and now, before going further. I propose we all take an oath.”

“We’ll do that. You, Randall, you repeat it over, and we’ll follow you.”

“Head your horses round, then, face to face.”

The horses are drawn into a circle, their heads together, with muzzles almost touching.

Randall proceeds, the rest repeating after him.

“We swear, each and every one of us, never to make known by act, word, or deed, the way in which the half-breed Indian, called Choc, came by his death, and we mutually promise never to divulge the circumstances connected with that affair, even if called upon in a court of law; and, finally, we swear to be true to each other in keeping this promise until death.”

“Now,” says Brandon, as soon as the six young scoundrels have shaken hands over their abominable compact, “let us on, and put the Indian out of sight. I know a pool close by, deep enough to drown him. If he do get discovered, that will look better than hanging.”

There is no reply to this astute proposal; and though it helps to allay their apprehensions, they advance in solemn silence towards the scene of their deserted bivouac.

There is not one of them who does not dread to go back in that glade, so lately gay with their rude roystering; not one who would not give the horse he is riding and the gun he carries in his hand, never to have entered it.

But the dark deed has been done, and another must needs be accomplished to conceal it.

## Story 1-Chapter IX. A Compulsory Compact

Heavy with apprehension, rather than remorse for their crime, the six hunters ride on towards the clearing.

They avoid the travelled track, lest they may meet some one upon it, and approach through the thick timber.

Guiding their horses, so as to make the least noise, and keeping the hounds in check, they advance slowly and with caution.

Some of the less courageous are reluctant to proceed, fearing the spectacle that is before them.

Even the loud-talking Slaughter would gladly give up the newly-conceived design, but for the manifest danger of leaving it undone.

Near the edge of the opening, still screened from their view by the interposing trunks and caneculms, they again halt, and hold council – this time speaking in whispers.

“We should not all go forward,” suggests the son of the tavern-keeper. “Better only one or two at first, to see how the land lies.”

“That would be better,” chimes in Spence.

“Who’ll go, then?”

Buck and Brandon are pointed out by the eyes of the others resting upon them. These two have been leaders throughout the whole affair. Without showing poltroon, they cannot hang back now.

They volunteer for the duty, but not without show of reluctance. It is anything but agreeable.

“Let’s leave our horses. We’ll be better without them. If there’s any one on the ground, we can steal back without being seen.”

It is the young planter’s proposition, and Buck consents to it.

They slip out of their saddles, pass the bridles to two of those who stay behind, and then, like a couple of cougars stealing upon the unsuspecting fawn, silently make their way through the underwood.

The clearing is soon under their eyes, with all it contains.

There is the carcass of the bear, black with buzzards, and the skin still hanging from the tree.

But the object of horror they expected to see hanging upon another tree is not there. That sight is spared them.

There is no body on the branch, no corpse underneath it. Living or dead, the Indian is gone.

His absence is far from re-assuring them; the more so as, on scanning the branch, they perceive, still suspended from it, a piece of the rope they had so adroitly set to ensnare him.

Even across the glade they can see that it has been severed with the clean cut of a knife, instead of, as they could have wished, given way under its weight.

Who could have cut the rope? Himself? Impossible! Where was the hand to have done it? He had none to spare for such a purpose. Happy for them to have thought that he had.

They skulk around the glade to get nearer, still going by stealth, and in silence. The buzzards perceive them, and though dull birds, reluctant to leave their foul feast, they fly up with a fright. Something in the air of the two stalkers seemed to startle them, as if they too knew them to have been guilty of a crime.

“Yes, the rope’s been cut, that’s sartin,” says Buck, as they stand under it. “A clean wheep o’ a knife blade. Who the divvel cud a done it?”

“I can’t think,” answers the young planter, reflecting. “As like as not old Jerry Rook, or it might have been a stray traveller.”

“Whoever it was, I hope the cuss came in time; if not – ”

“If not, we’re in for it. Bless’d if I wouldn’t liked it better to’ve found him hanging; there might have been some chance of hiding him out of the way. But now, if he’s been dropped upon dead, we’re done for. Whoever found him will know all about it. Lena Rook knew we were here, and her sweet lips can’t be shut, I suppose. If’t had been only Rook himself, the old scoundrel, there might have been a chance. Money would go a long ways with him; and I’m prepared – so would we all be – to buy his silence.”

“Lucky you riddy for that, Mister Alfred Brandon. That’s jest what Rook, ‘the old scoundrel,’ wants, and jess the very thing he means to insist upon hevin’. Now name your price.”

If a dead body had dropped down from the branch above them it could not have startled the two culprits more than did the living form of Jerry Rook, as it came gliding out of the thick cane close by the stem of the tree.

“You, Jerry Rook!” exclaim both together, and in a tone that came trembling through their teeth. “You here?”

“I’m hyar, gentlemen; an’ jess in time, seeing as ye wanted me. Now, name yur price; or, shall I fix it for ye? ’Tain’t no use ’fectin’ innercence o’ what I mean; ye both know cleer enuf, an’ so do this chile, all ’beout it. Ye’ve hanged young Pierre Robideau, as lived with me at my shanty.”

“We did not.”

“Ye did; hanged him by the neck till he war dead, as the judges say. I kim hyar by chance, an’ cut him down; but not till ’twar too late.”

“Is that true, Rook? Are you speaking the truth? Did you find him dead?”

“Dead as a buck arter gittin’ a bullet from Jerry Rook’s rifle. If ye don’t b’lieve it, maybe you’d step down to my shanty, and see him streeched out.”

“No, no. But we didn’t do it; we didn’t intend it, by Heaven!”

“No swarin’, young fellars. I don’t care what your intentions war; ye’ve done the deed. I seed how it war, and all about it; ye hung him up for sport – pretty sport that war – an’ ye rud off, forgittin’ all about him. Yur sport hev been his death.”

“My God! we are sorry to hear it. We had no thought of such a thing. A bear came along, and set the hounds up.”

“Oh, a bar, war it? I thort so. An’ ye tuk arter the bar, and let the poor young fellar swing?”

“It is true; we can’t deny it. We had no intention of what has happened; we thought only of the bear.”

“Wal, now, ye’ll have to think o’ something else. What d’ye intend doin’?”

“It’s a terrible ugly affair. We’re very sorry.”

“No doubt ye air, an’ ye’d be a precious sight sorrier of the young fellar had any kinfolk to look arter it, and call ye to account. As it be, there ain’t nobody but me – and he warn’t no kin o’ mine – only a stayin’ wi’ me, that may make it easier for you.”

“But, what have you done with – the – the body?”

Brandon asks the question hesitatingly, and thinking of Rook’s daughter.

“The body? Wal, I’ve carried it to the shanty, an’ put it out o’ sight. I didn’t want the hul country to be on fire till I’d fust seed ye. As yet, thar ain’t nobody the wiser.”

“And – ”

“An’ what?”

“Your daughter.”

“Oh! my darter don’t count. She air a ’bedient gurl, and ain’t gwine to blabbin’ while I put the stopper on her tongue. Don’t ye be skeeart ’beout thet.”

“Jerry Rook!” says Brandon, recovering confidence from the old hunter’s hints, “it’s no use being basket-faced over this business. We’ve got into a scrape, and and we know it. You know it, too. We had no intention to commit a crime; it was all a lark; but since it’s turned out ugly, we must make the best we can of it. You’re the only one who can make it disagreeable for us, and you won’t. I know

you won't. We're willing to behave handsomely if you act otherwise. You can say this young fellow has gone away – down to Orleans, or anywhere else. I've heard you once say he was not to be with you much longer. That will explain to your neighbours why he is missing. To be plain, then, what is the price of such an explanation?"

"Durn me, Alf Brandon, ef you oughtn't to be a lawyer, or something o' thet sort. You hit it so adzactly. Wal; let's see! I risk someat by keepin' your secret – a good someat. I'll stand a chance o' bein' tuk up for aidin' an' abettin'. Wal; let's see! Thar war six o' ye. My girl tolt me so, an' I kin see it by the tracks o' your critters. Whar's the other four?"

"Not far off."

"Wal; ye'd better bring 'em all up hyar. I s'pose they're all's deep in the mud as you in the mire. Besides, it air too important a peint to be settled by depity. I'd like all o' yur lot to be on the groun' an' jedge for theerselves."

"Agreed; they shall come. Bring them up, Bill."

Bill does as directed, and the six young hunters are once more assembled in the glade; but with very different feelings from those stirring them when there before.

Bill has told them all, even to the proposal made by Rook; and they sit upon their horses downcast, ready to consent to his terms.

"Six o' ye," says the hunter, apparently calculating the price of the silence to be imposed on him; "all o' ye sons o' rich men, and all able to pay me a hundred dollars a-year for the term o' my nateral life. Six hundred dollars. 'Tain't much to talk abeout; jess keep my old carcasse from starvin'. Huntin's gone to the dogs 'bout hyar, an' you fellars hev hed somethin' to do in sendin' it thar. So on that account o' itself ye oughter be only too happy in purvidin' for one whose business ye've speiled. It air only by way o' a penshun. Hundred dollars apiece, and that reg'larly paid *pre-annum*. Ye all know what 'tis for. Do ye consent?"

"I do."

"And I."

"And I."

And so signify the six.

"Wal, then, ye may go hum; ye'll hear no more 'beout this bizness from me, 'ceptin' any o' ye shed be sech a dod-rotted fool as ter fall behind wi' yur payments. Ef ye do, by the Eturnal –"

"You needn't, Jerry Rook," interposes Brandon, to avoid hearing the threat; "you may depend upon us. I shall myself be responsible for all."

"Enuf sed. Abeout this bar skin hanging on the tree. I 'spose ye don't want to take that wi' ye? I may take' it, may I, by way o' earnest to the bargain?"

No one opposes the request. The old hunter is made welcome to the spoils of the chase, both those on the spot and in the forest further off.

They who obtained them are but too glad to surrender every souvenir that may remind them of that ill-spent day.

Slow, and with bitter thoughts, they ride off, each to return to his own home, leaving Jerry Rook alone to chuckle over the accursed compact.

And this does he to his satisfaction.

"Now!" cries he, sweeping the bear's skin from the branch, and striding off along the trace; "now to make things squar wi' Dick Tarleton. Ef I ken do thet, I'll sot this day down in the kullinder as bein' the luckiest o' my life."

The sound of human voices has ceased in the glade. There is heard only the "whish" of wings as the buzzards return to their interrupted repast.

## Story 1-Chapter X. Vows of Vengeance

The sun is down, and there is deep darkness over the firmament; deeper under the shadows of the forest. But for the gleam of the lightning bugs, the forms of two men standing under the trees could scarce be distinguished.

By such fickle light it is impossible to read their features, but by their voices may they be recognised, engaged as they are in an earnest conversation.

They are Jerry Rook and Dick Tarleton.

The scene is on the bank of the sluggish stream or *bayou*, that runs past the dwelling of the hunter, and not twenty yards from the shanty itself. Out of this they have just stepped apparently for the purpose of carrying on their conversation beyond earshot of any one.

The faint light burning within the cabin, that part of it that serves as sitting-room and kitchen, is from the fire. But there is no one there; no living thing save the hound slumbering upon the hearth.

A still duller light from a dip candle shows through the slits of a shut door, communicating with an inner apartment. One gazing in might see the silhouette of a young girl seated by the side of a low bedstead, on which lies stretched the form of a youth apparently asleep. At all events, he stirs not, and the girl regards him in silence. There is just enough light to show that her looks are full of anxiety or sadness, but not sufficient to reveal which of the two, or whether both.

The two men outside have stopped by the stem of a large cottonwood, and are but continuing a dialogue commenced by the kitchen fire, that had been kindled but for the cooking of the evening meal, now eaten. It is still warm autumn weather, and the bears have not begun to hibernate.

“I tell ye, Dick,” says the old hunter, whose turn it is to speak, “for you to talk o’ revenge an’ that sort o’ thing air the darndest kind o’ nonsense. Take it afore the coort ideed! What good ’ud thet do ye? They’d be the coort, an’ the jedges; that is, thar fathers wud, an’ ye’d stan’ as much chance o’ gettin’ jestic out o’ ’em as ye wud o’ lightin’ yur pipe at one o’ them thar fire-bugs. They’ve got the money an’ the infloence, an’ thar’s no law in these parts, ’ithout one or the t’other.”

“I know it – I know it,” says Tarleton, with bitter emphasis.

“I reckon ye’ve reezun to know it, Dick, now you haven’t the money to spare for sech purposes, an’, therefore, on thet score ’ud stan’ no chance. Besides thar’s the old charge agin ye, and ye dasent appear to parsecute. It’s the same men ye see, or the sons o’ the same – ”

“Curse them! The very same. Buck, Brandon, Randall – every one of them. Oh, God! There is destiny in it! ’Twas their fathers who ruined me, blighted my whole life, and now the sons to have done this. Strange – fearfully strange!”

“Wal, it air kewrious, I admit, an’ do look as ef the devvil hed a hand in’t. But he’s playin’ agen ye, Dick, yet, an’ he’d beat ye sure, ef ye try to fout agin him. Take the device I’ve gin ye, an’ git out o’ his and thar way as fur’s ye kin. Kaliforny’s a good way off. Go thar as ye intended. Git rich if ye kin, an’ ye think ye hev a chance. Do that, and then kum back hyar ef ye like. When yur pockets are well filled wi’ them thar shinin’ pebbles, ye kin command the law as ye like, and hev as much o’ it as ye’ve a mind to.”

“I shall have it for my own wrongs, or for his.”

“Wal, I reckon you hev reezun both ways. They used *you* durn’d ill. Thar’s no doubt o’ that. Still, Dick, ye must acknowledge that appearances war dreadfully agin’ ye.”

“Against me – perdition! From the way you say that, Jerry Rook, I might fancy that you too believed it. If I thought you did – ”

“But I didn’t, an’ don’t, ne’er a bit o’ it, Dick. I know you war innercent o’ *thet*.”

“Jerry Rook, I have sworn to you, and swear it again, that I am as innocent of that girl’s murder as if I had never seen her. I acknowledge that she used to meet me in the woods, and on the spot where she was found with a bullet through her heart, and my own pistol lying empty beside her. The pistol was stolen from my house by him who did the deed. It was one of the two men; which, I could never tell. It was either Buck or Brandon, the fathers of those fellows who have been figuring to-day. Like father, like son! Both were mad after the girl, and jealous of me. They knew I had outshined them, and that was no doubt their reason for destroying her. One or other did it, and if I’d known which, I’d have sent him after her long ago. I didn’t wish to kill the wrong man, and to say the truth, the girl was nothing to me. But after what’s happened to-day, I’ll have satisfaction on them and their sons too – ay, every one who has had a hand in this day’s work!”

“Wal, wal; but let it stan’ over till ye kum back from Kaliforny. I tell, ye, Dick, ye kin do nuthin’ now, ’ceptin’ to git yur neck into a runnin’ rope. The old lot are as bitter agin you now as they war that day when they had ye stannin’ under a branch, wi’ the noose half tightened round your thrapple; and ef ye hadn’t got out o’ thar clutches, why, then thar’d a been an end o’t. Ef you war to show here agin, it wud be jest the same thing, an’ no chance o’ yur escapin’ a second time. Therefar, go to Kaliforny. Gather as many o’ them donicks, an’ as much o’ the dust as ye kin lay yur claws on. Kum back, an’ maybe then I mout do someat ter ’sist ye to the satisfacshin ye speak o’.”

Tarleton stands silent, seeming to reflect. Strange that in all he has said, there is no tone of sorrow – only anger. The grief he should feel for his lost son – where is it?

Has it passed away so soon? Or is it only kept under by the keener agony of revenge?

With some impatience, his counsellor continues: —

“I’ve gin you good reezuns for goin’, an’ if you don’t take my device, Dick, you’ll do a durned foolish thing. Cut for Kaliforny, an’ get gold – gold fust, an’ let the revenge kum arter.”

“No,” answers Tarleton, with an emphasis telling of fixed determination. “The reverse, Jerry Rook, the reverse. For me, the revenge first, and then California! I’m determined to have satisfaction; and, if the law won’t give it – ”

“It won’t, Dick, it won’t.”

“Then, this will.”

There is just light enough from the fire-flies to show Jerry Rook the white ivory handle of a large knife, of the sort quaintly called Arkansas tooth-pick, held up for a moment in Tarleton’s hand.

But there is not enough to show Tarleton the dark cloud of disappointment passing over the face of the old hunter, as he perceives by that exhibition that his counsel had been spoken to no purpose.

“And now,” said the guest, straightening himself up as if about to make his departure, “I’ve business that takes me to Helena. I expect to meet that fellow I’ve been telling you of who gave me the gold. He’s to come there by an up-river boat, and should be there now. As you know, I’ve to do my travelling between two days. You may expect me back before sunrise. I hope you won’t be disturbed by my early coming?”

“Come an’ go when you like, Dick. Thar ain’t much saramony ’beout my shanty. All hours air the same to me.”

Tarleton buttons up his coat, in the breast of which is concealed the before-mentioned tooth-pick, and, without saying another word, strikes off for the road leading towards the river and the town of Helena. It is but little better than a bridle trace; and he is soon lost to sight under the shadows of its overhanging trees.

Jerry Rook keeps his place, standing close to the trunk of the cottonwood. When his guest has gone beyond reach of hearing, an exclamation escapes through his half-shut teeth, expressive of bitter chagrin.

## Story 1-Chapter XI. Dick Tarleton

In the conversation recorded Dick Tarleton has thrown some light on his own history. Not much more is needed to elucidate the statement made by him – that he must do his travelling *between two days*. He has admitted almost enough to serve the purposes of our tale which refers only to him, though a few more words, to fill up the sketch, may not be out of place.

Richard Tarleton was, in early life, one of those wild spirits by no means uncommon along the frontier line of civilisation. By birth and breeding a gentleman; idleness, combined with evil inclinations had led him into evil ways, and these, in their turn, had brought him to beggary. Too proud to beg, and too lazy to enter upon any industrious calling, he had sought to earn his living by cards and other courses equally disreputable.

Vicksburg and other towns along the Lower Mississippi furnished him with many victims, till, at length, he made a final settlement in the state of Arkansas, at that time only a territory, and, as such, the safest refuge for all characters of a similar kind. The town of Helena became his head-quarters.

In this grand emporium of scamps and speculators there was nothing in Dick Tarleton's profession to make him conspicuous. Had he confined himself to card-playing, he might have passed muster among the most respectable citizens of the place or its proximity, many of whom, like himself, were professed "sportsmen." But, Dick was not long in Helena until he began to be suspected of certain specialities of sport, among others, that of *nigger-running*. Long absences unaccounted for, strange company in which he was seen in strange places – both the company and the places already suspected – with, at times, a plentiful supply of money drawn from unknown sources, at length fixed upon Dick Tarleton a stigma of a still darker kind than that of card-playing or even sharpening. It became the belief that he was a *negro-stealer*, a crime unpardonable in all parts of planter-land – Arkansas not excepted.

Along with this belief, every other stigma that might become connected with his name was deemed credible, and no one would have doubted Dick Tarleton's capability of committing whatever atrocity might be charged to him.

Bad as he was, he was not so bad as represented and believed. A professed "sportsman," of wild and reckless habits, he knew no limits to dissipation and common indulgence. Immoral to an extreme degree, it was never proved that he was guilty of those dark crimes with which he stood charged or suspected; and the suspicions, when probed to the bottom, were generally found to be baseless.

There were few, however, who took this trouble, for from the first Dick Tarleton was far from being a favourite among the fellows who surrounded him. He was of haughty habits, presuming on the superiority of birth and education, and – something still less easily tolerated – a handsome personal appearance. One of the finest looking men to be seen among the settlements, he was, it need hardly be said, popular among the fair sex – such of them as might be expected to turn their eyes upon a *sportsman*.

One of this class – a young girl of exceeding attraction, but, alas! with tarnished reputation – was at the time an inhabitant of Helena. Among her admirers, secret and open, were many young men of the place and of the adjacent plantations. She could count a long list of conquests, numbering names far above her own rank and station in life. Among those were Planter Brandon, the lawyer Randall, and, of lesser note, the horse-dealer, Buck. None of these, however, appeared to have been successful in obtaining her smiles, which, according to general belief, were showered on the dissolute but handsome Dick Tarleton.

However it might have gratified the gambler's vanity, it did not add to his popularity. On the contrary, it increased the spite felt for him, and caused the dark suspicions to be oftener repeated.

Such were the circumstances preceding a terrible tragedy that one day startled Helena out of its ordinary tranquillity. The young girl in question was found in the woods, at no great distance from the town, in the condition already stated by Dick Tarleton, murdered, and Dick himself was charged with being the murderer.

He was at once arrested and arraigned, not before a regular court of justice, but one constituted under a tree, and under the presidency of Judge Lynch. It was done in all haste, both the arrest and the trial, and equally quick was the condemnation. The case was so clear. His pistol, the very weapon that had sent the fatal bullet, in the hurry and confusion of escape, was let fall upon the ground close by the side of the victim. His relation with the unfortunate girl – some speech he had been heard boastfully to utter – a suspected disagreement arising from it – all pointed to Dick Tarleton as the assassin; and by a unanimous verdict of his excited judges, prompted by extreme vindictiveness, he was sentenced to hanging upon a tree.

In five minutes more he would have been consigned to this improvised gallows, but for the negligence of his executioners. In their blind fury they had but slightly fastened his hands, while they had forgotten to strip him of his coat. In the pocket of this there chanced to be another pistol – the fellow of that found. Its owner remembered it, and, in the hour of his despair, determined upon an attempt to escape. Wresting his wrists free from their fastening, he drew the pistol, discharged it in the face of the man who stood most in his way, and then clearing a track, sprang off into the woods!

The sudden surprise, the dismay caused by the death of the man shot at – for he fell dead in his track – held the others for some time as if spell-bound. When the pursuit commenced Dick Tarleton was out of sight, and neither Judge Lynch nor his jury ever set eyes upon him again.

The woods were scoured all round, and the roads travelled for days by parties sent in search of him. But all returned without reporting Dick Tarleton, or any traces of him.

It was thought that some one must have assisted him in his escape, and suspicion was directed upon a hunter named Rook, who squatted near White River – the Jerry Rook of our tale. But no proof could be obtained of this, and the hunter was left unmolested, though with some additional stain on a character before not reputed very clean.

Such is a brief sketch of the life of Richard Tarleton – that portion of it spent on the north-eastern corner of Arkansas. No wonder, with such a record, he felt constrained to do his travelling by night.

Since that fearful episode, now a long time ago, he had not appeared at Helena or the settlements around – at least not to the eyes of those who would care to betray him. Gone to Texas was the general belief – Texas or some other lawless land, where such crimes are easily condoned. So spoke the “Puritans” of Arkansas, blind to their own especial blemish.

Even Jerry Rook knew not the whereabouts of his old acquaintance, until some six years before, when he had come to his cabin under the shadows of the night, bringing with him a boy whom he hinted at as being his son, the youth who had that day afforded such fatal sport for his atrocious tormentors.

The link between the two men could not have been strong, for the hunter, in taking charge of the boy had stipulated for his “keep,” and once or twice, during the long absence of his father, had shown a disposition to turn him out of doors. Still more so of late; and doubly more when Lena showed signs of interference in his favour. Ever, while regarding his daughter, he seemed to dread the presence of Pierre Robideau, as if the youth stood between him and some favourite scheme he had formed for her future.

There need be nothing to fear now – surely not; if Dick Tarleton would but discharge the debt.

Ah! to suppose this would be to make the grandest of mistakes. The brain of Jerry Rook was at that moment busy revolving more schemes than one. But there was one, grand as it was, dire and deadly.

Let our next chapter reveal it.

## Story 1-Chapter XII. A Traitor's Epistle

As already chronicled, Dick Tarleton has started along the forest path, leaving Jerry Rook under the cottonwood tree.

For some time he remains there, motionless as the trunk beside him.

The exclamation of chagrin that escaped him, as the other passed beyond earshot, is followed by words of a more definite shape and meaning. It was Dick Tarleton who drew from him the former. It is to him the latter are addressed, though without the intention of their being heard.

"Ye durned fool! ye'd speil my plan, wud ye? An' I 'spose all the same if I war to tell ye o't? But I ain't gwine to do that, nor to hev it speiled neyther by sich a obs'nate eedyut as you. Six hundred dollars pre annul air too much o' a good pull to be let go agin slack as that. An' doggoned if I do let it go, cost what it may to keep holt o't. Yes, *cost what it may!*"

The phrase repeated with increased emphasis, along with a sudden change in the attitude of the speaker, shows some sinister determination.

"Dick," he continued, forsaking the apostrophic form, "air a fool in this bizness; a dod-rotted, purnsumptuous saphead. *He* git satisfakshun out o' that lot, eyther by the law or otherways! They'd swing him up as soon as seed; an' he'd be seed afore he ked harm 'ere a one o' them. Then tha don't go 'beout 'ithout toatin' thar knives and pistols 'long wi' them, any more'n he. An' they'll be jest as riddy to use 'em. Ef't kim to thet, what then? In coorse the hole thing 'ud leak out, an' whar'd this chile be 'beout his six hundred dollars?" Durn Dick Tarleton! Jest for the sake o' a silly revenge he'd be a speiln' all, leavin' me as I've been all my life, poor as he's turkey gobbler.

"It must be preevented, it must!

"How air the thing to be done? Le's see.

"Thar's one way I knows o', that appear to be eezy enuf.

"Dick has goed to the town, an's boun' to kum back agin *from* the town. That's no reeson why he shed kum back hyar. Thar's nobody to miss him! The gurl won't know he ain't gone for good. He's boun' to kum back afore mornin', an' afore thar's sunlight showin' among the trees. He'll be sartin' to kum along the trace, knowing thar's not much danger o' meetin' anybody, or bein' reco'nised in the dark. Why shedn't I meet him?"

With this interrogatory, a fiendish expression, though unseen by human eye, passes over the face of the old hunter. A fiendish thought has sprung up in his heart.

"Why shedn't I?" he pursues, reiterating the reflection. "What air Dick Tarleton to me? I haint no particklar spite agin him, thet is ef he'll do what I've devised him to do. But ef he won't, ef he won't —

"An' he won't. He's sed so, he's swore it.

"What, then! Am I to lose six hundred dollars pre-annum, jess for the satisfakshun o' his spite? Durned ef I do, cost what it may.

"The thing'd be as eezy es tumbling off o' a log. A half-an-hour's squatting among the bushes beside that ere glead, the pull in' o' a trigger, an' it air done. That mout be a leetle bit o' haulin' an' hidin', but I kin eezy do the fust, and the Crik 'll do the last. I know a pool close by, thet's just the very place for sech a kinceelmint.

"Who'd iver sispsect? Thar's nobody to know; neery soul but myself, an' I reck'n that ere secret 'ud be safe enuf in this coon's keepin'."

For some time the old hunter stands silent, as if further reflecting on the dark scheme, and calculating the chances of success or discovery.

All at once an exclamation escapes him that betokens a change of mind. Not that he has repented of his hellish design, only that some other plan promises better for its execution.

“Jerry Rook, Jerry Rook!” he mutters in apostrophe to himself, “what the stewpid hae ye been thinking o’. Ye’ve never yit spilt hewmin blood, an’ mustn’t begin thet game now. It mout lie like a log upon yur soul, and besides, it’s jest possible that somebody mout get to hear o’t. The crack o’ a rifle air a sespishous soun’ at any time, but more espeeshully i’ the dead o’ night, if thar should chance to be the howl of a wounded man comin’ arter it. Sposin he, that air Dick, warn’t shot dead at fust go. Durned ef I’d like to foller it up; neery bit o’t. As things stan’ thar need be no sech chances, eyther o’ fearin’ or failin’. A word to Planter Brandon ’ll be as good as six shots out o’ the surest rifle. It’s only to let him know Dick Tarleton’s hyar, an’ a direckshun beouts whar he kin be foun’. He’ll soon summons the other to ’sist him in thet same bizness they left unfinished, now, God knows how miny year ago. They’ll make short work wi’ him. No danger ov thar givin’ him time to palaver beout *thet* or anythin’ else, I reckon; an’ no danger to *me*. A hint’ll be enuf, ’ithout my appearin’ among ’em. The very plan, by the Eternal!”

“How’s best for the hint ter be konvayed to ’em? Ha! I kin rite. Fort’nit I got skoolin’ enuf for thet. I’ll write to Planter Brandon. The gurl kin take it over to the plantation. She needn’t be know’d eyther. She kin rop up in hur cloke, and gi’e it ter sum o’ the niggers, as’ll sure ter be ’beout the place outside. Thar’s no need for a answer. I know what Brandon’ll do arter gittin’ it.

“Thar’s no time to be squandered away. By this, Dick hes got ter the town. Thar’s no tellin’ how long he may stay thar, an’ they must intrap him on his way back. They kin be a waitin’ an’ riddy, in that bit o’ clearin’. The very place for the purpis, considerin’ it’s been tried arready.

“No, thar arn’t a minnit to be lost. I must inter the shanty, an’ scrape off the letter.”

Bent upon his devilish design, he hastens inside the house; as he enters, calling upon his daughter to come into the kitchen.

“Hyar gurl. Ye’ve got some paper ye rite yur lessons upon. Fetch me a sheet o’t, along wi’ a pen an’ ink. Be quick ’bout it.”

The young girl wonders what he can want with things so rarely used by him, but she is not accustomed to question him, and without saying a word, complies with the requisition.

The pen, inkstand, and paper, are placed on the rude slab table, and Jerry Rook sits down before it, taking the pen between his fingers.

After a few moments spent in silent cogitation, reflecting on the form of his epistle, it is produced.

Badly spelt, and rudely scrawled, but short and simple, it runs thus: —

“To Planter Brandin, Esquare.

“Sir, – I guess as how ye recollex a man, by name, Dick Tarleton; an’ maybe ye mout be desireous o’ seein’ him. Ef ye be, ye kin gratify yur desire. He air now, at this present moment, in the town o’ Helena, tho’ what part o’ it I don’t know. But I know whar he will be afore mornin’. That air upon the road leadin’ from the town t’ward the settlements on White River. He arn’t a gwine fur out, as he’s travellin’ afoot, and he’s sartin to keep the trace through the bit o’ clearin’ not fur from Caney Crik. Ef you or anybody else wants ter see him, that wud be as good a place as thar is on the road.

“Y’urs at command,

“A Strenger but a Fren’.”

Jerry Rook has no fear of his handwriting beings recognised. So long since he has seen it, he would scarce know it himself.

Folding up the sheet, and sealing it with some drops of resin, melted in the dull flame of the dip, he directs it as inside – “To Planter Brandin, Esquare.”

Then handing it to his daughter, and instructing the young girl how to deliver it *incog*, he despatches her upon her errand.

Lena, with her cloak folded closely around her fairy form, and hooded over her head, proceeds along the path leading to the Brandon plantation. Poor, simple child, herself innocent as the forest fawn, she knows not that she is carrying in her hand the death-warrant of one, – who, although but little known, should yet be dear to her – Dick Tarleton, the father of Pierre Robideau.

She succeeds in delivering the letter, though failing to preserve her incognito. The hooded head proved but a poor disguise. The domestic who takes the epistle out of her hand recognises, by the white out-stretched arm and slender symmetrical fingers, the daughter of “old Rook, de hunter dat live ’pon Caney Crik.” So reports he to his master, when questioned about the messenger who brought the anonymous epistle.

Known or unknown, the name is of slight significance; the withholding of it does not affect the action intended by the writer, nor frustrate the cruel scheme. As the morning sun strikes into the “bit o’ clearing” described in Jerry Rook’s letter, it throws light upon a terrible tableau – the body of a man suspended from the branch of a tree. It is upon the same branch where late hung the young hunter Robideau. *It is the body of his father.*

There is no one near – no sign of life, save the buzzards still lingering around the bones of the bear, and the quaint, grey wolf that has shared with them their repast. But there are footmarks of many men – long scores across the turf, that tell of violent struggling, and a patch of grass more smoothly trampled down beneath the gallows tree. There stood Judge Lynch, surrounded by his jury and staff of executioners, while above him swung the victim of their vengeance.

Once more had the travestie of a trial been enacted; once more condemnation pronounced; and that tragedy, long postponed, was now played to the closing scene, the *dénouement* of death!

## Story 1-Chapter XIII. Six Years After

Six years have elapsed since the lynching of Dick Tarleton. Six years, by the statute of limitations, will wipe cut a pecuniary debt, and make dim many a reminiscence. But there are remembrances not so easily effaced; and one of these was the tragedy enacted in the clearing, near the Caney Creek.

And yet it was but little remembered. In a land, where every-day life chronicles some lawless deed, the mere murder of a man is but a slight circumstance, scarce extending to the proverbial “nine days’ wonder.”

Richard Tarleton was but a “sportsman,” a gambler, if not more; and, as to the mode of his execution, several others of the same fraternity were treated in like fashion not long after, having been hanged in the streets of Vicksburg, the most respectable citizens of the place acting as their executioners!

Amidst these, and other like reminiscences, the circumstance of Dick Tarleton’s death soon ceased to be talked about, or even thought of, except, perhaps, by certain individuals who had played a part in the illegal execution.

But some of these were dead, some gone away from the neighbourhood; while the influx of colonising strangers, creating a thicker population in the place, had caused those changes that tend to destroy the souvenirs of earlier times, and obliterate the memories of many a local legend.

There was one memory that remained fresh – one souvenir that never slept in the minds of certain individuals who still lived in Helena or its neighbourhood. It was of another tragic occurrence that had taken place in the clearing near Caney Creek, on the day before that on which the condemned gambler had been dispatched into eternity.

The knowledge of this second tragedy had been confided only to a few; and beyond this few it had not extended. The disappearance of young Robideau, sudden as it had been, excited scarce any curiosity – less on account of the other and better known event that for the time occupied the attention of all.

The boy, as if feeling the taint of his Indian blood, and conscious of a distinction that in some way humiliated him, had never mixed much with the youth of the surrounding settlement, and for this reason his absence scarce elicited remark.

Those who chanced to make the inquiry were told that Jerry Rook had sent him back to his mother’s people, who were half-breed Choctaw Indians, located beyond the western border of Arkansas territory, on lands lately assigned to them by a decree of the Congress.

The explanation was of course satisfactory; and to most people in Helena and its neighbourhood the boy Robideau was as if he had never been.

There were some, however, who had better reason to remember him, as also to disbelieve this suspicious tale of Jerry Rook, though careful never to contradict it. These were the six youths, now grown to be men, the heroes of that wild, wicked frolic already recorded.

In their minds the remembrance of that fatal frolic was as vivid as ever, having been periodically refreshed by an annual disbursement of a hundred dollars each.

With the exacting spirit of a Shylock, Jerry Rook had continued to hold them to their contract; and if at any time remonstrance was made, it was soon silenced, by his pointing to an oblong mound of earth, rudely resembling a grave, under that tree where he had held his last conversation with *his friend*, Dick Tarleton.

The inference was that the remains of Pierre Robideau were deposited beneath that sod, and could at any time be disinterred to give damning evidence of his death.

Remonstrance was rarely made. Most of the contributors to Jerry Rook's income had become masters of their own substance. Still, the compulsory payment of a hundred dollars each was like the annual drawing of a tooth; all the more painful from the reflection of what it was for, and the knowledge as long as their creditor lived there was no chance of escaping it.

Painful as it was, however, they continued to pay it more punctually than they would have done had it been a debt recoverable by court, or an obligation of honour.

They were not all equally patient under the screw thus periodically put upon them. There were two more especially inclined to kick out of the terrible traces that chafed them. These were Bill Buck, the son of the horse-dealer, and Slaughter, who kept the "Helena Tavern," his father being defunct.

Neither had greatly prospered in the world, and to both the sum of a hundred dollars a-year was a tax worth considering.

In their conversations with one another, they had discussed this question, and more than once had been heard to hint at some dark design by which the impost might be removed.

These hints were only made in presence of their partners in the secret compact, and never within earshot of Jerry Rook.

It is true they were discouraged by the others less harassed by the tax, and, therefore, Jess tempted to take any sinister step towards removing it. They had enough to torment them already.

Both Buck and Slaughter were capable of committing crimes even deeper than that already on their conscience. Six years had not changed them for the better. On the contrary, they had become worse, both being distinguished as among the most dissolute members of the community.

A similar account might be given of the other four; though these, figuring in positions of greater respectability, kept their characters a little better disguised.

Two of their fathers were also dead – Randall, the judge, and Spence, the Episcopalian clergyman, while their sons, less respected than they, were not likely to succeed to their places.

Brandon's father still lived, though drink was fast carrying him to the grave, and his son was congratulating himself on the proximity of an event that would make him sole master of himself as also of a cotton plantation.

The store-keeper, Grubbs, had gone, no one knew whither – not even the sheriff, loth to let him depart – leaving his son to build up a new fortune extracted out of the pockets of the Mississippi boatmen. The horse-dealer still stuck to his old courses – coping, swopping, swearing – likely to outlive them all.

Among the many changes observable in the settlements around Helena there was none more remarkable than that which had taken place in the fortunes of Jerry Rook. It was a complete transformation, alike mysterious, for no one could tell how it came, or whence the power that had produced it. It appeared not only in the person of Jerry himself, but in everything that appertained to him – his house, his grounds, his dogs, and his daughter; in short, all his belongings.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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