

Literature.

THE LYNCHING AT ROCKBRIDGE

(BY MARY E. BRYAN, IN 'THE HALF HOUR'.)

A south-bound train on a Georgia railroad slacked its speed before stopping at a small town in the 'piney' woods.

"Shipley!" shouted the leather-lunged man.

A young woman in one of the day coaches got up, took her leather hand-bag from the seat and moved toward the door. Notwithstanding her evident youthfulness, her bearing was dignified, and the expression of her face earnest and noble.

She was the only passenger for Shipley, it appeared; and after a mail-bag had been thrown from the car to the platform and another mail-bag on board after the mail agent had unhooked it from the projecting beam to which it was suspended, the train moved off and disappeared around a curve.

The young woman looked forlornly about her. There was no one here to meet her; there was no one even at the station. The groups usually to be seen lounging about the platform when a train was due were conspicuously absent.

But the little town was not asleep. On the contrary, signs of something unusual and exciting were apparent.

In front of a low, flat-roofed brick store about fifty yards from the station, there was a little group of men, boys and dogs, gathered about a half dozen horsemen armed with guns. These had seemingly just ridden up to the stoop, and were being questioned and listened to with eager interest.

After a while a young man in a blue railway uniform—evidently the station agent—left the group about the horsemen and came toward the railway, followed by the burly negro porter. He approached the young woman, and, lifting his hat politely, asked if she would like to have a seat in the waiting-room, and her trunk taken to the baggage-office.

"I hardly know what to do," she answered, hesitatingly. "I expected to be met here by Mr. Woodbridge, or one of his household. I am to board in his home. I wrote that I would be here today; but no one has come, it seems."

"You are Miss Harte, the new teacher for the Woodbridge school?" he said.

"Yes, I am Miss Harte."

"Harley Woodbridge told me you were to come today, and that he or his father would meet you. I suppose the excitement has put it entirely out of their minds."

"The excitement?"

"Over the murder. Our little town is mightily stirred up over a murder that was committed last night. Cap'n Brown who's been store-keeper here for the last twenty years, was killed and robbed in his store—that brick building there. His throat was cut as he sat at his desk posting his books, and his watch and his money taken. The boys have been out in squads hunting the murderer. One squad has just come; they haven't found him. When they do, I guess they'll make short work of him."

"Do you mean they will hang him?"

"That's what they'll do."

"Is it right, do you think, to hang a man without giving him a trial by the laws of his country?"

"The law now-a-days is too slow for justice. There's too many tricks and twists in it. What with mistrials, and new trial, and the crazy dodge, murderers oost the state thousands of dollars and then get off free nine times out of ten. When a man's known to be guilty, I say string him up at once. It saves time and money. There's not a bit of doubt about who killed the old Cap'n. The fellow dropped his bloody knife, with his name carved on the handle, on the floor close to the body. I s'pose he couldn't find it in his hurry. Then he'd been heard to threaten that he'd kill Captain Brown for pressing his father for some money he owed him, and he was seen coming from the store late last night. The evidence is strong as eyesight—and stronger, too. He comes from bad stock, the young fellow does. His grandfather was hanged for killin' a man, and his brother got shot in a fight. He himself is an idle, rovin' chap, good for nothin' except to fish and hunt rabbits."

"Still, I hope they will let the man have his chance in a court of justice," remarked the girl.

She was beginning to look anxious. She was warm and fatigued; she wanted to get to her temporary home.

"How far is Rockbridge from here?" she inquired.

"About three miles. It's over in that direction—across the pine hills."

"I am afraid they did not get my letter or they have forgotten about my coming today. I think I will leave my trunk here and walk to Mr. Woodbridge's house if you will kindly give me directions as to the way."

"You couldn't get across the creek. The big rain last night washed away the footbridge."

"Then tell me where I can get a conveyance. Have you any public stable here?"

"No; and I am afraid you will not be able to get a horse. Every horse in the village has been pressed into service by the men who are after Dick Boyle. He's hidin' in the woods somewhere. The rain washed away the scent of his tracks, or the dogs would have found him long

before this."

"Are you sure I can't get a horse?"

"I don't know of one. Yes, there's Mrs. Wilby's old mare. The widow wouldn't let the boys have her; she'd dead against hangin'. But, then, her buggy's lost a wheel."

"I could ride the horse if I had a bridle and saddle."

"I can get a bridle and saddle, right enough. I can get 'em from the store, I think. I'll see about it, and about the horse too."

"Thank you; it will oblige me very much."

"You'll have to have some one to go with you," he said, turning around to speak to her after he had started off.

"No; I will not need anyone."

He looked at her with surprise and curiosity. The sun was getting low, the country and the people were wholly strange to the girl, and in the woods somewhere near was a desperate criminal, and bands of men pursuing him; yet she proposed to ride three miles along a strange road alone.

"You'd best stay in Shipley, Miss Harte," said the station agent. "We haven't a hotel, but—"

"Thank you; I think I will go on to my destination. The school opens day after tomorrow."

She still hoped Mr. Woodbridge who was one of the school directors, would come or send some one for her; but no conveyance came in sight along the road that had been pointed out to her, winding down from the pine hill on the other side of the railway. Nor had any come in sight when the widow's mare, bridled and saddled, came on the scene, led by a little negro boy, and accompanied by other boys, white as well as black.

The horse was led up to the platform, and Anna Harte sprang into the saddle with an ease that showed her to be no unpracticed horsewoman.

The ticket agent gave her instructions as to the way.

"It's a plain road—no forks," he said. "Cross the creek on the right hand; it won't be flank deep to the mare. The first two-storey white house you come to is Squire Woodbridge's place."

After she had reached the top of the hill he suddenly exclaimed to those around him: "I declare! I forgot to tell her about the short road from the old Wilby house, that comes into this road the other side of the creek. The Widow Wilby's been having hauling done from there. It's the mare's old home, and she's sure to take the road to it. But I reckon the girl will find out she's wrong as soon as she sees the road stops at the house, and she'll turn back. She's a smart one, she is."

It took place as he foresaw. Miss Harte rode on without mishap, forded the creek, and went on half a mile beyond. There she stopped, perplexed. There were two roads coming together at an obtuse angle. Which should she take? She hesitated a moment, then decided to take the one the mare seemed to prefer. It had marks of hoofs and wheels indicating that it had been lately travelled. After ascending a hill she saw at a little distance the roof of a house nearly hidden by large trees. A horse neighed. The mare quickened her pace to a brisk trot. As she approached the house, Miss Harte heard the sound of horses galloping off. When she came nearer she saw that the house was deserted and partly dismantled. She rode around to the side of the building where some great oaks grew; but she saw no one.

Perceiving that she had taken the wrong road, she was turning back, when her horse started and snorted as with fright. She looked about to find the cause. All at once she saw the figure of a man standing, as it seemed, in the gloom of a tree, with his hands behind him. In another breath she saw that the man was not standing; he was swinging from the end of a rope that was fastened to a limb above him.

The ghastly sight made her reel in the saddle for a second. Then she realized that this was the fugitive murderer; that he had just been hanged by the men who galloped off when they heard her approaching—fearing, no doubt, that it was the officers of the law.

She gazed with shuddering fascination at the purple face. Suddenly the features writhed in a spasm of agony; the legs drew up, a gurgling groan escaped the livid lips. The man was alive.

Instantly fright and horror were overcome by pity and the strong impulse to save a life. She urged her horse up to the swaying figure. The mare trembled and held back, but her rider's soothing words and firm hand reassured her.

The instant the animal touched the hanging man he instinctively struggled to gain a foothold upon her. Drawing up his legs, he succeeded in getting his knees upon the neck of the mare. Miss Harte dropped the bridle, grasped the man, and drew him to her. Holding him against her with one arm, she began to unfasten the rope around his neck with the other hand. Fortunately it was tied in a slip knot. She quickly loosened it, and drew the rope over his head. Then, still holding him, so as to break his fall, she let him drop to the ground. Immediately she jumped from the saddle and threw the bridle over a broken limb. She got on her knees beside the prostrate figure. He was breathing at intervals in convulsive gasps. She lifted his head to a better position, and rubbed his throat gently. She took a stout clasp-knife from her

pocket and cut the cord that bound his hands. By this time his breathing was less labored. In another moment he opened his eyes and stared about him bewilderedly.

"Did the rope break?" he gasped. It was as though he asked himself the question.

"No," quietly answered Miss Harte. "The rope has been unloosed. You are free."

He turned his eyes in the direction of her voice and saw her for the first time. "Did you do it?" he asked.

She told him "Yes."

"Where are the others?"

"They rode away just before I came up. I was going to Woodbridge and lost my way."

He raised himself to a sitting posture and saw the dangling rope. A look of terror came into his eyes.

"They will come back and hang me again," he said.

She looked at him steadily. "Was it you that killed the store-keeper last night?" she asked.

"No, it wasn't," he said simply. "I didn't know the cap'n was dead until this mornin'. I was on my way to the store to get some fish-hooks. I met a boy that my mother nursed with the fever last summer, and he told me Cap'n Brown had been killed in his store last night, and they'd found my knife, all bloody, lyin' on the floor, and they were gettin' their horses to lynch me, and I had better take to the woods. I came here and hid in a whole in the side of the old cellar that's half full o' water. They found me awhile ago."

"What made you hide?"

"Why, things was black against me, and I knew they wouldn't wait till they were cleared up. They're down on us in this neighborhood somehow. I had threatened the cap'n because I was mad. He'd charged pap twice for the same goods, and talked hard to the old man. But he'd found out he was wrong, and he sent for me to come to see him. I went last night, and we talked it over and parted friendly."

"And the knife—was it yours?"

"I s'pose it was. I loaned my knife to a fellow yesterday, and he never give it back to me. I was fishin' in the creek, and he come up—a sort o' tramp he was—and he asked me for my knife to cut a cane for a fishin'-pole. He took it and went in the cane brake, and I never saw him again. He was a bad lookin' chap, and I reckon 'twas him that cut the cap'n's throat, and 'twas my knife he did it with."

"Did you tell this to the men that found you?"

"I tried to, but they wouldn't listen. They said it was a lie. But it's the God's truth lady, though I reckon you won't believe it neither."

"I do believe it, and will help you to save yourself all I can. Have you got a horse?"

"I've got a pony at home—about a mile from here."

"Have you got any money?"

"Nothin' but a quarter the cap'n give me for my fish last night."

"I have twenty dollars. I will give you half of it. When it gets dark, go home and mount your pony and travel as far out of this neighborhood as you can before morning. Take the back roads, and go until you think it may be safe to stop. Get work in the country; keep your secret; tell nobody; work faithfully, and make a new start, a new life for yourself. It may be your innocence of this crime will come out. I must go now, and so must you. They may come back. This is the money; it is in two dollar bills; the more convenient for you."

He had got on his feet with a little effort, and he stood leaning against a tree—the tree on which he had been hanged. He took the bills and stood still, looking at her, the tears coming into his wistful, dog-like eyes.

"You must a-been sent to me by the Lord," he said. "You are an angel on the earth. Won't you tell me your name?"

"My name is Anna Harte," she answered.

"Will you shake hands with me, Miss Anna Harte?"

He put out his hand timidly. She extended her own without hesitation and grasped his hand cordially.

"I promise I will do as you ask me to, or I'll die a-tryin'," he said. "You've saved my life, and I'll do with it as you say. I'll start a new row, and I'll hoe it straight."

"I believe you will. May God help and strengthen you," she answered, earnestly.

The pathos in his eyes, and his pitiful swollen face touched her heart. She got upon her horse and rode away. He watched her until she disappeared among the trees. Then he wiped his eyes on his patched sleeve, and slunk away into the tangled depths of a plum thicket to wait for the fast coming twilight.

The sun had set, but the golden after-glow bathed the green hills and russet fields when Miss Harte drew rein before the two-storey white house of her destination. With a few other dwellings, scattered like sentinels about a church, a school house, and a postoffice, it formed the little settlement of Woodbridge—named for the most important man of the neighborhood.

A negro boy, who had seen her approach from a distance, got down from the stablelot fence and came to take her

horse.

Mrs. Woodbridge, who was in the garden cutting late roses, came to the gate to meet her.

"Goodness me! You have come by yourself and on horseback!" she exclaimed, in surprise. "Where is Harley—my son? He went to Shipley in a buggy to bring you. How did you happen to miss him?"

"I took a wrong road and went a little out of my way," answered Anna.

She felt weary and exhausted after the strain of the last hour.

"Come right in," said her hostess warmly. "You look tired and worried. Supper will be ready soon. A cup of hot tea will do you good. I am sorry you had to wait at the station. Mr. Woodbridge had a chill to-day and Harley was to meet you. He went to Shipley to hear the news of the men who were hunting the murderer, and he didn't come back to get the buggy until about an hour or two ago. They talked about lynching Boyle; but I hope and pray they won't."

We are law-abiding folks ourselves.

Haaley will do his best to prevent any violence, I know."

Miss Harte said little. She was glad to be left alone for a while in the pleasant room that had been assigned her. She was looking pale when she came down to supper, and she had little appetite for the meal when she sat down at the table with Mrs. Woodbridge and the younger children—three girls, the eldest a bright faced girl of fifteen. Mr. Woodbridge was "sweating off his fever," his wife said, and Harley had returned, but was at the stable superintending the feeding of his horses.

He came in after supper when they were in the parlor, and Miss Harte had seated herself at the piano, in response to the children's entreaty that she would play.

The mother introduced her son to the young teacher with pride. He seemed a son to be proud of—an athlete in build, with a candid, manly face and eyes full of mingled fire and sweetness.

Miss Harte was extremely anxious to hear what was believed concerning Dick Boyle; whether it was known that he had been hanged, and whether it was suspected that his life had been saved; but she did not dare to enquire.

Presently Mr. Woodbridge came in, and immediately questioned the son in.

"All I can hear, sir, is that he was captured by one of the parties who were out hunting for him—and he got away."

"Ah! then he was lynched. 'Got away' is slang for hanging. I am sorry. I believe the man was guilty, but he ought to have had a trial. If I had not been seized with that confounded chill I would have used every effort to prevent this outrage."

(To Be Continued.)

Mrs. McGorry—O! niver was so freightened in ahl me loife! Sure, the car-r missed me be less than six inches.

McGorry—A yez had gone a step farther, the children wud lo! had a step-mother.

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