Literature.

THE LYNCHING AT ROCKBRIDGE

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

(Continued from last issue.)

"The murder was an outrage of the worst kind, sir: one that called for prompt punishment," interposed the young man, hotly.

"That is true; but the law of the country provides for such cases. I am thankful none of my blood was mixed up in dealing out this law-defying punishment."

Harley looked down and said nothing.

Anna Harte thought: "He does not sympathize with the lynchers, but he has friends among them; he is distressed because of their action."

Thinking to gratify the children and enliven the spirits of the others, Miss Harte began to play bright little pieces and sing snatches of popular songs. She passed from these presently to more earnest and imaginary numbers. One of these was a fantastic called 'Luray Cavern,' composed by her gifted and short-lived young music teacher.

After playing it, Miss Harte described to the children the wonder of this beautiful cavern, hidden in the heart of the quaint old Virginian town—her birthplace.

Whether she played, sung or talked, she did it in the same natural, unassuming way that had in it the fascination of sincerity and self-forgetfulness. Unconsciously to herself she laid that evening the foundation of her subsequent influence over these strangers among whom her lot was cast.

When Mrs. Woodbridge said "good-night" to her guest, after seeing her to her room, she said:

"I thank you for this pleasant evening, Miss Harte—the pleasantest we have had for a long time. Life on the farm is dull and young folks crave something to interest them and stir their brains and their blood as well. I think this is why so many young men in the country fall into wild ways of gambling and drinking—there is so much dullness and monotony at home. We shall appreciate your music and your interesting talk."

"And I truly appreciate your kindness, Mrs. Woodbridge. It makes me feel at home—the sweetest feeling in the world," returned the girl, earnestly. It had not been long since she lost mother and home at one blow, and this good woman's motherly welcome brought them to her mind.

Before she left Miss Harte, Mrs. Woodbridge told her she could sleep as long as she liked in the morning, for on Sunday the family were late in rising and breakfasting. But Anna Harte had been accustomed to early rising, and she was awake next morning before sunrise. She lay listening to the singing of a mocking bird in a tree near her window. In a little while she heard the sound of a man coming upstairs, evidently trying to make as little noise as possible. He reached the landing and came along the corridor, passed by her room, and knocked on the door of the chamber adjoining her's, which Mrs. Woodbridge had told her was occupied by her son.

She heard Harley's voice say, "Come in!" and the early visitor entered, saying. "In bed, still, old man? I thought you wouldn't be up; but I felt I must come and tell you the news."

In the stillness of the Sabbath morning Miss Harte could hear all he said. The walls between the rooms were not thick, the connecting door was of thin wood, and not well fitted, and the side windows of each room were open.

Harley's young friend went on to tell the "news."

"Sheriff Long and one of his deputies came at six o'clock yesterday evening on the local train. He had a warrant for Dick Boyle's arrest; he had heard rumors that a lynching was on hand; but he found everything quiet; he got nothing out of the Shipley folks. They told him Boyle had escaped. He stayed all night; ssid he would begin investigating today. Three of us boys went to the old Wilby place last night at ten o'clock, thinking we had better sink the body in the cellar—it's four feet in water; but shoot me, if it wasn't gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes, there wasn't a sign of it—rope and all were gone. We didn't know what to make of it last night; but this morning, as soon as it was day, I went there by myself. I found fresh cartwheel tracks, and traced 'em to old man Boyle's house. When I got there he was sitting on his stable fence with his head in his hands. I asked him where Dick was, and he glared at me and didn't answer. Then he began a string of abuse. Said the ones that hunted down his boy were bloodthirsty cowards. They had hanged an innocent man, and now they wanted his body to sell to the doctors to be cut up; but they'd never get it. I knew by this and by the wheel tracks that the old man had cut the body down and buried it somewhere."

There was a silence; then Harley said, with something like a groan:

"It was a bad business, that hanging; a dreadful bad business. I wish to God it had not been done! It is possible, too, that Boyle was not the man."

"That is preposterous! He was the man. Every circumstance proved it. Then, if he hadn't been guilty, why did he hide out? And why didn't his father report us boys instead of burying the body secretly?"

"Hush! You are talking too loud! Come nearer."

Harley seemed, for the first time, to remember that the room adjoining his was occupied. The conversation after this was carried on in a lower tone.

What Miss Harte had heard confirmed her in the belief that the lynching party—some of them at least—were friends of young Woodbridge, and that he knew of and was troubled by what they had done. She would have relieved his mind if she had known that she could do this without endangering Dick's prospect of life or liberty. But she could not be sure that Harley would not think it was his duty to make it known that the criminal—as he believed Boyle to be—had escaped, and thus set the avengers of blood in pursuit of him.

For her own part, she believed him to be innocent. His straightforward story, the tone of truth in his voice, and the look of steadfast sincerity in his eyes, appealed to an instinct that was stronger than reason. She trusted he had made good his escape; she was glad his father had had the wit to drive his cart to and from the place of the hanging, thus giving the idea that he had cut down and buried his boy.

The investigations of Sheriff Long came to nothing. He went back and reported that the murderer had escaped. A reward of a hundred dollars was offered by the state for his arrest. A brother of the dead man—heir to his property—arrived, and added two hundred dollars to this sum. The young lynchers kept their secret. So did Miss Harte.

The school at Woodbridge opened with a full attendance. Miss Harte was wholly occupied through the day with her pupils. Her evenings were spent mostly with the Woodbridge family. She had not the heart to withdraw to her room when she found what pleasure she was able to give them. Her music, her occasional reading aloud, and her conversation were a source of entertainment to the elders no less than to the children.

The Woodbridges were well-to-do; they owned a large, productive farm and extensive pastures grazed by many cattle; but they had not learned how to enjoy this competence. They took few periodicals; they did not keep in touch with the great world of progressive thought and industry. Their home life was bare of diversion. There were no games, no social meetings, no new books, no discussion of current topics.

The coming of Miss Harte wrought a quick and marked improvement. When her box of books arrived she brought out various parlor games, new books and music. She taught the young people some simple dances; she played dance music on the piano, and sang to her maddolin. She took a number of magazines; and to these she presently added an up-to-date agricultural paper, which she left lying about in the sitting-room, where it could be seen and read by Squire Woodbridge, who had an old-fashioned contempt for book-farming and modern ways.

As for Harley, Miss Harte soon decided that he possessed not only a fine mind, but a good heart. She was deeply impressed with his kindness of heart because of something she found out, when she at last ventured to go to see the parents of Dick Boyle.

She found a pretext for this visit in the fact that Mrs. Boyle was known to knit nice woollen mits for sale. It was now more than a month since Dick had made his escape from Woodbridge. Miss Harte had heard absolutely nothing from him.

She found his old mother sitting on the doorstep of her small cottage busy knitting. The poor woman was overjoyed to see her. She called her husband and the three talked together about Dick. They were devoted to him—their "baby child" they called him—the only one spared to them, and so good to his old father and mother. They had missed him sorely; missed his help, too, though two or three of the neighbors had been kind to them—none as kind as young Mr. Woodbridge. He had been to see them and given them a hog for their winter meat, a cord of wood and a sack of flour. He inquired as to their wants, and sent a doctor to see the old man when he cut his foot. He was a good young man, sure, and God would reward him.

Anna felt her cheeks glow as she listened to their praises of Harley. A few days afterwards she went again to the home of the Boyles, ostensibly to see about the fit of the woollen mitts, but really to carry joy to the hearts of two old people in the form of a letter she had received from one signing himself "Jim Thomas," whom she however, knew to be Dick Boyle He had told his parents that he would not write to them, because the detectives would be on the look out through the mails; but they might hear of him through Miss Harte.

No letter she had ever received had given Anna Harte as much pleasure as did this misspelled and poorly written sheet of foolscap from the fugitive whose life she had saved. The letter was cautiously worded, so that if it came into other hands than hers it might betray nothing definite. It told of his having regular work at a say mill, where he hauled the big logs from the pine woods.

"Jes' what I like," he wrote. "I allers did take to oxens, and they takes to me. I make fair wages, and I try to save it. I send you five dollars—part of what you was so good as to loan me. I ain't forgotten my promise to you—that I would start a new row and hoe it strate. I think of it whenever I'm tempted to drink or gamble or be lazy, and it keeps me right. Give my love to inquiring friends—two of them in particular. Tell them I think of them all the time, and hope to see them before long. I send them a dollar. I will send more soon. I had to get some shirts and a pare of shoes."

Miss Harte gave both the bills to the old people, and read the letter aloud to them, but did not leave it with them, as a measure of caution. It had been mailed on a train, and bore no postmark or address; but at the bottom was a really ingenious postscript, which said:

"Tell Susan Ray's mother, in Macon, that she is livin' at Red Lake, Georgia."

Miss Harte interpreted this message, and accordingly wrote to "Jim Thomas," at Red Lake, giving loving messages from "inquirin' friends," signing no name. Going to Macon, one Saturday, she mailed the letter there with her own hand.

Two weeks later, Squire Woodbridge, who was glancing over a Macon paper that his son had just brought from the postoffice, exclaimed excitedly:

"Listen to this!" and then read aloud a paragraph headed:—

" 'MURDERER OF WILKES BROWN FOUND.

" 'AL. JONES CONFESSES TO HAVING KILLED THE SHIPLEY MERCHANT.

" 'Al. Jones, the man who was stabbed in Hunt's liquor saloon on Friday is said to be in a dying condition. Last night he made a voluntary confession to the chief of police, which shows him to be an offender of the deepest dye. Among other crimes he acknowledged having killed Wilkes Brown, a merchant of Shipley, Georgia, who was found in his store with his throat cut about two months ago. Jones had proof of this crime on his person in a gold watch with the initials W. B. engraved on the case inside, also a jewelled pin engraved with the same letters. Both these articles had been described to the police as having belonged to Wilkes Brown and been worn by him at the time he was murdered. Al Jones said he did the bloody deed with a knife he had borrowed from Dick Boyle that day, when Boyle was fishing in the creek. He dropped the knife on the floor beside the body in order that Dick might be accused of the crime. Boyle was believed to be the murderer, and he would have been lynched had he not made his escape. It is only his flight that saved the would-be lynchers from the guilt and remorse of having hanged an innocent man."

"What did I tell you?" ejaculated Mr. Woodbridge, when he had finished reading the paragraph.

His son did not reply. He was seemingly shading his eyes from the rays of the setting sun that streamed in at the window. Had his father looked at the young man as he rose to go out of the room he would have seen that his face was ghastly. Strong anguish was stamped upon it.

Harley did not come to breakfast the following morning nor did he leave his room that day. He had 'a severe headache—just one of his old bilious attacks,' he told his mother. But when he came down the next morning, silently drank a cup of coffee, and went about his work in a weary, spiritless way, his face belied the light manner in which he had spoken of his malady.

Squire Woodbridge chanced to walk with the teacher and the girls a part of the way to the schoolhouse the next morning. While walking beside Miss Harte he said:

"Well, I wonder if the Boyles have yet heard of their son's innocence?"

Then, catching the surprised look of his companion, he remembered that she had not been in the room when he read aloud the newspaper paragraph. He took the paper from his pocket and gave it to her, turning off into another path before she had finished reading it. She carried the paper to Mrs. Boyle as soon as school was out, and cried in sympathy with the old mother, who sobbed out her thanks to God on her knees.

After promising to write to Dick that night, and tell him the great news that he was free to face the world once more, the young school mistress went home with a light heart and a step that kept time to it. Her bright spirits received a check when she entered the house. She was met by Mrs. Woodbridge, whose pale, tear-stained face and swollen eyes told of some deep distress. The cause of it came out under Miss Harte's sympathizing look. Harley was going away. He was going to Florida to join a party of filibusters, who would go on a vessel to Cuba, to aid the insurgents. Harley, her only son, going away from her for the first time—going to danger and death—it would break her heart.

An idea came to Anna.

"Mrs. Woodbridge," she said, "let me see your son a few minutes It may be I can persuade him to stay."

"Oh, if you could, I would bless you, forever!" returned the the poor mother, looking wistfully at the girl. She had before this surmised that Harley's sudden fit of unhappiness was caused by his having addressed Miss Harte and been refused by her. She did not suspect the truth.

She went at once to her son and told him that Anna wished to see him; then she gave strict orders to the children that they were not to go near the parlor.

When Harley entered the room, Miss Harte motioned him to sit down near her, and, looking at him steadily, she said:

"Your mother has told me you are going away. I cannot yet believe that you will grieve her so and leave your pleasant home where you are so well loved."

"I must," he burst out, "I can't stay. I am too miserable. I must go where there is stir and danger to put things out of my mind. If I don't I'll go mad!"

"What is the matter? Tell me; it may be I can help."

"No, no; you can't help me. Nobody can help me. It's done and can't be undone. Miss Harte, I am a murderer!"

"No, no—" she began.

"Yes," he interrupted. "I am a murderer. I was one of the party that hanged Dick Boyle, and he was innocent. Some time ago six of us boys formed ourselves into a kind of band and took an oath to stand by each other in everything. It was the dullness here, and the craving for excitement that made us do this foolish thing. We played cards and drank a little, and got into a few scrapes, but did nothing bad until this lynching. I was against it. I tried to stop the boys after they had found Dick Boyle, but they were drinking. I had drunk a little, too, and there was no stopping them. I was pledged to go with them, so I took hold of the rope and helped to hang him. My God! it kills me to think of it! I have never seen a happy moment since. And now to know the man was innocent—why it drives me crazy!" He stopped, his voice choking. "It has crushed the dearest hope of my soul," he went on, in a dreary, hopeless tone. "Miss Harte, I have loved you from the first time I saw you. I had dared to hope you might care for me. All that is over. I'll never ask you to touch a hand stained with innocent blood."

He was looking down while he said the last words. He lifted his eyes and saw to his amazement, that Miss Harte was holding out her hand to him.

"I can take your hand, Harley," she said. "It is not the hand of a murderer. God has interposed to save you from that. Dick Boyle is alive!"

"Alive!" He looked at her with sad unbelief. "That can't be! We left him bound and hanging, the rope around his neck."

"He was not dead when you left him. Help arrived the moment after; he was cut down and restored. He is alive and doing well. Here is a letter from him; an assumed name is signed, but Dick Boyle wrote it."

He took the sheet of paper she handed to him and devoured it with his eyes.

"He thanks you," he said. "He returns money you lent him. What does it mean? Miss Harte, is it possible that you—"

"It was I who rescued Dick Boyle," she replied. "Luckily—providentially, rather—I took a wrong road coming here. It led me to the old Wilby house just as your party rode away. I saw the man hanging; he was still alive, and I saved him."

"My God, I thank thee!"

He dropped his face in his hands, and his form shook with sobs. Then kneeling down by Miss Harte, he took her hand and kissed it reverently.

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Harley Woodbridge did not go to Cuba. Instead of enlisting under the lone-star flag of the insurgents, he enlisted under the double-star banner of matrimony.

Dick Boyle was at the wedding. Dressed in a handsome suit of clothes—the gift of the bridegroom—he presented a very good appearance. He had come to get his old parents and take them to a new home where they might find friends. To his surprise he found himself cordially welcomed by the people of the neighborhood, who were bent on making amends for the wrong they had done him. The tide had turned. The re-action lifted him on the wave of favor. He is now the best-paid and most trusted of the men who work for Squire Woodbridge in his new cottonseed-oil mills on Woodbridge Creek.