

II

OLD Gabe was just starting out when Isom reached the cabin, and the old man thought the boy had been at the mill all night. Isom slept through the day, and spoke hardly a word when the miller came home, though the latter had much to say of Raines, the two Steves, and of the trouble possible. He gave some excuse for not going with old Gabe the next day, and instead went into the woods alone.

Late in the middle of the afternoon he reached the mill. Old Gabe sat smoking outside the door, and Isom stretched himself out on the platform close to the water, shading his eyes from the rich sunlight with one ragged sleeve.

[102]

THE LAST STETSON

"Uncl' Gabe," he said, suddenly, "s'posin' Steve Brayton was to step out'n the bushes thar some mawnin' 'n' pull down his Winchester on ye, would ye say, 'Lawd, fergive him, fer he don't know whut he do'?"

Old Gabe had told him once about a Stetson and a Lewallen who were heard half a mile away praying while they fought each other to death with Winchesters. There was no use "prayin' an' shootin'," the miller declared. There was but one way for them to escape damnation; that was to throw down their guns and make friends. But the miller had forgotten, and his mood that morning was whimsical.

"Well, I mought, Isom," he said, "ef I didn't happen to have a gun handy."

The humor was lost on Isom. His chin was moving up and down, and his face was

[103]

THE LAST STETSON

serious. That was just it. He could forgive Jass—Jass was dead; he could forgive Crump, if he caught him in no devilment; old Brayton even—after Steve's revenge was done. But now— The boy rose, shaking his head.

"Uncl' Gabe," he said with sudden passion, "whut ye reckon Rome's a-doin'?"

The miller looked a little petulant. "Don't ye git tired axin' me thet question, Isom? Rome's a-scratchin' right peert fer a livin', I reckon, fer hisself 'n' Marthy. Yes, 'n' mebbe fer a young 'un too by this time. Ef ye air honin' fer Rome, why don't ye rack out 'n' go to him? Lawd knows I'd hate ter see ye go, but I tol' Rome I'd let ye whenever ye got ready, 'n' so I will."

Isom had no answer, and old Gabe was puzzled. It was always this way. The

THE LAST STETSON

boy longed for Rome, the miller could see. He spoke of him sometimes with tears, and sometimes he seemed to be on the point of going to him, but he shrank inexplicably when the time for leaving came.

Isom started into the mill now without a word, as usual. Old Gabe noticed that his feet were unsteady, and with quick remorse began to question him.

"Kinder puny, hain't ye, Isom?"

"Well, I hain't feelin' much peert."

"Hit was mighty keerless," old Gabe said, with kindly reproach, "swimmin' the crick atter a fresh."

"Hit wasn't the swimmin'," he protested, dropping weakly at the threshold. "Hit was settin' out 'n the woods. I was in Hazlan t'other night, Uncl' Gabe, to hear the new rider."

The miller looked around with quick in-

THE LAST STETSON

terest. "I've been skeered afore by riders a-tellin' 'bout the torments o' hell, but I never heerd nothin' like his tellin' 'bout the Lord. He said the Lord was jes as pore as anybody thar, and lived jes as rough; thet He made fences and barns 'n' ox-yokes 'n' sech like, an' He couldn't write His own name when He started out to save the worl'; an' when he come to the p'int whar His enemies tuk hol' of Him, the rider jes crossed his fingers up over his head 'n' axed us if we didn't know how it hurt to run a splinter into a feller's hand when he's loggin', or a thorn into yer foot when ye're goin' barefooted.

"Hit jes made me sick, Uncl' Gabe, hearin' him tell how they stretched Him out on a cross o' wood, when He'd come down fer nothin' but to save 'em, 'n' stuck a spear big as a co'n-knife into His side, 'n'

THE LAST STETSON

give Him vinegar, 'n' let Him hang thar 'n' die, with His own mammy a-standin' down on the groun' a-cryin' 'n' watchin' Him. Some folks thar never heerd sech afore. The women was a-rockin', 'n' ole Granny Day axed right out ef thet tuk place a long time ago; 'n' the rider said, 'Yes, a long time ago, mos' two thousand years.' Granny was a-cryin', Uncl' Gabe, 'n' she said, sorter soft, 'Stranger, let's hope that hit hain't so'; 'n' the rider says, 'But hit air so; 'n' He fergive 'em *while they was doin' it.*' Thet's whut got me, Uncl' Gabe, 'n' when the woman got to singin', somethin' kinder broke loose hyeh"—Isom passed his hand over his thin chest—" 'n' I couldn't git breath. I was mos' afeerd to ride home. I jes layed at the mill studyin', till I thought my head would bust. I reckon hit was the Sperit a-workin' me. Looks

THE LAST STETSON

like I was mos' convicted, Uncl' Gabe." His voice trembled and he stopped. "Crump *was* a-lyin'," he cried, suddenly. "But hit's wuss, Uncl' Gabe; hit's wuss! You say a life fer a life in *this* worl'; the rider says hit's in the *next*, 'n' I'm mis'ble, Uncl' Gabe. Ef Rome—I wish Rome was hyeh," he cried, helplessly. "I don't know whut to do."

The miller rose and limped within the mill, and ran one hand through the shifting corn. He stood in the doorway, looking long and perplexedly towards Hazlan; he finally saw, he thought, just what the lad's trouble was. He could give him some comfort, and he got his chair and dragged it out to the door across the platform, and sat down in silence.

"Isom," he said at last, "the Sperit air shorely a-workin' ye, 'n' I'm glad of it.

[108]

THE LAST STETSON

But ye mus'n't worry about the penalty a-fallin' on Rome. Steve Marcum killed Jass—he can't fool me—'n' I've told Steve he's got that penalty to pay ef he gits up this trouble. I'm glad the Sperit's a-work-in' ye, but ye mus'n't worry 'bout Rome."

Isom rose suddenly on one elbow, and with a moan lay back and crossed his arms over his face.

Old Gabe turned and left him.

"Git up, Isom." It was the miller's voice again, an hour later. "You better go home now. Ride the hoss, boy," he added, kindly.

Isom rose, and old Gabe helped him mount, and stood at the door. The horse started, but the boy pulled him to a standstill again.

"I want to ax ye jes one thing more,

[109]

THE LAST STETSON

Uncl' Gabe," he said, slowly. "S'posin' Steve had a-killed Jass to keep him from killin' Rome, hev he got to be damned fer it jes the same? Hev he got to give up eternal life anyways? Hain't thar no way out'n it—no way?"

There was need for close distinction now and the miller was deliberate.

"Ef Steve shot Jass," he said, "jes to save Rome's life—he had the right to shoot him. Thar hain't no doubt 'bout that. The law says so. But"—there was a judicial pause—"I've heerd Steve say that he hated Jass wuss 'n anybody on earth, 'cept old Brayton; 'n' ef he wus glad o' the chance o' killin' him, why—the Lord air merciful, Isom; the Bible air true, 'n' hit says an 'eye fer an eye 'n' a tooth fer a tooth,' 'n' I never knowed hit to fail—but the Lord air merciful. Ef Steve would only jes repent,

THE LAST STETSON

'n' ef, 'stid o' fightin' the Lord by takin' human life, he'd fight fer Him by savin' it, I reckon the Lord would fergive him. Fer ef ye lose yer life fer Him, He do say you'll find it agin somewhar—sometime."

Old Gabe did not see the sullen despair that came into the boy's tense face. The subtlety of the answer had taken the old man back to the days when he was magistrate, and his eyes were half closed. Isom rode away without a word. From the dark of the mill old Gabe turned to look after him again.

"I'm afeerd he's a-gittin' feverish agin. Hit looks like he's convicted; but"—he knew the wavering nature of the boy—"I don't know—I don't know."

Going home an hour later, the old man saw several mountaineers climbing the path towards Steve Marcum's cabin; it meant

THE LAST STETSON

the brewing of mischief; and when he stopped at his own gate, he saw at the bend of the road a figure creep from the bushes on one side into the bushes on the other.

It looked like Crump.

III

It was Crump, and fifty yards behind him was Isom, slipping through the brush after him—Isom's evil spirit—old Gabe, Raines, "conviction," blood-penalty, forgotten, all lost in the passion of a chase which has no parallel when the game is man.

Straight up the ravine Crump went along a path which led to Steve Marcum's cabin. There was a clump of rhododendron at the head of the ravine, and near Steve's cabin. About this hour Marcum would be chopping wood for supper, or sitting out in his porch in easy range from the thicket. Crump's plan was plain: he was about his revenge early, and Isom was exultant.

THE LAST STETSON

"Oh, no, Eli, you won't git Steve this time. Oh, naw!"

The bushes were soon so thick that he could no longer follow Crump by sight, and every few yards he had to stop to listen, and then steal on like a mountain-cat towards the leaves rustling ahead of him. Half-way up the ravine Crump turned to the right and stopped. Puzzled, Isom pushed so close that the spy, standing irresolute on the edge of the path, whirled around. The boy sank to his face, and in a moment footsteps started and grew faint; Crump had darted across the path, and was running through the undergrowth up the spur. Isom rose and hurried after him; and when, panting hard, he reached the top, the spy's skulking figure was sliding from Steve's house and towards the Breathitt road; and with a hot, puzzled face, the boy went down after it.

[114]

THE LAST STETSON

On a little knob just over a sudden turn in the road Crump stopped, and looking sharply about him, laid his gun down. Just in front of him were two rocks, waist-high, with a crevice between them. Drawing a long knife from his pocket, he climbed upon them, and began to cut carefully away the spreading top of a bush that grew on the other side. Isom crawled down towards him like a lizard, from tree to tree. A moment later the spy was filling up the crevice with stones, and Isom knew what he was about; he was making a "blind" to waylay Steve, who, the boy knew, was going to Breathitt by that road the next Sunday. How did Crump know that—how did he know everything? The crevice filled, Crump cut branches and stuck them between the rocks. Then he pushed his rifle through the twigs, and taking aim several times, withdrew it. When he

[115]

THE LAST STETSON

turned away at last and started down to the road, he looked back once more, and Isom saw him grinning. Almost chuckling in answer, the lad slipped around the knob to the road the other way, and Crump threw up his gun with a gasp of fright when a figure rose out of the dusk before him.

"Hol' on, Eli!" said Isom, easily. "Don't git skeered! Hit's nobody but me. Whar ye been?"

Crump laughed, so quick was he disarmed of suspicion. "Jes up the river a piece to see Aunt Sally Day. She's a fust cousin o' mine by marriage."

Isom's right hand was slipping back as if to rest on his hip. "D'you say you'd been 'convicted,' Eli?"

Crump's answer was chantlike. "Yes, Lawd, reckon I have."

THE LAST STETSON

"Goin' to stop all o' yer lyin', air ye," Isom went on, in the same tone, and Crump twitched as though struck suddenly from behind, "an' stealin' 'n' *lay-wayin'*?"

"Look a-hyeh, boy—" he began, roughly, and mumbling a threat, started on.

"Uh, Eli!" Even then the easy voice fooled him again, and he turned. Isom had a big revolver on a line with his breast. "Drap yer gun!" he said, tremulously.

Crump tried to laugh, but his guilty face turned gray. "Take keer, boy," he gasped; "yer gun's cocked. Take keer, I tell ye!"

"Drap it, damn ye!" Isom called in sudden fury, "'n' git clean away from it!" Crump backed, and Isom came forward and stood with one foot on the fallen Winchester.

"I seed ye, Eli. Been makin' a blind fer Steve, hev ye? Goin' to shoot him in the

THE LAST STETSON

back, too, air ye? You're ketched at last, Eli. You've done a heap o' devilment. You're gittin' wuss all the time. You oughter be dead, 'n' now——"

Crump found voice in a cry of terror and a whine for mercy. The boy looked at him, unable to speak his contempt.

"Git down thar!" he said, finally; and Crump, knowing what was wanted, stretched himself in the road. Isom sat down on a stone, the big pistol across one knee.

"Roll over!" Crump rolled at full length.

"Git up!" Isom laughed wickedly. "Ye don't look purty, Eli." He lifted the pistol and nipped a cake of dirt from the road between Crump's feet. With another cry of fear, the spy began a vigorous dance.

"Hol' on, Eli; I don't want ye to dance.

THE LAST STETSON

Ye belong to the chu'ch now, 'n' I wouldn't have ye go agin yer religion fer nothin'. Stan' still!" Another bullet and another cut between Crump's feet. "'Pears like ye don't think I kin shoot straight. Eli," he went on, reloading the empty chambers, "some folks think I'm a idgit, 'n' I know 'em. Do you think I'm a idgit, Eli?"

"Actin' mighty nateral now." Isom was raising the pistol again. "Oh, Lawdy! Don't shoot, boy—don't shoot!"

"Git down on yer knees! Now I want ye to beg fer mercy thet ye never showed—thet ye wouldn't 'a' showed Steve. . . . Purty good," he said, encouragingly.

"Mebbe ye kin pray a leetle, seein' ez ye air a chu'ch member. Pray fer yer enemies, Eli; Uncl' Gabe says ye must love yer enemies. I know how ye loves me, 'n' I want yer to pray fer me. The Lawd mus'

THE LAST STETSON

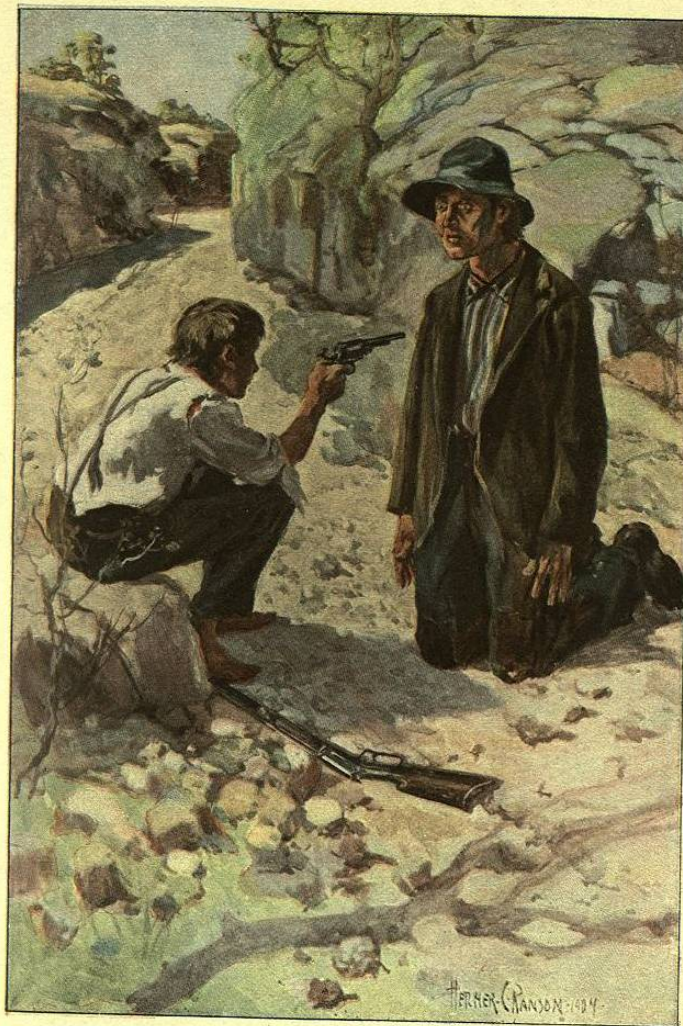
sot a powerful store by a good citizen like you. Ax him to fergive me fer killin' ye."

"Have mercy, O Lawd," prayed Crump, to command—and the prayer was subtle—"on the murderer of this thy servant. A life fer a life, thou hev said, O Lawd. Fer killin' me he will foller me, 'n' ef ye hev not mussy he is boun' fer the lowes' pit o' hell, O Lawd——"

It was Isom's time to wince now, and Crump's pious groan was cut short.

"Shet up!" cried the boy, sharply, and he sat a moment silent. "You've been a-spyin' on us sence I was borned, Eli," he said, reflectively. "I believe ye lay-wayed dad. Y'u spied on Rome. Y'u told the soldiers whar he was a-hidin'. Y'u tried to shoot him from the bresh. Y'u found out Steve was goin' to Breathitt on Sunday, 'n' you've jes made a blind to shoot him in

[120]



"Pray fer yer enemies, Eli."

THE LAST STETSON

the back. I reckon thar's no meanness ye hain't done. Dad al'ays said ye sot a snare fer a woman once—a woman! Y'u loaded a musket with slugs, 'n' tied a string to the trigger, 'n' stretched hit 'cross the path, 'n' y'u got up on a cliff 'n' whistled to make her slow up jes when she struck the string. I reckon thet's yer wust—but I don't know."

Several times Crump raised his hands in protest while his arraignment was going on; several times he tried to speak, but his lips refused utterance. The boy's voice was getting thicker and thicker, and he was nervously working the cock of the big pistol up and down.

"Git up," he said; and Crump rose with a spring. The lad's tone meant release.

"You hain't wuth the risk. I hain't goin' ter kill ye. I jus' wanted ter banter

THE LAST STETSON

ye 'n' make ye beg. You're a good beggar, Eli, 'n' a powerful prayer. You'll be a shinin' light in the chu'ch, ef ye gits a chance ter shine long. Fer lemme tell ye, nobody ever ketched ye afore. But you're ketched now, an' I'm goin' to tell Steve. He'll be a-watchin' fer ye, 'n' so 'll I. I tell ye in time, ef ye ever come over hyeh agin as long as you live, you'll never git back alive. Turn roun'! Hev ye got any balls?" he asked, feeling in Crump's pockets for cartridges. "No; well"—he picked up the Winchester and pumped the magazine empty—"I'll keep these," he said, handing Crump the empty rifle. "Now git away—an' git away quick!"

Crump's slouching footsteps went out of hearing, and Isom sat where he was. His elbows dropped to his knees. His face dropped slowly into his hands, and the

THE LAST STETSON

nettles of remorse began to sting. He took the back of one tremulous hand presently to wipe the perspiration from his forehead, and he found it burning. A sharp pain shot through his eyes. He knew what that meant, and feeling dizzy, he rose and started a little blindly towards home.

Old Gabe was waiting for him. He did not answer the old man's querulous inquiry, but stumbled towards a bed. An hour later, when the miller was rubbing his forehead, he opened his eyes, shut them, and began to talk.

"I reckon I hain't much better 'n Eli, Uncl' Gabe," he said, plaintively. "I've been abusin' him down thar in the woods. I come might' nigh killin' him onct." The old man stroked on, scarcely heeding the boy's words, so much nonsense would he talk when ill.

THE LAST STETSON

"I've been lyin' to ye, Uncl' Gabe, 'n' a-deceivin' of ye right along. Steve's a-goin' atter ole Brayton—I'm goin' too—Steve didn't kill Jass—hit wusn't Steve—hit wusn't Rome—hit was—" The last word stopped behind his shaking lips; he rose suddenly in bed, looked wildly into the miller's startled face, and dropping with a sob to the bed, went sobbing to sleep.

Old Gabe went back to his pipe, and while he smoked, his figure shrank slowly in his chair. He went to bed finally, but sleep would not come, and he rose again and built up the fire and sat by it, waiting for day. His own doctrine, sternly taught for many a year, had come home to him; and the miller's face when he opened his door was gray as the breaking light.

IV

THERE was little peace for old Gabe that day at the mill. And when he went home at night he found cause for the thousand premonitions that had haunted him. The lad was gone.

A faint light in the east was heralding the moon when Isom reached Steve Marcum's gate. There were several horses hitched to the fence, several dim forms seated in the porch, and the lad halloed for Steve, whose shadow shot instantly from the door and came towards him.

"Glad ter see ye, Isom," he called, jubilantly. "I was jus' about to sen' fer ye. How'd ye happen to come up?"

Isom answered in a low voice with the