

## THE LAST STETSON

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"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 halloood 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

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news of Crump's "blind," and Steve laughed and swore in the same breath.

"Come hyeh!" he said, leading the way back; and at the porch he had Isom tell the story again.

"Whut d' I tell ye, boys?" he asked, triumphantly. "Don't believe ye more 'n half believed me."

Three more horsemen rode up to the gate and came into the light. Every man was armed, and at Isom's puzzled look, Steve caught the lad by the arm and led him around the chimney-corner. He was in high spirits.

"'Pears like ole times, Isom. I'm a-goin' fer thet cussed ole Steve Brayton this very night. He's behind Crump. I s'picioned it afore; now I know it for sartin. He's a-goin' to give Eli a mule 'n' a Winchester fer killin' me. We're goin'

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to s'prise him to-night. He won't be lookin' fer us—I've fixed that. I wus jus' about to sen' fer ye. I hain't fergot how ye kin handle a gun." Steve laughed significantly. "Ye're a good frien' o' mine, 'n' I'm goin' to show ye thet I'm a frien' o' yourn."

Isom's paleness was unnoticed in the dark. The old throbbing began to beat again at his temple; the old haze started from his eyes.

"Hyeh's yer gun, Isom," he heard Steve saying next. The fire was blazing into his face. At the chimney-corner was the bent figure of old Daddy Marcum, and across his lap shone a Winchester. Steve was pointing at it, his grim face radiant; the old man's toothless mouth was grinning, and his sharp black eyes were snapping up at him.

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"Hit's yourn, I tell ye," said Steve again. "I aimed jes to lend it to ye, but ye've saved me frum gittin' killed, mebbe, 'n' hit's yourn now—yourn, boy, fer keeps."

Steve was holding the gun out to him now. The smooth cold touch of the polished barrel thrilled him. It made everything for an instant clear again, and feeling weak, Isom sat down on the bed, gripping the treasure in both trembling hands. On one side of him some one was repeating Steve's plan of attack. Old Brayton's cabin was nearly opposite, but they would go up the river, cross above the mill, and ride back. The night was cloudy, but they would have the moonlight now and then for the climb up the mountain. They would creep close, and when the moon was hid they would run in and get old Brayton

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alive, if possible. Then—the rest was with Steve.

Across the room he could hear Steve telling the three new-comers, with an occasional curse, about Crump's blind, and how he knew that old Brayton was hiring Crump.

"Old Steve's meaner 'n Eli," he said to himself, and a flame of the old hate surged up from the fire of temptation in his heart. Steve Marcum was his best friend; Steve had shielded him. The boy had promised to join him against old Brayton, and here was the Winchester, brand-new, to bind his word.

"Git ready, boys; git ready."

It was Steve's voice, and in Isom's ears the preacher's voice rang after it. Again that blinding mist before his eyes, and the boy brushed at it irritably. He could see

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the men buckling cartridge-belts, but he sat still. Two or three men were going out. Daddy Marcum was leaning on a chair at the door, looking eagerly at each man as he passed.

"Hain't ye goin', Isom?"

Somebody was standing before him twirling a rifle on its butt, a boy near Isom's age. The whirling gun made him dizzy.

"Stop it!" he cried, angrily. Old Daddy Marcum was answering the boy's question from the door.

"Isom goin'?" he piped, proudly. "I reckon he air. Whar's yer belt, boy? Git ready. Git ready."

Isom rose then—he could not answer sitting down—and caught at a bedpost with one hand, while he fumbled at his throat with the other.

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"I *hain't* goin'."

Steve heard at the door, and whirled around. Daddy Marcum was tottering across the floor, with one bony hand uplifted.

"You're a coward!" The name stilled every sound. Isom, with eyes afire, sprang at the old man to strike, but somebody caught his arm and forced him back to the bed.

"Shet up, dad," said Steve, angrily, looking sharply into Isom's face. "Don't ye see the boy's sick? He needn't go ef he don't want to. Time to start, boys."

The tramp of heavy boots started across the puncheon floor and porch again. Isom could hear Steve's orders outside; the laughs and jeers and curses of the men as they mounted their horses; he heard the cavalcade pass through the gate, the old

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man's cackling good-by; then the horses' hoofs going down the mountain, and Daddy Marcum's hobbling step on the porch again. He was standing in the middle of the floor, full in the firelight, when the old man reached the threshold—standing in a trance, with a cartridge-belt in his hand.

"Good fer you, Isom!"

The cry was apologetic, and stopped short.

"The critter's fersaken," he quavered, and cowed by the boy's strange look, the old man shrank away from him along the wall. But Isom seemed neither to see nor hear. He caught up his rifle, and wavering an instant, tossed it with the belt on the bed and ran out the door. The old man followed, dumb with amazement.

"Isom!" he called, getting his wits and

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his tongue at last. "Hyeh's yer gun! Come back, I tell ye! You've fergot yer gun! Isom! Isom!"

The voice piped shrilly out into the darkness, and piped back without answer.

A steep path, dangerous even by day, ran snakelike from the cabin down to the water's edge. It was called Isom's path after that tragic night. No mountaineer went down it thereafter without a firm faith that only by the direct help of Heaven could the boy, in his flight down through the dark, have reached the river and the other side alive. The path dropped from ledge to ledge, and ran the brink of precipices and chasms. In a dozen places the boy crashed through the undergrowth from one slippery fold to the next below, catching at roots and stones, slipping past death a score of times,

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and dropping on till a flood of yellow light lashed the gloom before him. Just there the river was most narrow; the nose of a cliff swerved the current sharply across, and on the other side an eddy ran from it up stream. These earthly helps he had, and he needed them.

There had been a rain-storm, and the waves swept him away like thistle-down, and beat back at him as he fought through them and stood choked and panting on the other shore. He did not dare stop to rest. The Marcums, too, had crossed the river up at the ford by this time, and were galloping towards him; and Isom started on and up. When he reached the first bench of the spur the moon was swinging over Thunderstruck Knob. The clouds broke as he climbed; strips of radiant sky showed between the rolling masses,

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and the mountain above was light and dark in quick succession. He had no breath when he reached the ledge that ran above old Steve's cabin, and flinging one arm above it, he fell through sheer exhaustion. The cabin was dark as the clump of firs behind it; the inmates were unsuspecting; and Steve Marcum and his men were not far below. A rumbling started under him, while he lay there and grew faint—the rumble of a stone knocked from the path by a horse's hoof. Isom tried to halloo, but his voice stopped in a whisper, and he painfully drew himself upon the rock, upright under the bright moon. A quick oath of warning came then—it was Crump's shrill voice in the Brayton cabin—and Isom stumbled forward with both hands thrown up and a gasping cry at his lips. One flash came through a port-hole

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of the cabin. A yell broke on the night—Crump's cry again—and the boy swayed across the rock, and falling at the brink, dropped with a limp struggle out of sight.

## V.

THE news of Isom's fate reached the miller by way of Hazlan before the next noon. Several men in the Brayton cabin had recognized the boy in the moonlight. At daybreak they found bloodstains on the ledge and on a narrow shelf a few feet farther down. Isom had slipped from one to the other, they said, and in his last struggle had rolled over into Dead Creek, and had been swept into the Cumberland.

It was Crump who had warned the Braytons. Nobody ever knew how he had learned Steve Marcum's purpose. And old Brayton on his guard and in his own cabin was impregnable. So the Marcums,

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after a harmless fusillade, had turned back cursing. Mocking shouts followed after them, pistol-shots, even the scraping of a fiddle and shuffling on the ledge. But they kept on, cursing across the river and back to Daddy Marcum, who was standing in the porch, peering for them through the dawn, with a story to tell about Isom.

"The critter was teched in the head," the old man said, and this was what the Braytons too believed. But Steve Marcum, going to search for Isom's body next day, gave old Gabe another theory. He told the miller how Daddy Marcum had called Isom a coward, and Steve said the boy had gone ahead to prove he was no coward.

"He had mighty leetle call to prove it to me. Think o' his takin' ole Brayton all

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by hisself!" he said, with a look at the yellow heaving Cumberland. "'N', Lord! think o' his swimmin' that river in the dark!"

Old Gabe asked a question fiercely then and demanded the truth, and Steve told him about the hand-to-hand fight on the mountain-side, about young Jasper's treachery, and how the boy, who was watching the fight, fired just in time to save Rome. It made all plain at last—Rome's and Steve's denials, Isom's dinning on that one theme, and why the boy could not go to Rome and face Martha, with her own blood on his hands. Isom's true motive, too, was plain, and the miller told it brokenly to Steve, who rode away with a low whistle to tell it broadcast, and left the old man rocking his body like a woman.



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An hour later he rode back at a gallop to tell old Gabe to search the river bank below the mill. He did not believe Isom dead. It was just his "feelin'," he said, and one fact, that nobody else thought important—the Brayton canoe was gone.

"Ef he was jus' scamped by a ball," said Steve, "you kin bet he tuk the boat, 'n' he's down thar in the bushes somewhar now waitin' fer dark."

And about dusk, sure enough, old Gabe, wandering hopefully through the thicket below the mill, stumbled over the canoe stranded in the bushes. In the new mud were the tracks of a boy's bare feet leading into the thicket, and the miller made straight for home. When he opened his door he began to shake as if with palsy. A figure was seated on the hearth against the chimney, and the firelight was playing

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over the face and hair. The lips were parted, and the head hung limply to the breast. The clothes were torn to rags, and one shoulder was bare. Through the upper flesh of it and close to the neck was an ugly burrow clotted with blood. The boy was asleep.

Three nights later, in Hazlan, Sherd Raines told the people of Isom's flight down the mountain, across the river, and up the steep to save his life by losing it. Before he was done, one gray-headed figure pressed from the darkness on one side and stood trembling under the dips. It was old Steve Brayton, who had fired from the cabin at Isom, and dropping his Winchester, he stumbled forward with the butt of his pistol held out to Raines. A Marcum appeared on the other side with the

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muzzle of his Winchester down. Raines raised both hands then and imperiously called on every man who had a weapon to come forward and give it up. Like children they came, Marcums and Braytons, piling their arms on the rock before him, shaking hands right and left, and sitting together on the mourner's bench.

Old Brayton was humbled thereafter. He wanted to shake hands with Steve Marcum and make friends. But Steve grinned, and said, "Not yit," and went off into the bushes. A few days later he went to Hazlan of his own accord and gave up his gun to Raines. He wouldn't shake hands with old Brayton, he said, nor with any other man who would hire another man to do his "killin';" but he promised to fight no more, and he kept his word.

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A flood followed on New Year's day. Old Gabe's canoe—his second canoe—was gone, and a Marcum and a Brayton worked side by side at the mill hollowing out another. The miller sat at the door whittling.

"'Pears like folks is havin' bad luck with thar dugouts," said the Brayton. "Some triflin' cuss took old Steve Brayton's jes to cross the river, without the grace to tie it to the bank, let 'lone takin' it back. I've heard ez how Aunt Sally Day's boy Ben, who was a-fishin' that evenin', says ez how he seed Isom's harnt a-floatin' across the river in it, without techin' a paddle."

The Marcum laughed. "Idgits is thick over hyeh," he said. "Ben's a-gittin' wuss sence Isom was killed. Yes, I recollect Gabe hyeh lost a canoe jus' atter a flood

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more'n a year ago, when Rome Stetson 'n' Marthy Lewallen went a-gallivantin' out'n the mountains together. Hyeh's another flood, 'n' old Gabe's dugout gone agin." The miller raised a covert glance of suspicion from under his hat, but the Marcum was laughing. "Ye oughter put a trace-chain on this 'un," he added. "A rope gits rotten in the water, 'n' a tide is mighty apt to break it."

Old Gabe said that "mebbe that wus so," but he had no chain to waste; he reckoned a rope was strong enough, and he started home.

"Old Gabe don't seem to keer much now 'bout Isom," said the Brayton. "Folks say he tuk on so awful at fust that hit looked like he wus goin' crazy. He's git-tin' downright peert again. Hello!"

Bud Vickers was carrying a piece of

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news down to Hazlan, and he pulled up his horse to deliver it. Aunt Sally Day's dog had been seen playing in the Breathitt road with the frame of a human foot. Some boys had found not far away, behind a withered "blind," a heap of rags and bones. Eli Crump had not been seen in Hazlan since the night of the Brayton raid.

"Well, ef hit was Eli," said the Brayton, waggishly, "we're all goin' to be saved. Eli's case 'll come fust, an' ef thar's only one Jedgment day, the Lord 'll nuver git to us."

The three chuckled, while old Gabe sat dreaming at his gate. The boy had lain quiet during the weeks of his getting well, absorbed in one aim—to keep hidden until he was strong enough to get to Rome. On the last night the miller had raised one of

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the old hearth-stones and had given him the hire of many years. At daybreak the lad drifted away. Now old Gabe was following him down the river and on to the dim mountain line, where the boy's figure was plain for a moment against the sky, and then was lost.

The clouds in the west had turned gray and the crescent had broken the gloom of the woods into shadows when the miller rose. One star was coming over Black Mountain from the east. It was the Star of Bethlehem to old Gabe; and, star-like on both sides of the Cumberland, answering fires from cabin hearths were giving back its message at last.

"Thar hain't nothin' to hender Rome 'n' Marthy now. I niver knowed anybody to stay 'way from these mount'ins ef he could git back; 'n' Isom said he'd fetch

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'em. Thar hain't nothin' to hender—nothin' now."

On the stoop of the cabin the miller turned to look again, and then on the last Stetson the door was closed.