

[Written for *The Flag of Our Union*]

THE MIDNIGHT ALARM

by James Dabney

The village of H—was one of the quietest and most orderly places in New England. From the days of the Pilgrim Fathers down to the time of which we write, it had always maintained a reputation for soberness, steadiness and morality and its inhabitants were among the most rigid and straitlaced in the land. Even the little children were grim and sour enough to have made old Praise God Barebones's heart leap with joy, could he have seen them. Not a case of crime or misdemeanor had occurred in the village for fifty years, and the last person hung there was a Quaker who had the boldness to attempt to propagate his "infamous doctrines" in the good town of H—in the days of the colony.

This being the state of affairs, the reader may imagine the horror and consternation of the townspeople when it was announced, one Sunday morning, that the store of Deacon Harding had been robbed of several hundred dollars' worth of goods on the previous night. This startling news was followed by the equally startling announcement that Squire Wilson's horse and wagon had been stolen, also, no doubt by the thief or thieves, for the purpose of carrying off the plunder.

The news was absolutely so startling that few persons went to church that day; but the majority of them might have been collected here and there in little knots, discussing the momentous event. It seemed incredible that any one should have committed such a crime in H—, and each man, woman and child set to work to remember what strangers had been in the place of late. No one could recollect any such person save an old crippled woman that had stopped at Deacon Harding's store to make some purchases, and at Squire Wilson's for a drink of water, a few days previous to the robbery! But surely it could not be that poor old woman. She was too feeble, too decrepit to carry off such a lot of goods, and a horse and wagon in the bargain.

I am afraid the good people of H—were not very expert in the science of thief-taking, and that their long exemption from such occurrences had totally unfitted them for contending with them. Be this as it may, they could not come to any definite conclusion as to the probable identity of the thief, and each man gradually settled down into the frightful suspicion -- a thought none as yet had the courage to put into words -- that the robbery had been committed by some one in the village. This unhappy suspicion greatly troubled the good townspeople, for it gradually made each man distrustful of his neighbor; and having lost confidence in others, each began to grow uneasy lest others should suspect him. Thus matters went on, growing worse instead of better, for the space of a month, when the town was again thrown into commotion by the occurrence of a second and more daring robbery than the first.

Words are inadequate to describe the consternation which this second event created in the community. Some sour old women declared that the two affairs were direct visitations from

Heaven for the punishment of the sins of the people of H—, and recommended that the authorities of the place should appoint a day of fasting and prayer for a deliverance from the evil. The minister and the deacons declared this mere nonsense and insisted that H— was the most pious and devout place in all New England, but at length admitted that, as the serpent entered into Eden, he might also make his way into H—, and lead astray some one less favored than good Mother Eve. A few, more practical than the rest, laughed at both the old women and the minister's party, and declared that the best thing that could be done was to send to Boston for a detective to come down and investigate the matter. They met with fierce opposition at first from some grim old fellows, who declared it would be a shame to bring such a person into their midst -- that it would be lasting disgrace to the town. But the more practical ones at last prevailed, and a detective was brought down from Boston.

That worthy official, upon his arrival in the place, met with a cold reception from the majority of the people. They snubbed and insulted him on every possible occasion, and gave him so much trouble, that in his disgust and anger he determined to leave the place, and as a matter of revenge, declared, in leaving, that, although he was unable to trace the thief, every indication went to prove that the robbery had been committed by a resident of H—. The increased horror with which this declaration was received, amply repaid the detective for the annoyance he had experienced, and he took his departure, feeling that he owed the people of H— nothing.

After his departure, the villagers relapsed into positive despair. If an experienced detective, a man who had everyday experience with crime and criminals was convinced that the thief was one of their own number, it must be so.

At length, to decide the matter, the minister proposed that every man and woman in the place should appear before a magistrate and make oath that he or she had known nothing of the crime or the criminal. This measure was eagerly adopted, and on the appointed day, the village of H— went through a course of swearing such as no other town in all New England had ever known. Every one made it a point to be present on the occasion, and every one present promptly took the required oath. The result was that the perplexity of the people was increased ten-fold. They now believed that some of their number had not only been guilty of theft, but of perjury, also, and they began to tremble for the reputation of the place. The sour old women came to the conclusion that the town had been given over to his Satanic Majesty, to exercise his full power over it; and this belief was gradually gaining ground among the people.

A more disagreeable state of affairs cannot be ingrained, and it was rapidly becoming more and more intolerable, when an event occurred which put a new face on the whole matter.

One Sunday afternoon, while the villagers were flocking towards the church for evening worship, the bell suddenly ceased ringing. The sexton, who was ringing it in the lower part of the belfry, by means of ropes, gave it an impatient jerk to continue its summons, but found that it would not move. It had stuck fast, bottom upward, and to right it, he must ascend the belfry to

the bell itself. He remembered now that he had left the key at the minister's house, and would have to wait until the services were over, and get it from him. But when he asked for it, the minister told him to wait until the next day and fix it then: and he was forced to wait, though much against his will.

The people of H— were early birds, and sitting up late at night was considered by them almost an act of wickedness. With no less horror did they regard any sudden interruption of their peaceful slumbers, and they were thoroughly annoyed when they were aroused near midnight of the Sunday in question, by the loud ringing of the church bell, followed instantly by a cry of "fire."

Out of their beds tumbled the good people, and into the street they rushed, armed with buckets, their only means of extinguishing a conflagration. Every one hurried towards the church. The bell had ceased ringing by this time, and no signs of a fire were visible. Upon reaching the church, they found that the alarm had been caused by the bell suddenly and violently falling into its proper position. Vexed and disappointed, they prepared to return to their homes, when one of their number who had been standing on the church steps, suddenly fell off and sprained his ankle. As he lived in a different part of the town and was unable to walk, four men undertook to carry him home on a litter, made on the spot. They were some time in reaching the injured man's home, and when they set out to return to their own abodes, the village had again become wrapped in slumber.

In passing through a back street before they separated, they saw a horse and wagon standing in the rear of a dry goods store. One of the party recognized the animal and vehicle as his own property, and declared to his companions that he believed if they were cautious, they might catch the thief they had so long been in search of; for it was evident that the horse and wagon had been stolen from his stable. They concealed themselves in a dark place near the wagon, and awaited with feverish impatience the result of the affair.

In a few minutes, a man came out of the back door of the store and placed a large bundle in the wagon. Immediately they sprang upon him and secured him. The next day, he was examined before the magistrates. He proved to be a noted thief from that wicked place called Boston, which the people of H— will always regard with a holy horror. The evidence against the man was clear, and he was sent on for trial, and finally sentenced to the state prison. He confessed that he had committed the other two robberies in H—.

You may be sure there was great rejoicing in the village. Men breathed freer, and could look each other in the face again, with the conviction that they were all good, honest people.

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