

# *The Blue River Bank Robbery*

by W. G. Woods

CHAPTER I.

“It is not of the least use to argue the question, father. Tell me plainly, yes or no, and I will bother you no more about it.”

“I cannot indulge you in this, Harry. Indeed, you should believe me when I say we cannot afford it.”

Mr. Houghton leaned his head heavily on his hands as he spoke, and seemed to deprecate the displeasure of his handsome, impatient son.

“Very well, sir,” said the youth of nineteen, his hands quivering as he rose with the anger he seemed striving to keep out of his words and tones. “I hope you will never be sorry for the trifle you have refused me to-night. I shall make the trip to Lake George next week, nevertheless, if I have to sell my grandfather’s watch and chain to get the money.”

A half-groan came from the hidden face of Foster Houghton, and a reproachful “O, Harry!” from his mother, whose eyes had been filling with tears as she sat silent through the stormy interview. But the boy was angry, and in earnest, and he twisted the chain in his waistcoat to give emphasis to the threat. Then as he took his cloak and cap from the closet he continued:

“You need not sit up for me, or leave the door unlocked; I am going to Tinborough with the fellows of the strawberry party, and as there will be a dance, and as the nights are short, I shall wait for daylight to come home, if I do not stop and catch a nap at the Valley House, before starting.”

“Who is going from Elmfield?” inquired the father, more from a desire to show an interest and win the boy from his moodiness than any real curiosity.

“Nearly everybody of my set,” said Harry, with something of a studied coldness: “Arthur Brooks and Tom Boxham and Frank Pettengill—and Harrison Fry, if you want the whole list.”

His father turned sharply away, but the mother spoke appealingly:

“If you would cut off your intimacy with Harrison Fry, now and forever, I think there are very few things your father would refuse you. I have seen his evil influence over you ever since he came back from the city. He was a bad boy, and will be a bad man.”

“Like myself and other wicked people,” said the boy, looking at his watch, “Harry Fry is not half so black as he is painted. But I am not as intimate with him as you fancy; and as to father, I don’t think his treatment of me to-night gives him a clue to interfere with my friendships.”

Henry Houghton shot his shaft deliberately, for he knew his father’s sensitive nature, in which it

would rankle cruelly; and in a moment he was off, bounding through the low, open window, and running with fleet steps down the gravel sidewalk toward the common.

The family circle thus divided was that of the cashier of the Blue River National Bank, of Elmfield. Foster Houghton was a man past middle age, and older than his years in appearance and in heart. He had petted his only son in his childhood enough to spoil most boys, and now made the balance even by repressing the exuberance of his youth with a sharpness sometimes no more than just, sometimes querulous and unreasonable. The boy's grandfather, old Peleg Houghton, who died a year before at ninety and over, had almost worshipped Harry, and on his death-bed, had presented his own superb Frodsham watch to the lad; and both father and mother knew he must be deeply moved to speak so lightly at parting with it.

"I fear Harry is getting in a very bad way," said Mr. Houghton, gloomily, after a pause in which the sharper click of his wife's needles told that her thoughts were busy. "He goes to the other church too often to begin with—smokes, after I have repeatedly told him how the habit hurt me in my boyhood, and what a fight I had to break it off. He is altogether too much in Harrison Fry's company. He has been twice before to Tinborough, driving home across the country in the gray of the morning. And this project of going alone to Lake George on a week's trip is positively ridiculous."

"Very likely you are the best judge, my dear," said Mrs. Houghton. She always began in that way when she meant to prove him otherwise. "I fully agree with you about that reckless young Fry. But as to Harry's going to the brown church, and his visits to Tinborough, I think the same cause is at the bottom of both. Grace Chamberlin has been singing in the choir over there this Spring, and now she is visiting her aunt at Tinborough. And as to that, she is going with her aunt's family to Lake George, to spend July, and I suppose they have expressed a wish to meet him there. Grace Chamberlin is a very pretty girl; and Harry is like what you were at his age."

"Bless my soul, Mary," said the cashier, "then, why didn't the boy tell me what he was driving at? Chasing across the country after a pretty face is foolish enough, at his age, but it is not so bad as going to a watering-place merely for the fashion of it, like some rich, old nabob or professional dandy. If Harry had told me he wanted to dangle after Grace Chamberlin, instead of talking in that desperate way about the watch, I might have thought differently. There is a charm on the chain with my mother's hair, that I wouldn't have go out of the family for a fortune."

Just then the door-bell rang, as if a powerful, nervous hand was at the knob. Mr. Houghton answered the ring, for their one domestic had been called away by a message from a sick sister, and the mistress of the house was "getting along alone" for a day. So when her quick ear told her the visitor was one to see her husband on business, she quitted the room to set away the milk and lock up the rear doors of the house for the night.

The caller was Mr. Silas Bixby. He would have been a sharp man in Elmfield estimation who could predict the object of one of Silas Bixby's calls, though there were few doors in the village at which his face was not frequently seen. He was the constable, but he was also the superintendent of the Sunday School, and the assessor of internal revenue in the district, to say nothing of his being the agent of two or three sewing machine firms, and one life insurance

company, and the correspondent of the *Tinborough Trumpet*. He owned a farm and managed it at odd hours. He gave some of his Winter evenings to keeping a writing school, with which he sometimes profitably combined a singing-school, with lucrative concerts at the end of the term. He was the clerk of the fire company, and never had been absent from a fire, though some of his manifold duties kept him riding through the neighboring towns in his light gig a great deal of the time. He had raised a company and commanded it, in the nine months' army of '62. He kept a little bookstore in one corner of the village quadrangle, and managed a very small circulating library, with the aid of the oldest of his ten children; and he was an equal partner in the new factory enterprise at the Falls. So Mr. Houghton did not venture to guess on what errand Mr. Bixby came to see him, and showed him to a chair in the twilighted sitting room, with a face composed to decline a request to discount a note, or to join with interest in a conversation on the Sunday School, or to listen to a report of the new fire engine fund, with equal ease and alacrity.

Mr. Bixby looked about him to see that nobody was in hearing. "You'll excuse me, I know, 'squire, if I shut down the windows, hot as it is;" and before his host could rise to anticipate him, he had suited the action to the word. "It's detective business. It's a big thing. Do you know I told you, Mr. Houghton, the first of the week, that there was dangerous characters about town, and asked you to keep your eyes open at the bank. Will you bear witness of that?"

"I remember it very well, Mr. Bixby, and also that there has not been a single person in the bank since that day, other than our own towns-people and friends."

"That is just it," said Silas Bixby, twisting his whiskers reflectively; "they have got some accomplice who knows the neighborhood, and whom we don't suspect. But we shall catch him with the rest. The fact is, Mr. Houghton, the Blue River National Bank is to be robbed tonight. The plot is laid, and I have got every thread of it in my hand."

Foster Houghton was one of a class in the village who were habitually incredulous as to Silas Bixby's achievements, as announced by himself; but there was a positiveness and assurance about the constable's manner which carried conviction with it, and he did not conceal the shock which the news gave him.

"Just you keep very cool, sir, and I'll tell you the whole story in a very few words, for I have got one or two things to do before I catch the burglars, and I have promised to look into Parson Pettengill's barn and doctor his sick horse. There are two men in the job, besides somebody in the village here that is working with them secretly. You needn't ask me how I managed to overhear their plans, for I shan't tell; you will read it all in the *Tinborough Trumpet* day after tomorrow. They are regular New York cracksmen, and they have been stopping at the hotel at the Falls, pretending to be looking at the water-power. They came here on purpose to clean out the Blue River Bank."

"Do they mean to blow open the safe?" inquired Mr. Houghton, who was pacing the room.

"Just have patience, 'Squire," said Silas Bixby. "I thought it best to prepare you, and so lead you up kind o' gradual. They have got false keys to your house door and your bedroom. They are going to come in at midnight or an hour after, and gag you and your wife, and force you, at the

mouth of the revolver, to the bank and open the combination lock. Your help, they say, has gone off; and they seem not to be afraid of Henry.”

“Henry gone to Tinborough,” said Mr. Houghton, mechanically.

“I presume they know that too, then,” said the constable. “They calculate on forty thousand dollars in the safe, government bonds and all. Their team is to be ready on the Tinborough road, and they mean to catch the owl train. You they calculate to leave, tied hand and foot, on the bank floor, till you are found there in the morning.”

Foster Houghton stopped in his rapid walk up and down the little room, and took his boots from the closet.

“Fair play, ‘Squire,” said Bixby, laying a hand on the cashier’s arm as he sat down and kicked off his slippers. “I’ve told you the whole story, when I might have carried out my plan without telling a word. Now what are you going to do?”

“Going to order a stout bolt put on my front door at once, and to deposit the bank keys in the safe at Felton’s store.”

“You will think better of it if you will just sit still and hear me through,” replied the visitor. “Don’t you see that will show your hand to the gang, who are on the watch, and they will just leave Elmfield and rob some other bank and make their fortunes? Moreover, the plot never would be believed in the village, and such a way of meeting it would make no sensation at all in print. No, Mr. Houghton, you are cashier of the bank, and it is your business to protect the property. I am constable at Elmfield, and it is my duty to capture the burglars. I propose to do it in such a way that the whole State shall ring with my brilliant management of the matter, and yours, too, of course, so far as your part goes. The programme is all complete, and you have only to fall in.”

“Well, Mr. Bixby,” said the elder gentleman, again surrendering to his companion’s superior force and determination of character, “and what is the programme?”

“As far as you are concerned, simply to remain passive,” said the rural constable. “You are to show no knowledge of expecting the visit, and after a proper display of reluctance you are to go with the burglars, with your keys in your hand. If I were to arrest the rascals now, I should have nothing to charge them with, and could only frighten them out of town. When the bank is entered the crime is complete. I shall be on the watch with two strong fellows I have secured to help me—men who served in my company, stout, afraid of nothing, and not smart enough to claim the whole credit when the job is done. When you are fairly inside the bank we shall pop out from behind the bowling alley, guard the door, flash our lanterns in their faces, and overpower them at once. It sounds very short now, but it will easily fill a column in the city papers.”

“Mr. Bixby,” said Foster Houghton, with a good deal of deliberate emphasis, “I have always thought you a man of sense. I think so now. Do you suppose I am going to stand quietly by and

see a couple of ruffians tie a gag in the mouth of my wife, when I know and can prevent it before hand?"

"No, sir, I expect no such thing," said Bixby, not a little embarrassed. "I expected like as not you would bring up some such objection, so I have provided for it in advance. John Fletcher's little girl is very sick; they have gone the rounds of all the folks on our street, taking turns watching there; to-night they came to me and said, 'Bixby, can't you find us somebody to watch;' and I said I knew just the one that would be glad to help a neighbor. So I will deliver the message to Mrs. Houghton, and you needn't have a mite of anxiety about her, up there as safe and comfortable as if she were twenty miles away."

While her husband yet hesitated, Mrs. Houghton re-entered the room; and Bixby, quick to secure an advantage, was ready at the moment with his petition.

"Good evening, Mrs. Houghton. Been waiting very patient for you to come in. I called to see if you felt able and willing to set up to-night along with John Fletcher's little girl. The child don't get any better, and Mrs. Fletcher, she is just about sick abed herself, with care and worry."

"You know I am always ready to help a neighbor in such trouble," said the lady, graciously, with the prompt acquiescence which people in the country give to such calls. "And now I think of it, Mr. Bixby, I have another call to make on your street. I think I will walk up with you, and so get around to Fletcher's at nine o'clock. My husband has several letters to write, so he will not miss me."

Foster Houghton sat in a sort of maze, while fate thus arranged affairs for him, though they tended to a consummation which was far from welcome to his mind. His wife went out for her smelling salts, her spectacles and her heavy shawl; and Bixby snatched the brief opportunity.

"I have told you everything, 'Squire, that you need to know. Keep your mind easy and your head cool, and the whole thing may be done as easy as turning your hand over. Remember that it is the only way to save the bank and catch the men that may have robbed a dozen banks. Do not stir out of the house again this evening, or you will excite suspicion and ruin the game. Between twelve and two you may expect your company; and rely upon me in hiding close to the bank. Mum is the word;" For Mrs. Houghton was descending the stairs.

"Come in again when you come back, Bixby; can't you?" said the cashier, still loth to close so hasty and so singular a bargain.

"Not for the world," replied the constable. "It would expose our hand at once, and spoil the trick. Now, Mrs. Houghton, I'm really proud to be the beau to such a sprightly young belle."

And so, with a word of farewell, they were off, and Foster Houghton sat alone in the house with his secret.

He was not a coward, but a man of peace by temperament and training, and the enterprise in which he had been enlisted was both foreign and distasteful to him. How many incidents might

occur, not set down in Bixby's programme, to make the night's work both dangerous and disagreeable? His very loneliness made the prospect seem doubly unpleasant. A dozen times, as he sat musing over it, he put forth his hand for his boots with intent to go out and frustrate the robbery in his own way, regardless of Bixby's schemes for capture and glory. As many times he fell back in his easy chair, thinking now that he was bound in honor by his tacit agreement with the constable, and again that the whole story was nothing but the fruit of the officer's fertile imagination, and that only the inventor should render himself ridiculous by his credulity. Now he wished his wife was at home to make the waiting moments pass more quickly; that Harry was there to give the aid of his daring and the stimulus of his boyish enthusiasm in the strange emergency. And sometimes the old man's thoughts wandered, in spite of the excitement of the hour, to his boy, dancing away the night at Tinborough. He recalled his anxiety over his son's dissipation, his associates, his growing recklessness of manner, his extravagant tastes, the look of hard defiance in his face but an hour or two before. His heart yearned over the lad in spite of his wild ways, like David's over Absalom, and he resolved to try the mother's method and imagine excuses, and replace harshness with indulgence, hereafter. The village bell clanged out from the steeple close by, and Foster Houghton dropped the thread of his reverie with a start, and went back to the robbery again. Clearly he was getting too nervous. He must do something to shake it off.

"I'll get Harry's revolver," he thought, with little purpose what he should do with it; and he took the lamp and went up stairs to the boy's empty room. The drawers were thrown open in a confusion which offended the cashier's neat prejudices acquired in the profession. He knew where the pistol was kept, but its box was empty; and he exclaimed under his breath—

"That is a boy all over. He goes to Tinborough to dance and eat strawberries, and he carries a pistol, loaded, I dare say to the muzzle. It is ten to one he will shoot himself or his sweetheart before the evening is over."

As Mr. Houghton fumbled over the bureau his hand encountered a covered flask. Even his unaccustomed nose was able to recognize its contents as whiskey; and his regret at such a discovery in his son's room was lost in the joy with which he hailed a stimulant so greatly needed to put his nerves in a condition for the events to come. Perhaps he forgot how long it was since he called in such a reinforcement; perhaps his hands shook; perhaps he thought the occasion required a large dose. He took a hearty one; and when he was down stairs again the difficulties in the way of bagging the burglars vanished from his mind. He was a young man once more, and entered into the romance of Bixby's plot, he said to himself, as enthusiastically as Harry would have done. He paced the room with an elastic stride very different from the nervous wavering step with which he had heard the news. Bixby and himself, he thought, would be enough to overpower any three burglars. Then his head was heavy, and he felt drowsy. To be in proper condition for the emergency, he reflected, he needed all the sleep he could get. The resolve was one to be executed as promptly as formed; and in a few minutes later the cashier had locked the door, fastened the lower windows, and was snugly in bed.

A gentle tinkle of the door bell aroused him again before, as it seemed to him, he had fairly closed his eyes. "The robbers at last," he thought; and then he rebuked himself for the absurdity of supposing that a burglar would announce his coming by the door-bell. "It is Bixby, of course,"

he said to himself, "come to own he was a fool and the story all nonsense." But he paused before he turned the key, and said in his fiercest tone, "Who is there?"

"It is only me, Foster," said the sweet, familiar voice of his wife, without; and when he had admitted her she told him, in her quick way, that after she had watched with the child an hour or two, a professional nurse who had been sent for a week before had arrived unexpectedly, and that she had been glad to give up her vigil and come home.

Foster Houghton rarely did anything without thinking twice about it, if not more; so it came about that while he balanced in his mind the *pros* and *cons* as to revealing to his wife the secret which Bixby had confided to him, and thus give her a fright in advance for what might prove to be a false alarm after all, the tired lady went sound to sleep; and thus the scale was turned in favor of reticence. Perhaps the husband's continued drowsiness contributed to the resolve also; for his eyelids still drooped with strange obstinacy and an influence more powerful than even the apprehension of danger transformed his terrors into dreams again.

## CHAPTER II.

One, two, rang out from the belfry on the breathless June night, already heavy with the rising fog from the river. Foster Houghton found himself broad awake as he counted the strokes; but even while he thought it was the clock that had disturbed him, he felt a cold, hard ring of steel against his temple, and saw through the darkness a man by his bedside.

"Not one word, or you will never utter another."

He noticed the voice, even in the whirl of the moment, and knew that it was strange to him. He turned toward his wife, and saw that there was a man by her side also, with revolver aimed; felt, rather than saw, that she had waked when he did, and was waiting, self-possessed, for whatever was to come. As the darkness yielded to his eyes, he was aware of the third figure, standing at the window.

"Perfect quiet, remember, and we will tell you what is to be done," said the same voice, cool, with an utterance entirely distinct yet hardly louder than a whisper. "You have nothing to fear if you obey orders. A knife is ready for the heart of each of you if you disobey. The lady has simply to lie still; as she will be bound to the bed and her mouth stopped, that will be easy; and the gag is very gentle, and will not hurt if she does not resist. Mr. Houghton will rise, put on his trousers, and go with us to the bank, always in range of this pistol and in reach of this blade. The keys are already in my pocket. Number Three, will you scratch a match that I may help the gentleman to his clothes."

The figure in the window stepped noiselessly forward at the summons. As the blue flame lighted the room Foster Houghton observed that his visitors were all masked, with black silk, through which a narrow slit permitted vision. He noticed that their feet were shod with listing, so thick that a step made no audible sound on the straw carpet. He noticed that long, thin black cloaks covered their forms to the ankles, so that no details of clothing could be noted to identify them. And while he observed these things, not venturing to stir until the threatening muzzle was

withdrawn from his face, he felt his hand tightly clutched by the fingers of his wife, beneath the coverlid.

Years of familiar association had made him apt at interpreting his wife's thoughts and feelings, without the aid of the spoken word. Either by some peculiar expression in the grasp itself, or by that subtle magnetism which we know exists among the unknown forces, he felt that there was something more than the natural terror of the moment, more than the courage of a heart ever braver than his own, more than sympathy for his own supposed dismay, in his wife's snatch at his hand. More alarmed, at the instant, by the shock thus given than by the more palpable danger he turned his head toward his wife again, and in her eyes and in the direction they gave to his, saw all that she had seen.

The masked figure in the centre of the room, in producing a match, had unwittingly thrown back one side of its cloak. By the sickly flame just turning to white, Foster Houghton saw, thus revealed, the twisted chain he had played with in his own boyhood, the golden crescent with his mother's hair, the massive key with its seal, just as he had seen them on his boy's breast at sunset. In an instant more a taper was lighted; the curtain of the cloak was drawn together again. But the secret it had exposed was impressed upon two hearts, as if they had been seared with iron. As a drowning man thinks of the crowded events of a lifetime, Foster Houghton in that moment of supreme agony, of a dozen links of circumstantial evidence—the boy's baffled desire for money, his angry words, his evil associates, his missing revolver, his deliberate explanation of a night-long absence, his intimate knowledge of the affairs of the bank, except the secret combination of the lock, which he had often teased for in vain. Two things were stamped upon his brain together and he was thankful that his wife could know the horror of but one of them.

His own son was engaged in a plot to rob the bank, by threats of assassination against those who gave him birth. He himself was irrevocably enlisted in a plot to capture the robbers, and so to bring his boy to infamy and a punishment worse than death.

The discovery compels a pause in the narrative. It made none in the actual progress of events. The man who had spoken motioned the cashier to rise, and assisted his trembling hands in covering his limbs with one or two articles of clothing. The one on the opposite side of the bed moved quickly and deftly as a sailor, bound Mrs. Houghton where she lay, without a touch of rudeness or indignity beyond what his task made necessary. A knotted handkerchief from his pocket was tied over her mouth. The third figure stood at the window, either to keep a watch without or to avoid seeing what took place within; but Foster Houghton's eyes could discern no tremor, no sign of remorse or hesitation, in his bearing.

“Now, Cashier,” said the one voice, which alone had been heard since the stroke of the clock, “you will have to consider yourself ready, for we have no time to spare. I feel sure you know what is healthy for you, but still I will tie this rope round your waist to save you from any dangerous temptation to try a side street. Number Two, you will go below and see if the coast is clear.”

With one more look at his wife's eyes, in which he saw outraged motherly affection, where the strangers saw only fright and pain, Foster Houghton suffered himself to be led from the room.

One of the robbers had preceded him; one held him tightly by the wrist; one, the one whose presence gave the scene its treble terror, remained long enough to extinguish the taper and lock the door. The outer door was fastened behind them also; and then the noiseless little procession (for the cashier had been permitted to put on his stockings only) filed along the gravel walk through the pitch blackness which a mist gives to a moonless night, toward the solitary brick building occupied by the Blue River National Bank.

They passed the school house where Foster Houghton had carried his boy a dozen years before, with a bright new primer clutched in frightened little fingers; then the desolate old mansion of his own father, where the boy had been petted and worshipped as fervently as at home; a little further on, the church, where the boy had been baptized, and where the youth chafed beneath distasteful sermons—its white steeple lost in the upper darkness; and, a few paces beyond, the academy, within whose walls the cashier had listened with such pride to Harry's eloquent declamation of "The Return of Regulus to Carthage," on the last Commencement day. He thought of these things as he passed, though so many other thoughts surged in his mind; and he wondered if another heart beside his own was beset with such reminiscences on the silent journey.

Before they reached the bank the man who had gone in advance rejoined them.

"It is all serene," he said in a low tone, but with a coarser voice and utterance than his confederate's; "nothing more than a cat stirring. I have unhitched the mare, and we shall be off in fifteen minutes."

"All right, Number Two," said the leader. "The swag will be in the buggy in less time. Cashier, you are a man of prudence, I know. If you will work that combination skillfully and promptly, not a hair of your bead shall be harmed. If you make a blunder that costs us a minute, not only will this knife be at home in your heart, but we shall stop on our way back and set your cottage on fire. Our retreat will be covered, and you know the consequences there, before the alarm will rouse anybody. I have sworn to do it."

Foster Houghton fancied he saw a shudder in the slighter figure beside him; but it might have been a puff of wind across the long drapery.

"O, blow the threats," said Number Two. "The man values his life, and he is going to open the safe quicker than he ever did before. Open the door, young one, and let's be about it." The robber who had not yet opened his lips, and whose whole motion the cashier still watched stealthily, stepped forward to the bank door; and as he drew a key from under his cloak the prisoner caught another glimpse of the chain he could have sworn to among a thousand.

The door swung open. The cashier's heart was in his throat. He had not heard a sound of Bixby, but he knew the village constable too well to fear, or hope, that he might have given up the chase. All four entered the building; but before the door could be closed behind them there was a shout, a cry of dismay, a rush of heavy feet, a flash of light in a lantern which gleamed but a moment before it was extinguished, the confused sound of blows and oaths, and the breaking of glass, punctuated by the report of a pistol. Foster Houghton could never give a clear account of

the terrible minute in which his consciousness seemed partly benumbed. He took no part in the struggle, but seemed to be pushed outside the door; and there as the tumult within began to diminish, Silas Bixby came hurriedly to him, dragging a masked figure by the shoulder.

“Houghton, you must help a little. We have got the better of ‘em, and my men are holding the two big fellows down. But the fight is not out of them yet, and you must hold this little one three minutes, while I help to tie their hands. Just hold this pistol to his head, and he will rest very easy.”

Even while he spoke Bixby was inside the door again, and the gleam of light which followed showed that he had recovered his lantern and meant to do his work thoroughly.

Foster Houghton’s left hand had been guided to the collar of his captive, and the revolver had been thrust in his right. There was no question of the composure of the robber now. He panted and sobbed and shook, and made no effort to tear himself from the feeble grasp that confined him.

If the cashier had been irresolute all his life, he did not waver for an instant now. He did not query within himself what was his duty, or what was prudent, or what his wife would advise, or what the bank directors would think.

“Harry,” he whispered, hoarsely, his lips close to the mask, “I know you.”

The shrinking figure gave one great sob. Foster Houghton went right on without pausing.

“Bixby does not know you, and there is time to escape, yet. I shall fire this pistol in the air. Run for your life to your horse there, and push on to Tinborough. You can catch the train. May God forgive you.”

The figure caught the hand which had released its hold as the words were spoken, and kissed it. Then, turning back as if upon a sudden impulse, the robber murmured something which could not be understood, and thrust into the cashier’s hand a mass of chilly metal which his intuition rather than his touch recognized as Peleg Houghton’s watch and chain. He had presence of mind enough to conceal it in his pocket, and then he fired his pistol, and he heard the sound of flying feet and rattling wheels as Silas Bixby accosted him.

“What in thunder! did he wriggle away from you? why didn’t you sing out sooner?”

“I think I am getting faint. In Heaven’s name, go quick to my house and release my wife and tell her all is safe. The fright of these shots will kill her.”

Foster Houghton sunk into a swoon, even as he spoke, and only the quick arm of Silas Bixby saved him from a fall on the stone steps.

“See here, boys,” said he, “if you have got those fellows tied up tight, one of you take ‘Squire Houghton and bring him to, and I’ll go over to his house and untie his wife, before I start after

the pesky little rascal that has got away. If I had'a supposed he would dare to risk the pistol I should have hung on to him myself. Mike, you just keep your revolver cocked, and if either of those men more than winks, shoot him where he lies."

Having thus disposed of his forces, and provided for the guard of the prisoners and the restoration of the disabled, the commander was off at a run. Half of Emfield seemed to have been awakened by the shots and he was met by a half-dozen lightly clad men and boys whom he sent on this errand and that, to open the lock-up under the engine house, to harness horses for the pursuit, vouchsafing only very curt replies to their eager questions as to what had happened. He was exasperated on arriving at Foster Houghton's dwelling to find the door locked and the windows fastened. So he raised a stentorian shout of, "It's—all—right—Mrs.—Houghton. Robbers—caught—and—nobody—hurt"; repeating his words carefully to insure being understood ; and then scud at full speed back toward the bank again. He met half-way an excited, talkative little group, the central figure of which was the cashier of the bank, restored to life, but still white as death, and supported by friendly hands. Assured that Houghton was now able to release his wife, Bixby ran on to the green, and in five minutes more was settled in his gig, and urging his cheerful little bay Morgan over the road to Tinborough, mentally putting into form his narrative for the *Trumpet* as he went.

### CHAPTER III.

Thus it came about that it was Foster Houghton himself that unloosed his wife's bonds, bending his gray head as he did so, to print a kiss of sorrow and sympathy on her wrinkled check, and leaving a tear there.

"He has escaped," he said, "and is on the road to the station."

"Will he not be overtaken?"

"I think not. He has a fair start, and knows what is at stake; and the train passes through before daylight."

Then the woman's heart, which had borne her bravely up so far, gave way, and she broke into terrible sobs; and the husband who would comfort her was himself overcome by the common grief, and could not speak a word. Silently they suffered together, pressing hands, until the entering light of dawn reminded them that even this day had duties, and perhaps new phases of sorrow. They could hear the quick steps of persons evidently full of excitement over the event of the night, and talking all together. They could not be left long undisturbed. As they dressed, Foster Houghton—unable or reluctant to describe in any detail the scene at the bank, as his wife was to ask him about it—suddenly encountered in his pocket the watch entangled in its chain.

"He gave me this, and a kiss," he said, every word a sob; and Mary Houghton pressed it to her heart. Then, as a quick step sounded on the porch, she hastily thrust it into a drawer.

"What shall we say?" she asked.

“I do not know. Heaven will direct us for the best,” he replied.

The step did not pause for ceremony, but came in and up the stairs as if on some pressing errand. Then the door opened, and Harry Houghton ran in—his curls wet with the fog of the morning, his cheeks rosy as from a rapid ride, his eyes dancing with excitement.

His father and mother stood speechless and bewildered, filled with a new alarm. But the boy was too busy with his own thoughts to observe his reception, Thick and fast came his words, questions waiting for no answers, and narrative never pausing for comment.

“What is this Bixby shouted to me when I met him, about robbers? And what is there such a crowd at the bank about? Did I come sooner than you expected me? We had a glorious time at Tinborough, you know, and when we were through dancing I decided to drive home at once. And a few miles out I met Silas in his gig, driving like mad, and he shouted at me till I was out of hearing, but I could not catch one word in a dozen. But before anything else, I want to beg your pardon for my roughness last night. I am old enough to know better, but I was angry when I spoke; and I have been thoroughly ashamed of myself ever since. You will forgive and forget, father, won’t you? Hallo, I didn’t suppose you felt so badly about it, mother darling.”

Mary Houghton was clasping her son’s neck, crying as she had not cried that night. But the cashier, slower in seeing his way, as usual, stood, passing his hand across his brows for a moment. Then he spoke—

“Harry, where is your grandfather’s watch?”

“There, did you miss it so quickly? I meant to get it back before you discovered it was gone. I will have it after breakfast. The fact is, I was not myself when I left the house last night, with temper, and Harrison Fry offered me two hundred dollars for it, to be paid next week, and in my temper I let him have it to bind the bargain. I was crazy for money, and I sold him my pistol, too. I regretted about the watch before I had fairly quit the village; but he broke his engagement and did not go with us to Tinborough after all, so I have not had a chance to get it back again till now.”

“Harrison Fry!” exclaimed Foster Houghton; and his hands clasped and his lips moved in thankful prayer.

“But if you don’t tell me what is all this excitement in the village, I shall run out and find out for myself,” cried the boy impatiently. “You never would stand here asking me questions about trifles, if the bank had been broken open in the night.”

Foster Houghton put his hands on his boy’s shoulders and kissed him, as he had not done since his son’s childhood. Then he took from its hiding-place the watch and hung it on Harry’s neck, his manifest emotion checking the expression of the lad’s astonishment.

“There is much to tell you, Harry,” he said, “and perhaps you will think I have to ask your

forgiveness rather than you mine. But your heart is too full for a word till after prayers. Let's go down."

Then the three went down the stairs, the mother clinging to the boy's hand, which she had never relinquished since her first embrace. Foster Houghton took the massive Bible, as was his daily custom, and read the chapter upon which rested the mark left the morning before; but his voice choked and his eyes filled again when he came to the lines:

"For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Silas Bixby galloped into Tinborough two minutes late for the down train; and the fugitive was too sharp to be caught by the detectives who were put on the watch for him by telegraphic messages. In a few hours all Elmfield had discovered that Harrison Fry was missing, and had made up its mind that he was the escaped confederate in the burglary. The Blue River National Bank offered a reward for him, but he has never been found. The zealous constable found compensation for the loss of one prisoner in the discovery that the other two were a couple of the most skillful and slippery of the metropolitan cracksmen, known among other aliases as Gentlemen Graves and Toffey. Bixby's courage and discretion received due tribute from counsel, press and public during the trial the next month in the Tinborough court house; and by some influence it was so managed that Mrs. Houghton was not called to the stand, nor was Foster Houghton closely questioned in regard to the manner in which the third robber had escaped from his custody on the steps of the bank.

Harry Houghton went to Lake George that Summer, starting a day after the departure of Grace Chamberlin; but this year they go together, and the programme of the tour includes Niagara and Quebec.

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