

THE SOUND OF HEAVY HAMMERS

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IMMENSE single drops of rain came with the morning turn of the tide, honeycombing the duct of Monkey Lane in the harbor town of Halifax. It was but a small shower and the day was the Sabbath, yet the people stayed indoors, for it was late November and a bone-reaching chill came from the waterfront.

Timothy Briggs, the lame cobbler, snug and warm in the third dwelling on the Lane, a small house of squared timbers bearing a lettered board above the door which read "Boot Making, Oiling & Lacing," sat on a stool and watched his children. They were marching back and forth from door to window, carrying sticks for muskets and pretending they were soldiers.

"Look at them, Rachel," he cried to his wife. "See them march."

She nodded. "They're like you, Tim."

"Me!" He grimaced at his lame foot. "They'll be worth a dozen of me."

He turned as a neighbor rapped at the door, then shouted in. "Give me a hand, Tim. Some drunken soldiers pushed my heifer in the well."

"The blundering scuts!" Timothy put a cap on his head and followed the man.

A rope, and many hands, hoisted the animal to safety, but the owner cursed the pranksters. "There's too much drinking, he growled.

"Ay," agreed Timothy. "Has my brother . . ."

"Yes," said the man grimly. "It were him started this lark. He's had a drop too much, and he's gone to your house."

Timothy turned and limped hurriedly up Monkey Lane. Rachel was afraid of men loud with liquor, and Bentlow, his brother, was a rogue with women.

He heard Rachel calling for him before he reached the door, and the youngsters were squalling with fright. One look was enough. Bentlow had Rachel in his arms and was kissing her roughly.

Timothy was not as tall as his brother but he was more strongly built, and quicker in moving. He seized Bentlow, spinning him free of Rachel, then struck him a blow that slammed him against the wall. Bentlow let out a bellow and charged,

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but Timothy dodged neatly, caught his man in a wrestling grip, and threw him to the floor..

"Devil you are!" he gasped.

He had his hands about Bentlow's throat, his knee on Bentlow's chest, and Bentlow was on his broad back, gulping with fear. "If you touch Rachel again," he rasped, "I'll bash you fine face in."

Rachel persuaded him to loosen his grip, and her voice followed Bentlow like a long-lashed whip when he was able to get to his feet and stagger away down Monkey Lane.

"That's the end of his coming here," said Timothy. "He'll try hard to lose me trade over this, and I know the spite that's in him, but he'll come no more."

It was Monday week when the colonel of Bentlow's regiment spoke to Timothy and asked for the truth of the rumors that had skittered along every street of the town. Timothy gave him the facts frankly, for he counted the colonel a friend, and received approval.

"You did exactly right, Tim. Report your brother to me if he bothers you again."

Bentlow, however, kept away from Monkey Lane. The cold weather began and trade slackened, though footwear was a necessity and the other cobblers of the town were not so clever with shaping leather and pegging soles. A little work kept dribbling in, but there was not much silver in circulation.

Rachel said they would not want for food. Timothy had grown a winter's supply of potatoes and beans and peas in a cleared patch back of his cabin, and heavy soles nailed on fishing boots assured them fresh cod for a month of mornings. Some way they would get along.

After New Year's the pinch was tighter, and the town felt it. The winter was a hard one. The hills froze like iron, and ships coming to the wharves were coated with ice a foot in thickness. Days on end Timothy had no work at all or a chance to earn a penny. Then, under a fall of new snow, he found a side of leather near his door.

He glimpsed a corner of it while clearing a path to draw water for Rachel's tub, drew the leather forth, and stared unbelievably. It was leather he needed, and had needed because he lacked money to buy such a grade—but how came it there?

He took it into the house and talked with Rachel, and they thought of all the customers who might have come with an order for high boots to wear in the spring mud and who, under the

influence of a dram too many, might have lost the leather in the storm.

In the end they decided the customer would return and explain, and Timothy cut into the hide for shoes long ordered, and never had he softened better leather. To work with it gave him a feeling that the worst of the winter was over. New orders for boots came to hand, and he worked steady hours until March blustered in with an icy gale. The next morning a constable knocked at the door and arrested Timothy for stealing a side of leather valued at fifteen shillings.

Markings had been found inside a pair of high boots Timothy had made and Rachel stood as if carved in chalk while Timothy was led away. He seemed unable to speak or think or look at her. Fear had thrown a cold loop around his heart and drawn it tight, for in that year the penalty for stealing goods worth more than four shillings—was death.

It was the proprietor of the Green Cat, a tavern near the barracks, who laid the charge of theft. The side of leather had been stolen from him. By chance one of his tavern customers had examined a new pair of high boots, and had found an identification mark inside them.

The marks were strong evidence, and Timothy did not deny having a side of leather he had not purchased. He told his story of finding the hide in the snow beside his door, and of his thinking some customer had brought it there, someone whom he could pay later for the leather. He did not vary a word in his re-telling of the finding after the colonel of the regiment appeared on his behalf and said that Bentlow was the customer who had found the markings inside the boots another man was wearing.

There was talk, then, of dropping the case, but the proprietor of the Green Cat had customers of influence, and the justices had many things to consider. There had been several thefts during the hard winter, and an example was needed to curb further stealing. So they put off the decision for a day or two and then sentenced Timothy to be hanged by the neck at the Grand Parade when the ice had gone and it was convenient to build a gallows.

There was no cell for the condemned, even at the barracks, and they had to take Timothy to the Split Crow, a seamen's tavern, and lock him in the strong room used by fur buyers for storing their pelts while waiting a ship. They gave him a cot with plenty of blankets, and decent meals from the tavern

table. His guard was an oldster, who sat outside the door and acted as if he thought his post one of high privilege.

Timothy was still dazed. He was hoping to wake and find that everything that had happened was but a bad dream. No candles were allowed him, so he sprawled on the cot while his mind fumbled for something real to steady his thoughts. Every phase of his married life leaped through his mind, and he saw Rachel as clearly as if she were beside him. Every happiness they had shared together strung across his memory, passed and came again. The gnawing rats beneath the floor, and the drunken singing on the other side of the plank wall, made an environment of which he was but dimly aware, and he was lying there, still dressed but dreaming, when the roosters of the tavern woke him with their dawn crowing.

Peering through the small window rimmed with frost, Timothy made his plans. He asked to have his work brought him. It was a request quickly granted, and before noon he had his bench and hammer, his lasts and thread and sewing awls beside his coat. His wife was to be allowed to see him once a day.

One glance at Rachel's face when she came told him that she knew of his sentence, and they did not speak of it at all. Instead, she told him of an order for boots, as if his work were all that mattered.

"I hope there'll be more orders," he said simply. "The ground is hard frozen and it will be weeks afore they can build anything. I'll earn enough," he kept avoiding her gaze, "to buy you and the boys a passage to Boston. They must never grow up in this town."

Rachel's silent anguish tore at him. He put his arm around her and held her as if they were young again, seated on the sea wall by the harbor mouth, watching gulls fighting for scraps at the fish wharves. Then he kissed her and let her go. When the door closed he was already at work.

By full dawn each morning he sat at his bench, cutting, paring, stitching, as if devils perched at his elbows and, in a manner, he fancied them there. For his thoughts were of Rachel and the little hell that was to be her lot. Now and then he had mind pictures of himself as a boy, avoiding a drunken father seeing everything given to Bentlow, tall, straight, loud talking, jeering at all cobblers when he had donned his first uniform.

Rachel came each day, bringing little messages from friends, new orders for boots, and money collected from work delivered. One afternoon she brought the children with her. They climbed

about Timothy's cot, peeped through a knothole and listened to the coarse jollity of the Split Crow. There was loud talk of Bentlow and a female admirer at the Green Cat, so Rachel stopped the hole with wax and let the guard whittle wooden muskets for the boys.

The days sped by. It was late in April, and Rachel had brought him a treat of liver dumplings when Timothy, without a needle slipping or a peg driven wrong, finished a pair of high boots and knew he had the passage money earned. They counted every shilling, and he gave Rachel the silver.

"A captain came with an order for boots this morning," he told her. "He's from Boston, and he's promised to find a place for you and the boys."

It was the first mention he had made of the inevitable, and Rachel clung to him as if she would never let go.

"I have to keep on working," he said gently. "There must be enough to pay for a proper funeral.

"Don't," she pleaded. "Please don't." The agony was still in her eyes when she left him.

The garrison surgeon came the next morning and ordered boots with double soles. "Hurry them a bit, will you?" he said. "They're going to build the scaffold next week."

"I'll hurry," Timothy promised.

"I'll have a pint of brandy for you when the day comes," said the surgeon. "It'll keep your courage up."

When they began building the gallows Timothy had to stop his work and listen. There was something grim and terrifying and final in the thudding of the sledges as the timbers were driven into place. Rachel could not bring herself to walk past the Parade until dusk had hidden the rising structure from view and the hammers were still. Then she came and sat for an hour with Timothy. They did not mention the pounding that still filled their ears; they spoke instead, of when they had first moved into their house in Monkey Lane.

When the hammering began the next day Timothy pried the stopper of wax from the knothole and let in the noisy vulgarity throbbing in his brain, and he made his first mistakes with the sewing needle.

In the evening Rachel did not come and he paced his cell wondering. Her coming had become his strength, and her absence was unnerving. He was still pacing when the door was unbarred and Bentlow walked in. The guard said, "Ill leave a light this once," and he placed a candle on the bench.

When the door closed Bentlow spoke. "How's the time going?" he asked.

"Why should you want to know?" Timothy tossed back at him, burning with resentment. "If there's nothing else you want . . ."

"Don't, Tim. We're brothers." Bentlow was suddenly contrite.

"It was you who put me here," Timothy challenged.

"I was a fool," Bentlow whimpered, and suddenly Timothy knew that his brother was afraid.

"Why did you come?" he asked.

Bentlow slumped on the cot as if the sap had drained from his legs. "Tomorrow," he said chokingly, "I'll be worse off than you. I owe Jason, at the Green Cat, more than thirty pounds. He'll have me in jail before sundown."

"Yes," Timothy agreed tonelessly, "debt's a heavy crime."

"Hear the rest of it." All Bentlow's courage had washed away from him. "It was me who took that side of leather from Jason and put it where you'd find it. I was drinking that night and ugly thoughts were in my head, but, God's truth, Tim, meant to tell them I'd done it for a joke. But you didn't believe or send for me, and one day slid into another, and then I heard they'd sentenced you. I was drunk, then, days on end and . . ."

"Yes," said Timothy in a bitter voice, "and?"

The rowdies beyond the wall had staggered away in the spring mud, for it was past closing hour and the tavern so still they could hear, faintly, the first frogs in the pond at the end of Monkey Lane. Bentlow found it difficult to speak, but the silence was a vacuum dragging his story from him.

"And now that hussy at the Green Cat, who pretended she wanted to marry me, has told Jason she saw me take the hide, after me giving her money to be quiet, so tonight he said he'd have me put here in your place. He's a hard one, Tim, and they'll hang me. Whatever will I do?"

Timothy's heart leaped within him, and for a long moment he was only aware of terrific, incredible relief. Then an answer rose hotly to his tongue, but he held it there for the candle guttered out and they were sitting in the dark as though they were boys again listening for their father's stumbling tread as he came home from the tavern.

"You had best clear out," he said at last. "Get away before daylight. Make yourself a trapper and stay in the bush until they've forgotten you."

"I can't," Bentlow breathed hoarsely. "I'd get lost and starve. I couldn't do it."

"Try for a ship, then." Timothy winced in the dark at such shameless panic. "Once you're out of the harbor they won't get you."

"I tried." Bentlow was whispering now, for the guard was stirring outside. "They want ten pounds to hide me away until sailing time. God save me, Tim, what will I do?"

"It's midnight," the guard called sleepily. "You'll have to go, soldier."

Timothy reached inside his shirt and drew out a leather sack. "Here's what I saved for a proper burying," he said. "It'll put you safe."

He felt Bentlow's fingers clutching the sack, smelled his feverish breath and saw his face, twisted with fear, as the guard opened the door. But not a word could Bentlow manage, and then he was gone.

Timothy stayed on the cot, thinking, wondering, almost dazed with the miracle that had happened, but worried over Rachel's words when she found what he had done with such hard-earned money. He was still there, dozing, distressed and his shoes on, when the dawn came, clean and sweet, with sea birds crying over the harbor and the sun warming his small window.

The morning stretched, and was different. There were no sounds of heavy hammers. Then the guard burst in with news that had the town excited. Jason, of the Green Cat, had reported Bentlow to be the thief who had stolen the hide, and Timothy was to be freed. By mid-morning a curious crowd had gathered, and the constable came to release the prisoner.

Timothy walked outside, blinked gravely, then feasted his eyes on the green hillside above the town where the first grass had shown strength. He tingled. Rachel was coming to meet him.

It would be best, he knew, to have the worst over at the beginning, so he spoke swiftly. "I gave my burying money to Bentlow," he whispered. "Every shilling. I don't know why I did it. The hammers would have made him crazy, but . . ."

Rachel tightened her hold on his arm and the world stayed still while he waited her words. "We've still got the passage money," she murmured.

"But I gave our ten pounds to him, after all he's done . . ."

"I thought you would, Tim." There was such sheer love in Rachel's voice that he stopped walking, "So when he came

to me last night, so terribly scared and pleading, I talked him into going to see you. After all, he's your brother, and I'm proud and glad that you helped him."

Timothy didn't hear the cheering crowd, or the gun shouting that his tools would be taken over to his house. He was so amazed at Rachel's sending Bentlow to him, and trusting what he would do, that he could scarcely think.

"Rachel," he blurted, "first thing we do, before the planting is to get you a fine new gown with the passage money. I do declare you are the most handsome woman in this town."

Proudly, almost in awe, he walked with Rachel's hand on his arm, escorting her on the driest part of the street that led to Monkey Lane.
