Three in a Bridge

BY JAMES BUCKHAM.

WHEN I was in the theological seminary it was the custom of the students at the beginning of the senior year, to obtain, with the approval and co-operation of the faculty, licenses to preach. Then we would go out, as often as we had opportunity, to supply vacant pulpits in the surrounding country. Requests for "supplies" would come from these churches to some member of the faculty, and he would assign them to the seniors. Often we used to go long distances to fill these preaching engagements, and not infrequently the small sum we received for our services would be almost, if not quite, consumed by traveling expenses. In winter, or during the season of the spring floods, it was no small task to reach the remote country towns to which we were summoned, and often we would have to start before daylight on Saturday, and travel by all sorts of conveyances, in order to reach our destination in season.

However, we were all eager to get these preaching assignments, which served to introduce us to the actual work of the ministry; and not one of us ever complained if he was sent 150 or 200 miles "up country" to serve some small church in the hills, that could offer no more than to pay his expenses.

In the spring of 1874, which was my own senior year, Prof. Mason, of the seminary faculty, came to my room in Fletcher hall, one lovely April evening, with a letter in his hand from the committee of a small church in Bakersville, Vt., 95 miles away, in a thinly-settled section of the state. "Can you go?" he asked. "The pay is only $10—the fare $8."

"Certainly I can," I replied, gratefully, for I had not had an assignment to preach for more than a month.

"The pastor has been called away, suddenly, by the probably fatal illness of his father," explained Prof. Mason, "and you are to be entertained by his wife. A man will meet you with horse and wagon at Candia station, and you will have a drive of nine miles from there to Bakersville, which, as I understand, is an out-of-the-way place in a mountain valley. It's a long, hard trip, but you may get some pleasurable spice of adventure out of it."

Prof. Mason handed me the letter from the chairman of the church committee, Deacon John Fay, and I assured him that I would look up time tables and be ready to start early Saturday morning. It was already Friday evening, so I packed my bag, putting in two sermons, with the usual change of clothing, and then walked down to the railroad station to get posted as to my route. I found that I should have to start at seven o'clock in the morning, and then, as usual in such trips to out-of-the-way places, wait for three hours in the middle of the day to make connections at a small junction. It was exasperating, but there was no other way, so I added a lunch and a good book to my budget, and soon went to bed, so as to wake in time for an early start.

The day passed more pleasantly than I had expected, for the ride through the country, clad in that first delicate green of early leafage, and bright with clear sunshine and sparkling brooks, afforded a succession of charming pictures. I spent my three hours at the little junction in the hills strolling and listening to delicious brook music, instead of reading, and then settled to my book as the long-awaited train pulled out, and read until the brakeman shouted "Candia."

It was Deacon Fay himself who met me, with a stout horse and buggy, at Candia station and we had a pleasant talk, as we rode, in the late afternoon and early evening, through the lonely passes and over the wooded ridges of the everlasting hills. It was dusk before we reached Bakersville, or rather the river valley from which its roofs came in sight. Just as we were passing a rocky, wooded island in the stream a loud, hoarse, startling scream rang across the water. The horse gave a leap that nearly jerked us backward out of the buggy, and then broke into a gallop down the river road. My companion twisted the reins about his hands, and finally succeeded in slowing down the frightened horse to a trot. The cry was not repeated, and our steed became quieter as we drew rapidly away from the island.

"That's the first time I've ever heard it, and I've been over this road at least once a week for years," said my companion.

"What was it?" I asked, with perhaps an excusable tremor in my voice, for the cry had been truly terrifying.

"The reputed panther on Brigham island," replied Deacon Fay, "and I guess it is a panther, too, for no other creature could give a screech like that. People say that a panther has his den on that rocky island, and crosses to the nearer shore by leaping from rock to rock in the channel. I've read all about it in the county paper, but I never took any stock in the stories. It didn't seem possible that a panther could survive in this part of the country, yet I'm forced to believe it now, for that was no human scream."

We made the last two miles into Bakersville in surprisingly quick time, and rattled across the wooden bridge over the river just as lights began to twinkle down the single street of the village.

"I'll take you right to the elder's house," said my companion. "You'll find his wife one of the salt of the earth—sensible, sincere, kind-hearted, brave and unselfish. Here we are—and there she is at the door, looking for us."

The rattle of the buggy wheels across the bridge had brought the minister's wife to the door, and there she stood, peering out into the dusk, with a glow of lamplight streaming around her figure from behind. She was short and slight, with quick, energetic movements, and a face that was both sweet and strong. Her hair was fast graying, yet she did not impress one as a person who was growing old.

"Well, deacon, you've made good time," she said "and I'm glad you have, for supper is ready a little earlier than I had planned, and you can stop and have a bite with us before going home. Harold, take Deacon Fay's horse around to the barn."

A fine, manly-looking boy of about 16 stepped forward and led the horse away, while Deacon Fay brought me up the steps and introduced me. Mrs. Wilbur welcomed me cordially, and in a few moments made me feel entirely at home. She presented her children, Harold and two sisters, younger by a few years, and soon we all sat down to a delicious and bountiful supper.

A little before midnight, that Saturday night, it began to rain in torrents, and every time I woke up I could hear the storm dashing against the windows of my bed room and beating with a dull roar on the ground outside. "Too bad!" I thought, sleepily. "To-morrow'll be a rainy Sunday, and there'll be only a handful of people at church." The thought of anything more serious resulting from the storm never occurred to me.

Sure enough, all day Sunday the rain poured down in torrents. But the church was not far away, so, of course, we all went, both morning and afternoon. At the supper table, after the second service, Mrs. Wilbur said, somewhat hesitatingly, "Mr. Wilbur has been in the habit of conducting a Sunday evening mission service in the schoolhouse at the Four Corners, some three miles up the valley. I have said nothing to the people there about his being away, and suppose they will assemble in the schoolhouse as usual. My plan was—not expecting this storm—to ask you to drive down there with me and hold the meeting as usual."

"And I shall be glad to go, storm or no storm," I replied. "I want to carry out Mr. Wilbur's regular programme in every detail. But I don't think you ought to go, this bad night. Can't Harold drive me up there, and show me where the schoolhouse is?"

"No, I must go, and I want to go," replied Mrs. Wilbur. "If the meeting is held, I must be there. No one else can play the organ and lead the singing. I don't mind mere weather. I can assure you I've encountered a good deal of it since we came here, and you can see that it hasn't hurt me."

I laughed as I looked at Mrs. Wilbur's fine color and bright eyes. "Well, if you're not to be frightened by a little wind and rain, I certainly am not?" I replied. "When shall we start?"

"At about 6:30, Harold will harness the horse, and have it at the door at that time."

We were off promptly at 6:30, all bundled up, and with a big carriage-umbrella clamped to the seat. The rain was falling, if anything, harder than ever, and even the road was getting to be like the bed of a shallow brook. Our route took us up the river valley, the road every now and then skirting the very edge of the stream. We could see by the light of our lantern, hung in front of the dashboard, that the water was already almost bank-high. There was still unmelted snow in the recesses of the mountains, and this warm, long-continued April rain was rapidly swelling the tributary brooks.

"I do wish it would stop raining," said my companion, uneasily. "We have two bridges to cross, and what should we do if one of them should be washed away?"

We kept on, however, passed the bridges safely, and drove to the schoolhouse at the "Corners," which we found lighted and filled with a larger audience than had been present at either service in the church. After a warm and inspiring meeting of nearly two hours, Mrs. Wilbur and I started on our return.

We fought our way against the storm, after that, mostly in silence, driving slowly and peering into the darkness ahead, dimly lighted by our lantern. Once Mrs. Wilbur broke the silence by saying, "That dark bulk out in the river is Brigham's island. The first bridge is just below, and we shall soon reach it." As she mentioned Brigham's island an involuntary shiver ran up my back, for I remembered the hoarse scream of the night before. What an hour this would be to meet a crouching panther in the road!

A few minutes later we reached the bridge, which was a covered structure. The water was already piling up against the framework, and now and then we could hear a timber creak under its pressure. "Shall we drive on," I asked, "and risk it?"

"I think we'd better," replied my companion. "The bridge seems to rest firmly yet on its abutments and we won't be long crossing."

I urged the horse up the sharp pitch of the roadbed to the entrance of the bridge and the animal, after halting and snorting for a moment, with a reluctance which I could not understand, finally plunged with a rush upon the planks. At that moment there came an ominous growl and snarl from the darkness ahead. The horse began to rear, and I leaped over the wheel and caught him by the bridle.

Before I leaped I had seen the glow of two baleful, yellow eyes, like dull candle flames, in the gloom ahead, and the incident of the preceding day, the scream from Brigham's island, was again and still more vividly recalled. Instantly the conviction took possession of my mind that the creature confronting us in the bridge was the panther. The flood had driven him from his den on Brigham's island, and he had followed the bank of the stream until the cavernous opening of the bridge offered him shelter from the storm. There he had crouched, until the sound of our horse's hoofs on the planks had roused him to angry protest.

As I struggled to hold the frightened horse, I felt, all at once, the bridge beginning to lift on the flood, and then I heard it slowly grating off the stone abutments. All of a sudden it lurched, settled at one end, and then drifted off with the swift current of the stream. We were afloat with a panther in a covered bridge, from which there was now no way of escape!

If I lost my head for a moment in the bewilderment of peril, plucky little Mrs. Wilbur did not. As the horse began to back, still rearing and dragging me with it, she too sprang lightly out over the wheel and came to my assistance. But our combined efforts were powerless to hold the terrified horse, which continued to rear and back toward the end of the bridge. "We'll have to let him go," panted my companion. "Don't keep hold till you're dragged into the water!"

The horse, with a fierce shake and backward plunge, broke from us, and the next instant disappeared over the end of the bridge, dragged by the buggy. As our lantern on the dashboard vanished we were left in total darkness.

"Have you a match?" asked the little woman at my side, with wonderful coolness. "If so, please light it, and let us see what that creature is."

I had, fortunately, a pocket match-safe filled with parlor matches, which give a strong, bright blaze. I struck one of these and we soon saw, as I had suspected, that our fellow voyager in the bridge was a panther. Since I first saw the gleam of his eyes, he had sprung up to one of the transverse beams, and had crawled nearer the center of the bridge, where he was now crouching, out of reach of the water which covered the floor planks to the depth of a foot or more.

"We shall be safe from him as long as we stand in the water," said the minister's plucky wife, with a self-possession and shrewdness that put my flustrated wits to shame. "He will not risk a cold bath to harm us. We must stand just where we are. By-and-by the bridge may get aground."

We stood there in the chilling water for what seemed like hours—it was really only about 20 minutes. Then, through the dark opening at the end of the bridge, we saw a light slowly creeping across the flood! Could it be possible that a boat with a lantern was putting out from shore? I shouted at the top of my voice. In a moment we heard an answering cry, and then the light came more rapidly toward us.

Presently a flat-bottomed boat, driven by stout arms, was rowed up to the end of the bridge. I grasped the bow and held it while Mrs. Wilbur stepped lightly in. Then I followed her and pushed the boat off with all my might. In a few moments the drifting bridge was an indistinct bulk in the darkness.

"What! a panther on board the old bridge, did you say?" cried the rescuer, a sturdy mountain farmer. "Wal, wal! I was out lookin' for my chicken coops, but I guess I'll get my rifle and try for bigger game."

He took us ashore and up to his little house, where he left us to dry off and get warm. Before midnight he returned with the panther's hide!

Strangely enough, the minister's horse managed to struggle ashore, and was found next morning with he buggy wedged between two small trees on the river bank. The animal was chilled and weak, but otherwise unharmed.

My trip to Bakersville had indeed proved to be spiced with adventure, but it is not that which makes it pleasant to recall, so much as the resulting friendship of the Wilburs, which has been one of the happiest friendships of my life.—Orange Judd Farmer.

The Easier Way.

"Aunt Chloe," askd a Virginia housekeeper of an old servant, "what makes so many of your people superstitious?"

"Well, missus," she said, "I reckon it's 'cause de men folks fin's hit a heap easier to depen' on a rabbit's foot dan on deir own exertions."—Washington Star.

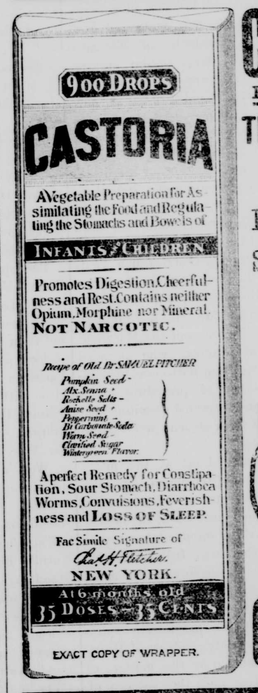
A Mean Trick.

Clara—Why in the world did you engage yourself to that Mr. Hardhead?

Dora—He took me at such a disadvantage that I had to.

"Nonsense!"

"Oh, but you don't know. He proposed to me in an ice cream saloon and I knew perfectly well that if I didn't accept him he wouldn't ask me if I'd have another plate."—N. Y. Weekly.



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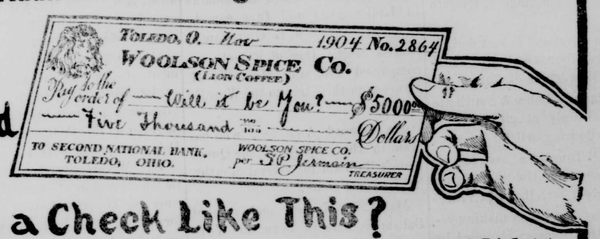

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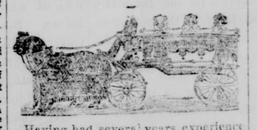

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