

THE OLD POST-ROAD

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The Old Post-Road by Mary Greenway McClelland

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MARY GREENWAY MCCLELLAND

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CHAPTER I.

THE night was as dark as a pocket, with clouds that hung low and an atmosphere as thick as broth in a witch's caldron. The blessed stars away in the infinite, sent rays earthward as usual, but the sullen clouds intercepted and absorbed them, as an ill-tempered person will hold back cheerfulness from a household. For days and nights the elements had held Walpurgis Carnival and the roads were something fearful to behold and worse to travel. Even the post-road between Baltimore and Havre-de-Grace, usually accounted the best bit of turnpike in Maryland, was reduced to the common condition of ruts and mud-holes. And

in places where the land basined there were long stretches of slush, hub-deep and well-nigh impassable. For weeks, also, the water-courses, great and small, had been restless, rising suddenly and then sinking back, tossing and tumbling like uneasy sleepers in beds too small for them, and where the estuaries backed over the flats, the deposit of mud showed black and sticky, and was almost as treacherous as quicksand.

It had been a bad autumn all around, people said, that autumn of 18—. What with rain, high water and mail robberies it was as much as a man's life was worth to journey half a league from his own ingle, be it empty-handed or with pelf, for the heavy weather made confidence in company, or horse-flesh, or even ammunition, to fluctuate with the phases of the moon and the quality of the mud in the highways. And more especially on a night like the one in question would sensible folks remain in-doors, and women who were good Catholics, cross themselves and mutter aves and paternosters as the rain swept

the pane, or the hand of the wind was laid heavily upon the casement.

Around the Nag's Head Tavern in Havre-de-Grace the wind whistled and yelled like a fury, dashing down the Bellaire road and around the corner into Juniata Street with an eerie shriek, with now and then a sobbing catch in it. The storm-wrack swept through the slats of the shutters and puddles of rain collected under the casements, dammed in by the woodwork and only prevented from dripping over into the room by the slant of the window-sills. The house was heavily built, but at intervals it trembled, with long, shivering vibrations, as though for the moment the insensate material were quickened and made capable of terror.

On the hearth of the tavern parlor a huge fire burned, casting red reflections on the brasses of the fender and fire-irons, and grimacing, so to speak, with weird distortion in the embossed ornaments of a tall, black walnut secretary, set across one angle of the room. The furniture was dark and heavily fash-

ioned. Wide settees, cushioned with leather, stood on either side of the fireplace, and straight-back wooden chairs were placed against the walls. A square of rag carpet of domestic manufacture decorated the center of the floor, and on it was placed a gaunt, claw-footed table, which held brass candlesticks supplied with candles ready for lighting. The night was young and the supper-hour, early in those days, not long past.

Before the hearth, with his booted legs outstretched to the glow and his head against the high back of his chair, sat a man in the prime of youth. Even in repose, his breadth of shoulder and length of limb gave the impression of great bodily vigor, and when he rose, which he presently did to stretch himself, it was apparent that his stature exceeded that of most men. In the uncertain light his face was given indistinctly.

After a second he crossed to a window, pushed aside the scant dimity curtain and bent close to the casement. The closed shutters and dense darkness

made sight of the storm impossible, but he hearkened to it with the thought in his mind that here was weather fit for warlock's riding or for churchyard trysts with witches. He was a man well read, and the description of the night when roistering Tam set forth from the "ingle bleezin' finely" upon his historic ride came back to him, and he gave out the full-blooded lines with a rollicking swing which showed zestful enjoyment of their flavor. He had a bad trick of talking aloud to himself when alone. No unusual habit with men who customarily act and speak more than they think.

"The wind blew as 'twad blawn its last ;
The rattling show'rs rose on the blast ;
The speedy gleams the darkness swallow'd ;
Loud, deep, and lang the thunder bellow'd ;
That night a child might understand
The de'il had business on his hand."

He rang out the lines as the roar of thunder rocked the house, and pressed his face close to the glass trying to get a glimpse of the wet world outside in



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breath. The candles were of tallow, with wicks of homespun, which burned unsteadily, the flames bending sideways and running out to a point, smokily, and sending the grease guttering down to the lip of the candlestick. The atmosphere of the room seemed a cross-tangle of drafts.

In the stronger light the young fellow's face came out vividly; reddish chestnut hair—which in childhood had gained him the soubriquet of Rufus—reddish chestnut eyes, with the glance of a falcon in them; a smoothly shaven lip and chin, and heavy brows, making an almost continuous line above the eyes. A strong face in line and contour, a handsome face in feature and coloring. And a face whose expression made it easy to fancy it fierce and reckless in no small degree upon occasion.

He wore his hair short, for the days of queues and powder had passed for the younger generation, and brushed back from his brow, with the parting low on one side. His clothes were