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AN IMPERIOUS COURT

By OPIE READ

Negley was riding along a road in a remote and picturesque part of southern Missouri. The day was delightful—the weather had crossed the imaginary line that fancy has drawn between Spring and Summer. Negley did not belong to any temperance order, or if he did his adherence to its precepts was not very strict, for as he rode along there in the sunshine he took out a whiskey bottle, held it up and looked through it. That hasty survey assured him that there was but one drink left.

"Well, I might as well take it off my mind and put it where it will do more good or harm," he mused. "What's this," he added, looking at a line of print across the label on the flask. "Please break this bottle." Now why should I put myself to that trouble? My obligation ended when I paid for the stuff, and the manufacturer has no more right to make any further demand. But, after all, it's a very slight request. It implies but little exertion on my part." He drank the whisky and again looked at the request. This time he noticed it was printed in red. "All right, gentlemen, I will go you," said he, and, rising in his stirrups, he threw the bottle at a rail fence. The bottle whirled through an opening, made by a crooked rail, and then there came a loud cry like the howl of a wild beast. And a man jumped up, looked about him

of the road in front of Negley, shook his fist and exclaimed:

"So I've got you. Oh, attempt to get away and I'll shoot the top of your head off. Can't lie down to take a little nap but somebody must come along and try to kill me. But I've got you."

"My dear sir," said Negley, "I humbly beg your pardon. I didn't see you until after I had thrown that bottle."

"You didn't, hay? Haven't got anything to do but go about the country throwing bottles? What did you throw at if you didn't throw at me? Oh, I've got you!"

"My dear sir, I threw at the fence."

"What did you want to throw at the fence for? And do you mean to tell me that you couldn't hit that fence? And say, why did you want to hit the fence?"

"I wanted to break the bottle."

"What did you want to break the bottle for? Why couldn't you have thrown it over there against that rock? Look here, your aim was to assassinate one of the most prominent citizens of this neighborhood, and if any law can be squeezed out of the statutes of this state you shall suffer for it. Turn

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off yonder at the right, and ride slowly toward that house across the creek."

"Look here," Negley protested, "you can't arrest me without a warrant."

"Can't I? We'll see. Things may be different where you come from, but in this part of the country the law doesn't sit cross-legged and see a criminal get away just because no warrant has been issued for him. Ride on, there."

Negley is a peaceable sort of a fellow, and he is also a man of exquisite judgement; so he rode along. When he arrived at the gate in front of the house that had been pointed out he was told to dismount. He did so, and just then a girl, swift of motion and with a wild tangle of dark hair, came out.

What tried to kill me just now, and I'm going to have him tried for his life, even if we do have to stretch a point in law. Here, take this pistol and hold him here until I come back."

The girl took the pistol and the man disappeared.

"What is he going to do?" Negley asked.

"He's gone after the constable and clerk. Got to have 'em or he can't run the court. He's the judge."

"Look here, miss, I didn't hit your father intentionally. I simply threw a bottle away to break it and it happened to hit him."

"Was there anything in the bottle?" she asked.

"No."

"Then no wonder he got mad."

Negley's face brightened. "And won't you please let me ride on away?"

"No, I'll have to keep you till pap comes."

"But you could shoot at me and not hit me."

"Oh, hitting you wouldn't make so much difference, but I might hit the horse, and that would be bad."

She held him there until the old man returned, and then a formal indictment was issued. The

judge decided that the case was not bailable, and it was therefore necessary to keep the unhappy prisoner in close confinement until the next day, when it was intended that the trial should begin. So the prisoner was locked in the smokehouse and a guard was appointed. Negley sat down on a box of salt pork and cursed the backwoods institutions of his country. He knew he could have the old man arrested and severely dealt with, but that was small consolation. What he wanted was to get out of that greasy prison.

"Who's on guard out there?" he asked, talking through a crack.

"I am."

"Oh, is that you, miss?"

"Yes. Jim, the constable, has gone to get something to eat, and I have to stay until he gets back."

"What time of night is it?"

"Bout ten, I think."

"Look here, if you will let me out I will send you a silk dress."

"I'd like to have one powerful, but I have to do my duty. Here comes Jim."

The next day Negley was arraigned before what purported to be a solemn court. The old man presided with severe dignity.

Negley, who had been holding a bottle, but declared that added to this crime was the awful offense of contempt of court, as he himself was the man who had received the blow. The prisoner urged that out of the tender obedience of his nature he had simply obeyed a request pasted on a bottle. But the bottle was produced. The label was gone—some evil-minded person had removed it. This was a serious complication. "Prisoner," said the judge, "I don't see but one way out of it. Marry the girl."

"What!" the prisoner exclaimed.

"Yes, that's the law. You become my son-in-law or take the consequences."

This appeared to satisfy the entire court. The prisoner, who had been watching for an opportunity, darted through the doorway, tumbled over a fence, and was soon in a woods. He had left a fine horse, but he had escaped a wife. Several weeks later, while sitting in a St. Louis hotel, Negley overheard the following fragment of a conversation: "Yes, I was down in that country once and was arrested on some fool charge—don't exactly remember what it was—and the court decided that I should marry a girl. The girl had nothing to do with the affair, but that made no difference. Well, I seized what I thought to be an accidental opportunity and ran away, leaving a \$250 horse. I afterward heard that this was the aim of the court. I hear that other men have been trapped in pretty much the same way."

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