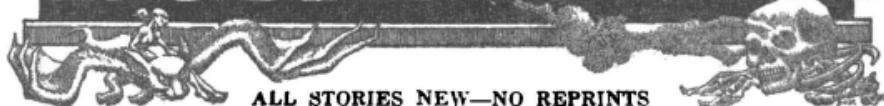


# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1942

Cover by A. R. Tilburn

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental*

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D. MCILWRAITH, Editor.

HENRY AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.



## *The* $\beta$ ridle

THEY needed a doctor at Lownsbury Corners.

As I needed a practice and could ill afford to purchase one I went to Lownsbury Corners, rented a house,

bought a horse and a two-wheeled cart. Then I hung out my shingle.

Had I been other than a penurious young man, I would have driven through the Corners from one end to the other



Here are the facts: the leather is human skin—the microscope proves it; the bit is solid silver, and very old—as old as Witchcraft. And the bridle has power—strange, incredible, terrifying power!

By DAVID H. KELLER, M.D.

and then settled somewhere else. But—I had to live somewhere.

Surely a year or two in that half-detached section of Pennsylvania would at least do me no harm.

I had a small income which I felt sure would supply any need until practice was established. The nearest fellow-practitioner lived ten miles away at Rounsville; therefore I was certain of some medical

work, especially in the winter when the roads were deeply drifted.

Lownsberry Corners was on top of the world. There two roads crossed at right angles, giving an excuse for a store, a church, a doctor and a name for the spot. One road ran along the crest of the mountain ridge; the other slid down to Corydon on one side and slanted to Rounsville on the other. The top of the ridge was naked of timber, but there were farms on either side of the road. Where the mountain dropped to the Conewango and the Allegheny it was heavily wooded. From an airplane the ridge road would have appeared as an ugly scar, yellow and crooked, between two stretches of green forest.

It was a scar. A hundred years before hardy pioneers had hit the ridge with their axes. They cleared the land of the beautiful white pine that nature had spent centuries in developing; they sent the logs to the sawmill; down even as far as Pittsburgh and St. Louis. The great pine roots were torn up and used for fences. On the cleared fields they raised hay, oats and wheat. For decades the land yielded all and received nothing in return. There was no humus left in the soil. The rains of summer, the melting snows of spring, washed everything good out of it and left merely the clay which refused to nurture anything except the goldenrod and the wild asters.

The lofty barns, once bursting with the yearly harvest, now slowly rotted in decay. The second and third generations were realizing what starvation meant. Those few with courage and initiative abandoned the farms, moving to other localities, but many families stayed on. Each year crops grew smaller and poorer in quality; the orchards rotted; even the flocks of sheep looked dismal as they cropped the sparse grass.

"They tell a story about a rabbit," Will Jordan, the blacksmith, said to me the first day I took my horses in to be shod. "Old

Rabbit was a traveling down the road with his pack on his back. He was traveling fast for he was hungry. 'Where are you going, Rabbit?' asked the Preacher. 'It's this way,' Old Rabbit replied, 'my uncle died and left me a hundred acre farm at Lownsberry Corners. I went up there, hunted all over the place for three days and couldn't find enough to keep me alive, so I'm giving up the farm and going down to Ackley Hollow to work at the saw mill. I can at least make a living'."

As I became better acquainted with my neighbors I found that only two families were comfortably situated. The others, including the parson stayed because there was no way of getting out. They were cold in the winter, hot in summer and hungry all the time. The storekeeper was king of finance at the Corners. The pastor received four-fifths of his meager stipend from the Home Missionary Society of his denomination. The rest of us seldom saw a dollar.

I did what I could for the sick and ailing for what I could get in payment. Often it was a chicken or oats and hay for the horse. In the fall sometimes there was potatoes and apples or other vegetables and once it was a foxhound pup. My library was large and since I enjoy reading the times passed not too dully. At least my horse and I had three meals a day and a place to sleep.

OCTOBER of that first year of private practice was more than unprofitable. Oh yes I had callers at the office and I made calls. But such callers! Once a boy came in with a dozen four-ounce bottles which he wanted me to buy for five cents each. He seemed familiar and I asked his name which he said was Miller. I refused to make the purchase, reminding him that I had furnished those bottles full of medicine to his father, Ruben Miller, and had not received a cent of pay. But the

boy refused to yield the basket and said he would walk to Rounsville and sell them to Dr. Vermile. Twenty miles for sixty cents!

A bit later one of the Holt girls came in, a poor little thing with a twisted face and a crippled leg. She had been saving the lining of chicken gizzards as someone had told her I would pay two cents each for them. I gave her a quarter for her imagined treasures and she left with a smile on her tiny twisted face.

An early frost had sent the brown and crimson leaves falling in deep winddrifts on the sodden ground. The roads were heavy with slick, greaselike mud. Only a few miles of driving was sufficient to completely cover the cart with dirty yellow clay. It was not clean, healthy mud; it had an unhappy, sickly feel as it hit the flesh and dropped off. I learned to hate that mud; yet I knew it made it easier riding than after it had frozen into deep ruts.

Every day I hitched up and went for a drive both to exercise the horse and to make the neighbors believe that I had patients to care for. On one of those imaginary calls I had my first meeting with "The Miller Girl." I had heard much of her and her ethereal beauty but had never had chanced to meet her.

It was past five in the afternoon and the sun was edging toward the floor of the valley, flooding the sky with crimson and orange splendor. I had passed the old stone cider mill and was dreamily debating what I should cook for supper when my horse shied and almost overturned the cart. From the scrub beside the road came a scornful laugh—then into the very middle of the road stepped the Miller girl. No mistaking her, once you had seen her. A she-devil from Hell, the other women called her, but if thus Hell be populated why strive for Heaven? She was beautiful from the ends of her windblown chestnut hair to the tips of her toes, protruding

from waterlogged, rotting shoes. Just once I looked at her and wondered why she had remained a maid so long. I said as much to her.

" 'Twas worth being put into the ditch to meet you, Aline Miller."

"You're the new doctor?"

"Correct. Where have you been all these six months that I've been here without a glimpse of you?"

"I've been down to Walden—out to service."

"And you came back unmarried?"

She laughed bitterly, cynically, with a twist to her lips.

"Those who would have me I want not and those I would have I cannot. I went away to get rid of that pestering Ethan Holt. Know him? The old fitting fool! The nerve of him to think he could ever marry me! He gave me no peace but I'm not afraid of him now. I can go and come when I like, here or there. I don't need to be afraid of him any more—the fitting fool!"

She flung her beautiful hair from across her face and strode past me down the road, my horse quivering and rearing as if in fear as she passed him.

"A wild woman," I mused to myself. "A wild woman and none too good. Even if Holt is an epileptic she should know better than to call him a 'fitting fool.' But she is beautiful! I don't blame him for wanting her though. The Holts and the Millers! Wonder what imps of Hell bred that spawn? Which family is the more degenerate? One family produces a woman with the body of Venus and the other a man with the face of a bull and the mind of a demon."

I drove on and almost immediately the Holt boy stepped from the roadside brush. He had the shoulders of a giant, the legs of a cripple and the forehead of a bull. I never saw such frontal bosses; enormous overgrowth of bone that made his eyes ap-

pear to shine in dark recesses of forehead. For some reason he liked me. He always wanted to stop and talk whenever we met on the road. He came and leaned against the top of the cart wheel.

"The Miller girl is back, Doc," he said. On his face was the look of an animal in intense pain.

"I know. I just met her a piece back on the road."

"Did she—did she say anything—'bout me, Doc?"

"Yes. Said you wanted to marry her. Do you?"

"I do, Doc, but she don't like me. Not at all. Know what she calls me? 'A fitting fool.' That ain't right, Doc, for 'taint my fault about the fits; and I would be kind to her, if she wedded with me."

"I believe you, Ethan."

"Would you talk to her about me, Doc? Tell her you know I'd treat her gentle like?"

"It wouldn't do any good, Ethan, my boy. She is set against you."

"Is she 'feard of—me?"

"She said she used to be, but not now."

"She better be! I could break her in two, just as easy as this," closing his great hands over her imaginary body he made a breaking motion, then spread his huge fists as if dropping something to the ground.

"You wouldn't hurt her if you loved her. Anyway, she is not afraid. She told me so."

I LEFT him standing in the mud and drove off with misgiving in my heart. As I passed the blacksmith shop I decided to pause for a moment's conversation with the smithy. He was well educated and I enjoyed him. Seeing me he threw down his hammer and came out to the cart.

"How's business, Doc?" he asked.

"Like the weather, rotten. I just met the Miller girl."

"Better watch out. She has a peculiar reputation."

"For what?"

"You'll think I'm simple-minded."

"Go on, tell me. How can a man be simple-minded when he can read Dante in the original Italian."

"All right, you are asking and I am answering: Every generation of Millers breeds one who is in covenant with the Devil. Now you know the answer."

"You mean she is a witch?"

"Call her anything you wish but that is what I mean."

I had thought to argue with him, changed my mind, paid him a dollar I owed him and invited him over that night for a game of chess. Bedding my horse mechanically I was tormented by what the smithy had said. For a few moments while waiting for the house to get a bit warmer I cursed my loneliness. But the thought of the folly of the Holt boy in wanting to marry that wonderfully beautiful Miller girl crowded always to the front. Dress her in becoming mode and give her the opportunity she would make any man a splendid wife, I was sure. It must have been that I even dreamed of holding her in my arms that night for I was calling her name when daybreak came.

A heavy pounding on my door brought me back to reality. The little crippled Holt girl was there, shivering in the cold. She asked would I please come and see her brother Ethan. Before we started out into the cold I gave her breakfast and coffee. Holding the reins with one hand I held her, wrapped in a blanket, close to me on the cart seat. It was a long, slow ride, through the frozen mud, till we slid down through the woods to the Holt farm.

My first look at the boy convinced me that he had had a series of convulsions, real *Status Epilepticus*. He was now in a stupor, his open mouth and protruding, lacerated tongue, showing how badly he

had bitten himself during the convulsions. The bloody foam had dried on his cheeks and chin. Picking up a hand to feel the pulse I found the palm covered with mud. The other hand was soiled likewise and, blankets off, I found the feet and legs muddy, the dirt dried clear to the knees. Wishing to listen to his heart, I opened his shirt, and discovered his body blood-stained, on either side a number of punctate wounds, like stabs with a small dagger.

"Where was he all night?" I asked his mother.

She stared back at me, a sullen fright in her eyes.

"Was he in bed?" I demanded.

"He must 'ave been out wandering," she replied at last.

There was nothing to be gained in questioning her, so through elimination, stimulation and with the help of his iron constitution, I finally restored consciousness. He cried as he moved. Later he complained that every muscle hurt him. I washed his mouth out, painted his wounds with iodine, left some medicine and tossing his little sister a dime promised to return the next day.

He did not wait for me to call on him but was waiting at my office bright and early. He brought with him eggs, two cocks and a jar of honey. At least he was appreciative; but he would not talk. He simply stated he could remember nothing of the night. I did not believe him but was sure he was evading the truth but did not have the heart to call him a liar. As he reached the office door he turned.

"I ain't afeard of that Miller girl, Doc." he called.

"That's good, Ethan."

"She did me dirty, Doc. But I ain't fear—I aim to tame her some day—darn'er! I could nearabout kill her only—I do love her, Doc."

"Poor fool!" I said to myself as he closed the door. "Poor fitting fool."

"For the next three days Lownsberry Corners was storm swept. No one sent for me and I was glad. I fed the horse and dozed by the fire. When the rains finally ceased I ventured out to the store for necessary provender and found the country-side more sodden and desolate than before—which had always seemed the ultimate.

**A** FEW loungers were at the store gos- siping about the trivial things that become so important when our lives are dreary.

Someone made the statement that Ethan Holt had a new mare, and a wild one at that. This made me prick up my ears with interest. How did he ever pay for it? Or had he stolen it? It would not be the first time a horse thief had been traced to the Corners. But when Ruben Miller came slouching in all talk ceased. Nobody liked him and all were more or less afraid of him because of his brawny muscles, his vicious tongue or both. He was in an ugly mood.

"That slut of mine's run off again!" he snarled.

"Meaning Aline?" asked the store-keeper.

"Who else?" Miller responded as he helped himself to the crackers. "Thinks she can come and go as she damned pleases. But this time when she comes back I'll beat her 'til I kill her."

"Perhaps she run off with the Holt boy?" suggested a wit.

"No. Hell No! She's bad but she ain't no fool. She wouldn't trifle with that spawn of the Devil."

Ethan's father, who had been sitting silent behind the stove, now jumped at Miller with an ax handle raised over his head, as if to brain Miller. We parted them but both men were ripe for murder. They hated one another bitterly and on the

slightest provocation were at one another's throat.

Somehow I was relieved as I left the store and slushed my way through the muck to the blacksmith shop. I felt quite certain that if the girl had stayed at the Corners she would, eventually, have made a fool of me. Now I could put her out of my mind and—heart.

**T**HREE was excitement aplenty at the smithy shop. Ethan Holt had brought his new mare to be shod. It was the first shoeing and she fought furiously. A twister on her upper lip and one foot reefed up held her in the shop. Holt had put a bridle and cruel gagbit on her and when he jerked the reins the blood spurted from her opened mouth. She was a beautiful creature, looked as though there was some Arabian blood, all glossy chestnut in color save a white star between her eyes.

"Hurry up with it, Bill," Holt yelled to the blacksmith. "Don't take time to pound those shoes to fit. Put 'em on red hot and let 'em burn into place, but clinch the nails good and tight."

"That's no way to shoe a horse for the first time, Ethan," protested my friend. "She is a valuable animal. Might lame her if I hurry."

"Do as I tell you," commanded the epileptic. "I am paying for this shoeing and it's my horse. Damn her! I'll break her if I have to kill her."

The smith did as Ethan commanded and put the shoes on almost white hot. The mare struggled until the sweat ran down her flanks, and when the nails went in she squealed, almost cried. I never heard a horse make a noise like that, but at last it was over. Ethan leaped into the saddle, the twister was taken off and, digging his spurs into her flanks, almost throwing her with the gagbit, they dashed out of the forge.

William Jordan took off his apron and

told his helper to go home as he was closing shop.

"Come over and play chess tonight," I suggested.

"No thanks, Doc. There is a meeting at the church. Better come."

"I am not much interested, Jordan," I replied, trying to make my refusal sound kindly. He took it seriously.

"My boy, let me give you a word of advice. I have lived for many years in Lownsberry Corners. We have good people and bad. Much of the time it seems that the Devil is running things; but now and then the sun shines, and we know that God is in Heaven and all's well with the world. If you live here, you have to be on one side or the other. You have to serve God or the Devil."

"You mean figuratively, Jordan?"

"No, I mean actually. Take the Millers and the Holts. They have followed the Devil for many generations. Their ancestors were burned in Scotland for just that. Of course, we don't burn witches here in Pennsylvania, but that does not mean they do not exist. I am convinced that the Miller girl is in covenant with the Evil One. When she leaves here she says she has been to Walden, but I fear it is in Hell that she vacations."

"I laughed at that as I rather scornfully said:

"There are no more witches, Jordan."

"You mean you think there are no more witches."

"That is what I mean."

"Thinking don't make it so, Doc."

And thus we parted.

Back in my house I could not keep from thinking of that mare and how cruelly she had been treated. The memory of her burning hooves made me sick. Finally I could restrain my desires no longer. Opening my old trunk I counted out one-hundred dollars, precious coin!—and lantern in hand started for the Holt farm, slip-

sliding through the mud for I would not drive, risking the laming of my horse, unless necessary. It was a long two-hour walk and as I approached the house I saw it was unusually lit up and, as I came nearer, I heard the wailing of a woman. Once inside the kitchen the cause of the keening was soon disclosed.

MRS. HOLT took my hand and led me into one of the bedrooms—pleading with me to do the best I could. But there was nothing I could do; the boy was dead. He had had a fight with the mare—his last fight. She had squeezed him against the side of the stall until he fell, breathless, and then she had stamped him into a horrible jelly. Those new shoes he had burned into her hooves had put him beyond all recurring fits. The women were weeping loudly but his father stood stiff and still with a rifle cradled in the crook of his arm. Seeing that and understanding, I spoke before he could.

"After this you won't want to keep the mare, Mr. Holt. This is a bad business. You will need some ready cash, right now, so here is one-hundred dollars, if you will sell me the mare."

I held out the money. He stared at it; the women ceased to wail and looked at the bills. But he held to his rifle.

"I aim to kill that mare!" he snarled.

Putting the money into his hand I took the lantern and left the house. When he did not follow me I knew that I had bought the mare. And I had a horse already.

The mare pricked her ears when she heard me enter the stable but there was no fight left in her. Tying a halter rope around her neck I turned her in the stall and led her to the road where we began our two-hour trudge toward home.

Suddenly the clouds disappeared as if by magic from the sky, leaving a full golden moon-ball against a strange, translucent blue ceiling seemingly trying to bathe this

desolate part of the earth in loveliness and beauty.

When we came to the watering trough, a half-cider barrel, rotted and splintery on the outside and moss grown within, with the moon mirrored in the smooth water, the mare stepped eagerly toward it. Any horse lover could tell she was burned-dry-thirsty. She made a sorry attempt to drink with the gagbit in her mouth—so I slipped the bridle off.

The mare drank and drank as if she could never slake her thirst, then suddenly, like lightning, she lunged to the left of me, and tearing the halter rope from my hand, dashed down the moon-shadow-streaked road.

I stood staring vacantly at the bridle—a hundred dollars thrown away, for I was sure I would never see the mare again. "A fool and his money," I thought, resuming the trek home in bitter anger, shame and remorse. It would have been better for Holt to have shot the beast. A life for a life—Well, at least it was even. He had lost his son and I had lost a horse. But I had a bridle.

At last comfortable in slippers and robe I examined the piece of harness most carefully under the oil lamp. It was a very peculiar bridle and the bit, highly polished, showed not a sign of rust. The whole thing exuded a strange odor, like something dead, but unlike any old leather I had ever handled. The reins were ornamented with many small silver studs and two larger studs, set with red stones. I was puzzled and determined to show it to the blacksmith the first thing in the morning, for he was an expert in harness and leathers.

Daylight, however, brought an urgent call. Unfortunately it was the Miller family, and so far, they had not paid even a penny on a very large bill. But when the boy told me that his sister had come home and was badly hurt, so they all feared she would die, I had to go, pay or no. With-

out waiting for breakfast I hitched the horse to the cart and drove through the splashing mud with the white-faced boy hanging to the seat as best he could as we slued and slid down the gummy road. I was shocked at what I saw inside the Miller house.

The Miller girl had indeed come home but where had she been? The self-confident, unafraid beauty of a few days previously was now a pitiful human wreck, burning with fever. Her lips were torn; her tongue parched and bleeding. I picked up one hand and saw that the palm was seared, deeply, in a semi-circle, and there was dried blood on the hand. It was very hard to even imagine what had happened, but around the girl's neck was a halter rope. I was thinking fast and in another minute I might have found the answer to the mystery, but in that minute Ruben Miller entered the room, cursing and striking at the women folk who tried to hold him.

"I told her I'd beat her to death and I'm gwine to!" he yelled, bringing the snapper of a blacksnake whip down across the poor girl's pain-distorted face. It was more than evident he had been drinking, even more than usual.

"No more of that!" I commanded, grabbing the whip. "Bad enough to have her nearly dead without having murder on your soul."

He attempted to jerk the whip from my hand, crying:

"What is she to you?"

**H**ONESTLY I do not know what made me do it—the words came from my lips as though I were a puppet; some other person giving my words voice.

"Didn't she tell you? We are going to be married. I asked her and she agreed and then she disappeared. She is going to be my wife, some day; in the meantime I am going to take her to my home and try

to save her life. If she dies, however, I will bury her—without expense to you."

That bothered him. Even in his drunkenness he saw that it might be most advantageous to have the girl married. But he was crafty.

"What do I get out of it? Been a lot of trouble and expense raising that slut. Tell me—what do I get?"

"If you promise to leave us alone and stay away from her, I'll give you a check for one-hundred dollars."

"Fair enough—don't ever worry about my coming around where she is" said Ruben Miller, licking his lips and trying to figure how long the hundred would keep him in liquor. I sat down and wrote the check. That was twice in twelve hours that my money had saved a life; first a horse and now a sick girl.

Granny Miller came hobbling into the room just as I was wrapping Aline in a blanket.

"I want my bridle," she whined. "I want my bridle, my pretty bridle. Some one's got my bridle and I long for it muchly."

Miller, without speaking a word, took her roughly by the shoulder and almost threw her out of the room; threw her out bodily. She continued crying in the next room. It was a sorry way to treat an old woman I thought as I gathered the girl in my arms and carried her to the cart. It was all I could do to lift her up onto the seat beside me for Miller never offered any help; just stood watching, chewing tobacco, adding his filth to the already soiled earth. Just as I started off I turned to him and asked:

"What bridle was the old lady asking for?"

"You ask too many damned questions," he shouted, shaking his fist at me. "It's none of your business and some day you'll get a bullet in you if you don't learn to mind your own affairs. Take the wench

and travel. I don't want to ever see her again."

On the way home I stopped at the blacksmiths. William Jordan came to the door with more than usual interest in his kindly face.

"Will you do me a favor, Mr. Jordan? I have Aline Miller here. She is very sick. I brought her with me to prevent her father from beating her to death. I need a woman to nurse her. Will you ask your wife to come over and stay until she is out of danger—or dead?"

"The Miller girl? You are taking her into your home?"

"Yes."

"Listen to me, Doctor: Take my advice and keep on driving. Go to Walden and put her in the hospital. She is not the kind of woman you want in your house."

"I am afraid she is, Mr. Jordan. You see, I am going to marry her—if she lives."

My statement altered his attitude; immediately he became both dignified and solicitous.

"In that case I will go for my wife at once. She will not enjoy it but she will go. We will be right over."

For three hours Mrs. Jordan worked with the girl, bathing and oiling her with soothing unguents. Now and then I went in to give Aline a stimulant. She must have walked a long time for she was mud-stained from head to foot. After she was bathed clean and bedded between clean white sheets I went in to examine her; binding her feet and hands; washed out her mouth and painted the welts on her side and face.

Pneumonia developed and for a week Aline hovered between life and death. Mr. and Mrs. Jordan and a young doctor who loved her fought desperately for her life. At last the crisis came and she slept. In another week I was able to remove the bandages from her extremities. They had been horribly mistreated. They were

seared in round, hard pads with many evenly spaced round spots as if made by some pointed instrument, such as an ice pick. On the outside of the hands and feet there were short, livid bruises directly corresponding to those smaller dots on the inside of the palms and soles.

One evening I called Jordan into my office and after closing the door I said:

"Mr. Jordan, I am going to ask a question about my future wife and I want an honest answer. When I brought her home her hands and feet were burned on the under part and had many holes in them. Have you any idea how she came by these injuries?"

"What kind of holes?" he countered.

"Small holes, from top to bottom, sort of like nail holes."

"How many?"

"Eight on each hand and foot."

"And the hands and feet were burned?"

"Yes. The burns were over a half-inch wide and curved, but the heels and wrists were unharmed. No holes there."

"What do you want to know?"

"How was she hurt?"

"How can I tell?"

"Have you any ideas?"

"Lots of them. Haven't you?"

I became irritated.

"Mr. Jordan, I asked you for help, not to play a game of mental chess."

"No doubt, but our psychology is different. If I told you what I think, you would send me to the Insane Hospital at North Walden. But do you remember the day Ethan Holt had me shoe his mare? Do you recall the bridle he had on her?"

"Certainly I remember."

"I never saw that bridle close," his eyes were dim and mysterious as he spoke, "but I always wanted to get it into my hands. If I knew more about that bridle we might discover the truth about the rest of it. I mean we might somehow find out whether we were right or wrong."

Unlocking a drawer of the desk I took out the bridle and handed it to him.

"There it is."

He looked at it intently; felt every part of it; smelt it carefully and returned it to me.

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

"It was on the mare the night she trampled Holt to death. I bought her for one-hundred dollars. The old man was going to kill her."

"And she got away from you?"

"Yes. I took off the bridle so she could drink from the trough and she got away. All I have for my hundred is the bridle."

"Have you any idea who had the bridle before Holt got it?"

"No—that is—not exactly," as memory stirred. "Now I remember—Granny Miller was asking about a bridle that she lost the morning I went for Aline."

"I thought so," said the blacksmith.

"Thought what?"

"Thought she had lost one. Now listen to me, Doctor: you are close to making a serious error by making the people of Lownsberry Corners think you will marry the Miller girl when she recovers. I am not going to advise you not to. All I am going to do is urge that you take this bridle to the man in charge of the Armor Room at the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

"Let him tell you what he thinks. The Missus and I will care for the girl and perhaps when you do return you will have changed your mind about marrying the girl."

"That is all you will tell me?"

"That's all."

"But it will cost money to go to New York."

"It may cost you your soul if you stay here."

I left for New York that very night with the bridle wound round my body under my

vest. In the morning I was talking to the Curator.

He spent the entire morning examining that bridle, speechless. He crumpled it in his hands; smelt of it; stretched it as far as his arms would reach; then he scraped it and put the scrapings under a microscope. I watched him carefully as he worked and when he finally returned the bridle to me I noticed that his hands shook violently.

"Where did you get it, Doctor Maverto?"

"It belonged to a family by the name of Miller."

"Tell me about it."

"Not a word until you tell me what you think of it."

"Here are the facts then. Not fanciful opinions; but facts. The leather is human skin; there is no possible doubt of it—the microscope proves it. It has been kept soft and pliable by the use of what I believe to be human fat. The bit is very old and seems to be of solid silver. So much for the facts."

"And how about the fancies?"

"That is different. Although I have never seen one, actually, only read of them and seen sketches of them, it looks to me like a very fine specimen of a witch's bridle."

"What do you mean?"

"It goes back to black magic and the Devil's Mass. A witch would take her bridle and throw it over a man's head, whereupon at its first touch, he would become a horse. She would ride him to the mass. When she was through with him off came the bridle, and the poor wretch would stumble home, muscle sore, hands and feet bruised and bleeding; tongue cut and lips raw from the gagbit."

"And I suppose the doctors thought he had suffered some form of epileptic convolution?"

"No doubt."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"I am not asking you to believe anything. I am only telling you what people believed, long ago. We will give you five-hundred dollars for that piece if you wish to sell, Doctor Malverto."

"Thanks, but I think not. But I will tell you the story."

AND SO I told him beginning with the illness of Ethan Holt; how he had come into possession of a beautiful new mare and had met his death by her hooves; how I bought and lost her within the hour after purchase. But I did not tell him about the little woman, slowly drifting back to healthy youth. No. It was best that he should not know about her; about her hands and feet; that she was in my home. I merely thanked him and left, taking the bridle with me.

Now I knew the whole story; that time I had been called to attend Ethan he had been hag-ridden to the meeting of the Devil and his followers. Somehow he had discovered what had happened to him. Perhaps the vainglorious girl had bragged and twitted him about it and the next time she had tried to slip the bridle on him he had been too quick and strong and the harness had been strapped on her head instead of his. Then he shod her, determined to tame her, even if it killed him in the taming. But she would not tame and had killed him. I had released her from the spell when I removed the bridle at the watering trough. But there remained the marks.

So I returned to Lownsberry Corners and found Aline greatly improved. I locked the bridle in the drawer again and going into her room shut the door and sat by her bed.

"Aline, you know that I am going to marry you and try to make you a happy, respected woman. But before we get mar-

ried I would like you to be baptised. Then you will belong to God instead of the Devil. You will give up your former life and live as a Christian woman should live with her husband."

She greeted my statements with laughter. Again and again she laughed as she kissed me. That first kiss drove me frantic with the sweetness of it.

"No," she whispered. "You come with me, to the meeting. It will be soon, now, when the moon is full. I will show you something then that will put all thoughts of God and marriage out of your mind. You can have me there, but I will never, never, be your wife. Bah! And be baptised! Never! Never! But you give me back the bridle. We will bit the blacksmith. He is big enough for the two of us to ride him, and how I will enjoy it! To sit close to you on such a stallion and gall him with bit and spur! You should have seen me spur the fitting fool!"

I held her close to me, raining kisses on her lips, eyes, hair and her slender, alabaster-like neck.

"No! No! You are going to marry me," I cried.

"Never!" she replied, pushing me from her. "I would sooner have married Ethan."

I left her then and told the blacksmith and his wife that they might go home, for I was taking her to Walden to some friends of mine. Then I spent the rest of the day strengthening the box stall with heavy planks. The next day I told Jordan I had decided not to marry Aline and he shook my hand and congratulated me on my wisdom.

The evening after the Jordans left, the air was cold, with a light frost, and clear. The stars were unusually bright as though they were intent on lighting the whole of the Corners. I wrapped a blanket around my love and carried her, wondering and protesting, out to the stable. I laid her gently on the clean straw which thickly

bedded the stall. I held her firmly there as I gave her a last chance to reconsider and become a decent, Christian wife. In reply she spat on me, whereupon I drew the bridle from my pocket, and only then did she realize what I had in mind and she began fighting, writhing and biting. For all my strength, and except for her illness, she would have won out had I not placed a silver cross on her lips, whereupon she fainted. I slipped the bridle on, put the gagbit in her mouth. Just in time I jumped out of the box stall and padlocked the door.

Three days later I took the blacksmith out to the stable.

"You got the mare back?" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"Yes, I found her again."

"Where's the Miller girl?"

"I told you I was sending her to Walden."

"So you did. Is that the bridle the mare had on the night you bought her? The one you took to New York City?"

"The same."

He entered the stall, gentling her, took the mare's hooves, one at a time in his hands to examine them.

"Was she still shod when you bought her from old man Holt?"

"I am sure she was."

"Shod when you watered her?"

"Certainly."

"Well, all I can say is that when she got away from you she slipped her shoes; but the nail marks are still there. And her hooves are still burned where I fitted those red-hot shoes on her."

"You are sure this is the mare you shod for Ethan?"

"Positive. I know my own work."

"How many nails to each shoe?"

"Eight. And that reminds me—"

"I know what you are thinking," I said, "and may I suggest that you stop thinking?"

He came out of the stall and shut the door.

"This is the Devil's work, my boy. Take the advice of an older man and put a bullet between her eyes, and better still, make it a silver bullet with a cross on its nose. Then come to church and be an example for righteous people."

"No," I said, "I am going to keep the mare and tame her."

Now, during the days, I drive one horse and try to make a living. But at night I go into the box stall and try to tame a wild mare. At times she will let me put my arms around her neck and kiss her on the forehead between the eyes, where the silver star is. At other times she fights furiously and tries her best to get me under foot so she can trample me as she did the fitting fool.

But I am determined to conquer her. When I do I will again remove the bridle; she will be willing to be baptised and marry me, becoming a gentle, loving wife, and faithful.

Of course, I realize that she may kill me first, in an unguarded moment, kissing my body to death with blows from her hardened hooves. But come what may, I must have her with me, woman or mare, because I love her.