



T H E F U N E R A L

THE HOUSE WAS QUIET. I OPENED THE DINING ROOM DOOR SLIGHTLY and could see men sitting in chairs. They were asleep. I walked slowly into the living room where the body of Peter Wilks lay. Suddenly, I heard someone coming down the stairs. I didn't know what to do. There was no place for me to run. I quickly hid the bag of gold dollars under the body of Peter Wilks. His body was so cold that I felt sick with fear. Then I ran across the room and hid behind a door.

The person coming was Mary Jane. She walked softly toward the body of her uncle and sat down beside it. She held a handkerchief to her face and was crying. Her back was toward me. Quietly, I moved out of my hiding place and returned to my room.

I knew that I had not hidden the money well. If it would stay hidden with the body, there would be no problem. Once we were far away, I would, simply write to Mary Jane and tell her to get them to dig up the body and recover the money. However, what would happen if the money was discovered before the body was buried? The king would get it again, of course, and he would guard it so closely that I could never hope to steal it again. I knew that I should try to move the money to

a safer place, but I was afraid that I would be caught if I attempted to do so.

The next day the family began to make preparations for the funeral. The coffin, with Peter Wilks's body in it, was placed on several chairs in the middle of the room. The rest of the room was filled with rows and rows of chairs, which extended into the dining room and hall.

Neighbors and friends from the town began to arrive. Soon all the chairs were full. I had hoped to move the money to a safer hiding place, but knew I could not do that with so many people watching. The king, the duke, and the three girls sat in the first row of chairs. They all held handkerchiefs to their eyes and kept their heads bent down. The only sound was that of quiet crying and the noises made by men blowing their noses—people always blow their noses more at a funeral than at any other time.

The man in charge of the funeral moved noiselessly through the crowd like a cat. He never spoke; he moved people around, made space for those who arrived late, and made certain that everyone was comfortable, but he did this all with nods and signs with his hands, not words. When he was satisfied that all was ready, he stood against the wall.

The three sisters had borrowed a piano—a sick one. A young woman sat down and played a sad song and everyone joined in singing. After the song ended, the Reverend Hobson began his talk in a slow, low voice.

Suddenly, there was a terrible noise in the basement. The noise was made by a dog, but it was the loudest, meanest dog that I had ever seen. Reverend Hobson refused to notice the noise and continued talking about the dead man. Finally, the noise became so loud that he had to stop talking. No one seemed to know what to do.

The man in charge of the funeral moved from his position against the wall. He made a sign to Hobson as if to say, "Don't worry—depend on me." Then he moved smoothly and easily along the wall, all the while not making a sound. All eyes in the room followed his movements. The noise in the basement grew louder and louder. Finally, the

man disappeared behind the door leading to the basement. We heard a loud *whack*, then a loud dog cry, and all was still. Hobson continued his talk. In a few minutes, the man returned from the basement, again moved smoothly and easily along the wall, returned to the same spot where he had been standing before, and said in a loud whisper, "He had a rat!"

You could see that this was a great satisfaction to the people because naturally they had wondered what was troubling the dog. A small, helpful act like that was what made this man so well-liked in town.

When the Reverend Hobson had finished talking, the man in charge of the funeral left his position against the wall and came over to the coffin and closed the top. I didn't know if anyone had discovered the money. Was it really going to be buried with Peter Wilks?

After they had buried Peter Wilks, we returned to the house. I began to watch the faces of the king and the duke to see what I could learn. Did they know that the money was gone? Their faces told me nothing. They sat in the evening, talking to the people who were still at the house. The king said that they were eager to return to England, and would have to sell the property immediately. He said that he and his brother would be happy to take the girls home to England with them. The girls were so happy at the thought of moving to England that they forgot about losing their uncle. It made my heart sick to see them being lied to again.

The very next day, the king decided to sell the house, the tannery, and the black slaves. The slaves were being sold immediately—the two sons were sold to a family living up the river in Memphis, Tennessee, and their mother was sold down the river to New Orleans. The three sisters and the black slaves cried and cried when the time came for them to separate. The girls said that they never realized that the slaves would be sold away from the town. Many people in the town were angry that the mother and her two sons were going to be separated in this way.

The following morning the king and the duke entered my room

very early and I knew that there was trouble.

“Were you in my room two nights ago?” asked the king.

“No, I wasn’t even near your room since the girls took us there that first day.”

“Well, did you see anyone go in there?”

“Not that I can remember.”

“Stop and think.”

“Well, I did see two black slaves go in there on the day of the funeral. I was walking down the stairs and I saw them go in the king’s room.”

“What did they do in there?”

“Nothing that I could see. I thought that they were simply cleaning the room.”

The duke had a strange smile on his face. “Those black slaves have tricked us. They cried and made a scene about having been sold away from this town, but that was simply an act.”

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“This is not any business of yours. You keep your mouth shut. You know nothing about any of this.” Then the duke shouted at the king, “This is your fault. I knew that we should have left with the money. But you wanted to wait until you sold the property.”

The king did not like these remarks and said the fault was mine. He said that I should have come to him immediately when I saw the black slaves leave his room. I didn’t mind his saying this. I knew that they wouldn’t try to search for the money and they really couldn’t harm the black slaves either.