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PART I

Cradle of Fire

1

Their eyes held across the limp figure on the pallet. Fear filled the tiny room like an ominous rumble of thunder. Tibby blessed herself, glad for the first time that the child she had just delivered was not hers.

Tom dropped his head in his hands, the rushlight glinting on his foxy hair. The baby kicked feebly, gave a gasping squeal and began to breathe.

'Oh, no!' he groaned. 'I hoped it were -'

'Sh-sh!' warned Tibby fiercely, glancing at Margery's pale face and shadowed eyes. She pulled herself together, cut the cord and bound up the mother. Then she began rapidly to collect up her things.

'Where you going?' Tom looked up, his old young face anxious.

'Home!' she muttered briefly. 'You don't think I'm stopping here. They'll say I "touched" it. You know I didn't. You saw me put the pearl-wort under her knee. Who's going to believe me? It's always the midwife's fault...'

Tom started up. 'How do I know you won't tell!'

'Tell? Why should I tell? I'm in trouble same as you.' 'You don't understand.' He grabbed her shoulders to make her look at him. 'There's been no baby born here tonight.' She frowned,

uncomprehending, until he added slowly, 'Not born alive, that is.'

Tibby stared. 'Tom -you cannamean-' It was a cross, to be sure, but crosses were to be borne. Poor Margery ... her firstborn! She said, aghast, 'Dunna do it, Tom.'

Tom's voice shook. 'I got to, Tib. You know I have.'

'But Margery-'

'There'll be others. It won't be so hard for her again. I'll make a birthing stool so they come easy. You'll see, it's for the best-' He spoke eagerly, trying to convince himself as much as her. 'Better now than -'

'Tom ...' a voice came feebly from the shadows. 'What is it?' After the months of waiting, the punishing hours of labour, was there a girl or a boy ...

'Witchmarked.' Tom said it bluntly; the baby was quiet, so he added, 'Born dead. Dunna look. I'll bury it outside.'

'No, Tom!' Tibby snatched it from him and it set up a healthy cry.

'It's not dead!' Margery tried to struggle upright on the blood-soaked ruin of her bed, 'Give it here!' She reached out for it and then, bewildered by their reluctance, she began to cry exhaustedly. 'I want my baby,' she begged weakly, pitifully.

'You canna do it, Tom!' Tibby put a stout arm about the weeping girl. 'Here's your baby, dunna you fret yourself, 'tis a fine bonny girl. Only - 'tis witchmarked, like Tom says, and right bad.' She glared fiercely in his direction. 'But we anna going to let him do away with it!'

'Oh, no!' sobbed Margery, her head bent over the puling infant. 'My baby - not my baby!' She rocked back and forth, hysterically clutching the child, and abruptly lost consciousness.

'There!' scolded Tibby, triumphant. 'Now see what you done.'

Tom looked helplessly from one to the other. He was beaten.

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He could override one woman but not two. Not when one was his Margery. He knelt awkwardly beside her. 'Marge, love ...' She moaned and her eyelids flickered. 'Dunna take on so, you know I wanna do it, not if you say No ...' They rubbed her hands and feet until she returned to them. At last Tom said, 'Well, Tib, what we going to do, then? Cut it out?'

Margery held the baby tighter and looked at them with frightened eyes.

'No use,' declared Tib, 'things like that do always grow again. No, all you can do is keep your big mouth buttoned tight and hope nobody sees. And stop scaring the daylights out of this poor girl!'

Tom coloured angrily. What right had she to tell him how to treat his wife?

'That's all very well.' His tone was surly. 'I anna having no imps suckled in this house-'

'Oh, Tom, how could you!'

'Old wives' tales!' snapped Tibby, trying to control the prickle that was running up her own spine. 'To say such a thing about your own flesh and blood!'

'Tain't my flesh and blood. 'Tis a changling for all I know, and none of mine. I'm telling you, the first time I sees-'

'You won't see nothing, you great stupid lump. Weren't you there all along? How could anyone change it under your very nose? Talk sense, can't you!' Tibby's voice was sharpened by concern for her patient, whose lips were again turning colour.

'Not someone - something,' Tom muttered darkly. Tibby silenced him.

'If you're so lily-livered best get out in the woods and dig up some rowan saplings. Plant 'em in a circle round the house and keep her inside. They won't cross that. Not imps nor witches nor spooks nor nothing else. And give her a good name.'

'I thought to call her Nan,' put in Margery timidly. 'Like the Rose of Hever,' she explained.

'The King's whore!' roared Tom, jerked out of his fantasies. 'Over my dead body!'

'Now, now, Tom,' soothed Tibby, 'that's no matter now. But Nan's no good. You want a good strong Christian name. Mary or Martha or such.'

'Them's no good. I heard tell of a witch called Mary and two called Elizabeth.'

'What then?'

Tom thought for a moment. 'We-ell ... if you want to keep the witches off a cow, you ties a switch of hazel to her tail. Never know it to fail. So it's Hazel, I reckon. We're like to call it Hazel.'

'Hazel,' repeated Margery, tasting the name. She smiled for the first time. 'I like that, Tom. That's pretty. We're going to call her Hazel.'

'Yes, well... ' Tom felt his surliness melting. 'You got to rest now, Marge. You got to get strong again.'

Margery's eyes shone softly, and Tib nudged her, chuckling. 'Strong enough to start the next, he means!'

Tom had had enough. He got to his feet and his tone was truculent.

'I'm bringing the goat in, now. She'll be catching her death out there.'

'Oh yes, bring the goat in,' jeered Tibby, recognising her dismissal; she added tartly, 'Be sad indeed if the goat got wet. Much more of a matter than a firstborn child ...'

Tom said sourly, 'We got to feed a baby. The goat feeds us. And you'll be expecting your birthing price, no doubt.'

'No!' said Tibby, her face hard and square as a man's. 'I've not been here tonight. I'll take no payment. Just don't you let me hear of no harm coming to that child.' She called goodnight to Margery from the doorway and followed him out to where the goat was tethered. It stood shivering and dull-eyed, with the night rain streaming from its coat.

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'There,' exclaimed Tom, 'it's started already! The goat's going sick!'

'Duckpuddles!' snorted Tibby, edging away. 'Mind now, don't you let me hear ...'

'All right, all right,' muttered Tom, untying the animal to lead her indoors, 'but you'll see ...'

His words were blown away by the wind and Tibby did not catch them.

'What?' she shouted back over her shoulder. His voice followed her, rain-tossed, down the hill.

'I say no good's going to come of this - you mark my words!'

Tibby did not answer. She had done her job. Delivered living child and seen it and the mother safe. And yet - she shivered with more than the pre-dawn chill. Disturbed and uneasy, she stumped off into the night.

2

The fust in the cottage was becoming unbearable. The sun sucked steam from the thatch, drove a dagger of light down the chimney, and drew an oily sweat from the paper windows. Margery stirred restlessly as the odour of the rosemary and wild garlic in their pots joined the fume from the floor to assail her queasy stomach. She threw off the single cover and touched the back of a hand to the face of the girl beside her, then smiled, finding it healthily cool. Then she moved her hand lightly over her own swollen belly. Her brows drew together as she thought she felt a gentle contracting of the muscles.

The girl turned towards her, mumbling drowsily, and then in the middle of a yawn said sharply, 'Mother!' Suddenly alert, she added, 'You going to birth it today?'

Margery relaxed with a sigh. 'When the apple's ripe 'twill drop. Nothing we can do to hurry it. Still, the sooner the better, I suppose.' She heaved her unwieldy body to a sitting position and sat smiling at her daughter, rubbing the small of her back to ease the cricks before making the effort of getting to her feet.

She was no stranger to pregnancy now. In the fourteen years of her marriage she had borne eight children and four of them had lived and thrived. She sighed; three were gone from her now, Jody to a blacksmith and the others God knew where,

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and no one could say if she would ever see them again. But not this one: this one they dared not sell.

They had planted their saplings of rowan and they had hung a crucifix about her neck and they had called her Hazel to keep the witches at bay. They had prayed - at least Margery had - as devoutly as they had hoped; perhaps it was not really what it seemed, perhaps it would disappear as the child grew, perhaps ... But it had not disappeared, and it was all too clearly what it seemed. And the woman so marked stood surely in the shadow of the rope. If only Tom ... with an effort, she turned her mind away.

If only Jody could have stayed at home! Fie must be twelve now, brown-eyed and russet-haired like Tom, almost a man himself ... Jody would have known the best thing to do about Hazel. But now there was only herself, hampered as she was by the coming babe, to keep Hazel safe. And the danger grew daily. Sooner or later someone would catch her, strip her for his pleasure, and afterwards - would he denounce her as a witch and see her hang? Who could tell... if she disappointed or resisted him ... she was barely grown, scarce out of her childhood. Yet watching her move about the darkened room ...

'Hazel, put your shift on - don't wander about with that thing showing!'

'There's no one here but us.'

Margery glanced uneasily behind her. 'That's all you know.'

Mischief bubbled in Hazel and she stooped, one hand extended, as if she were calling hens.

'Here - pretty, pretty, pretty! Here - pretty, pretty-' Then she saw Margery's face and hugged her impulsively. 'Oh, Mother - you dunna really think I'd suckle the Devil! You know I'd fly a mile from anything with horns - I canna even abide cows!' She laughed, 'I'll put something on if it worries you, but you're so easy teased!'

Margery watched her leaning into the heavy press where their few garments were stored. That'll be the next to go, she thought. If we can find someone to buy it ... How she hated having to sell the things Tom had made. She thought of the spinning wheel that they had clung to up to the last; they had used it with pride and with love, and parting with it had been painful.

Hazel put on her shift. Then she took Margery's old gown that had become too small for her, carried it to the door, and shook it hard in the fresh air, blinking at the sunlight.

'It gets tighter every day,' she complained, squeezing it down over her budding breasts.

'Slack it off, then. Come here, I'll do it for you.' Margery let out the lacing to ease her, then patted her on the rump. 'Remember, now, don't call the Devil, not even in fun. You never know what might be listening.'

Hazel aired Margery's own clothes and handed them to her, and smiled as she dragged her fingers through her hair.

'I'll lay fresh rushes before the baby comes. This floor smells like a midden.' She picked up the water bucket and went out.

Margery dressed slowly. She felt tired this morning. Perhaps it was a good sign. The sooner the birth was over the better, for they could not move until it was. And they had to get on the road before they had nothing left to sell. She looked around her at the familiar place and felt the tears rise ... Oh, Tom, why did you have to fight them when they took our bit of land! We'd have kept body and soul together somehow, with the carpentry, with something, we'd have managed without it one way or another ... but when the others from the village came, off you had to go hotheaded to throw your life away! You always were the wild one. I should have known you'd never die in your bed ...

She sighed again. Looking from the door, she could see Hazel stepping out in the morning sunlight with a bucket in each hand. The yoke was too big for her and sat awkwardly on

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her immature shoulders. How could anyone think evil of a harmless child? And yet - who had lived quieter than old Nanny Webster, who wove the finest cloth for miles around? And they had hanged her only last summer, and burned not only her loom, saying it was enchanted, but her cat and her tame hare along with it, swearing that they had all been consorting with the Evil One. The old woman was speechless with shock. The cat died without a sound, muffled in its bag, mercifully stifled by the smoke perhaps. Only the hare screamed long and dreadfully, 'letting the Devil out'. Margery winced, remembering the sound.

Now the whole problem of Hazel fell on her shoulders alone; all because Tom - she checked her thoughts. Tom was Tom, God rest him, and could only have been what he was. It was up to her to find safety for the girl before she began to be what she was - whatever unnatural thing that might turn out to be.

She was kneading up dough for a loaf when the thought touched her like a chilly hand. Why had Hazel said 'I'd fly a mile'? Why not 'I'd run a mile' - like anybody else...

She beat the flour from her hands and went out of doors to get warm. She sat on the wall in the sun and closed her eyes. Holy Mother, she prayed, Holy Mother, let the baby come soon!

Hazel sat on the brink of the well to rest after the long sweat of winding up the buckets. Summer was well on and the water was low. She drew deep breaths of the sweet air, savouring the scent of wood smoke drifting towards her from the village fires.

They were the only ones using the old well now that the new one had been sunk in the village. It had become her favourite place, a lone and secret refuge where she could listen to birdsong or watch the tawny squirrels flicker in the highest branches of the oaks. Often she would come up here alone to think her thoughts, or to escape the wrath of Tom when the

goat went dry, and the place was a balm to her spirit. She would sit in silence and watch while a spider built a web, and go away refreshed. But not today.

A figure was slowly winding its way up the path from the village to their door. She leaned forward, catching sight of a snowy wimple crowned by a broad-brimmed hat. Only the midwife wore such things, even without her basket with its white cloth she could be recognised by her clothes. If Tibby was on her way it was time for Hazel to go back; she always helped with her mother's confinements and had a soft spot for Tibby, knowing instinctively that her gruff voice and rough manners meant nothing. She felt a warmth from Tibby that she had never known from Tom.

Hazel pushed back the hair from her damp forehead, shouldered the buckets, and started walking back.

Tibby reached the newly built sheep wall that divided Margery's cot from the rest of the village. This was the wall, she reflected, that had started all the trouble, putting boundaries where they had no right to be and putting honest folk out of their homes. Now Tom was dead, and others beside, and Margery only remained on sufferance. As soon as her child was born her cottage would go too, to make yet more pasture for the encroaching sheep. And from what Tib had heard from the travelling apothecary, there were others yet worse off in other parts; some landowners were evicting whole communities to make more grazing lands. Tib did not know what the world was coming to. Time was when the lords of the manors had cared what became of their tenants, but not now. They cared for nothing any more as long as their rents rolled in. She sighed. Cursing fate was not going to help Margery or Hazel. No time today to stop and get her breath, her errand was too urgent. She caught sight of Margery stooping to gather herbs and called out to her.

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Margery straightened her back carefully.

'Why, Tibby, I haven't sent for you yet. What brings you?'

Panting, the old woman sank down on a stone.

'I had to come.' She mopped her face with a fold of her skirt. 'Where's the girl?'

'Gone for water,' said Margery with a sinking of the stomach. She looked searchingly at Tibby. 'Why, what's wrong?'

'Trouble, and like to be more trouble. You must get away now and take her with you. No time to wait for the baby. There's talk in the village and no time to be lost.'

Margery sat down weakly beside her. 'Oh no, Tib! I can't bear any more - how can I take to the road like this?'

'Take to it you must,' said Tib firmly, 'or tomorrow may be too late. You don't know the way they'm talking down there.'

'But who's talking? What about? I don't understand ...'

'About the plague and that Dickun's wife. Seems she saw a hare dancing in the moonlight outside her cottage last night and this morning he's took with it. They say she's vowing someone brought the sickness to Dickun - some witch in the shape of the hare.'

Margery looked at her despairingly. 'But there's always plague in town in the hot weather, always has been, always will be - nothing to do with witches! Someone must have come this way from the town and brought it on their clothes.'

'You try telling that to an angry mob!' said Tibby sagely.

'But even then, what's it to do with us? Has someone found out about Hazel - Tib, you haven't told?'

'God's truth and I haven't, and I don't know how you can say such a thing, and me holding my peace these many a year! Maybe nobody knows, all I'm saying is there's some funny old talk going on. People a-gathering in little groups and a-muttering away and a-looking up here towards your place. I dunna like the looks of it so I come to warn you. They'm frightened, Margery, and when folks is frightened they starts

to look around 'em for a scapegoat. Maybe they're telling themselves if they gets rid of Hazel the plague'll go away. I always did think as you kept her too much apart - as good as telling the world there was something wrong about the child. And you never can tell what folks is going to think with the Old One looking over their shoulder. Seems like it comes between them and their wits. So best thing is, you get stirring and get you both on the road.'

'Today?' Margery said unhappily. It was one thing to know you had to go, another to actually start the journey.

'Now, this minute!' Tibby said flatly. 'And don't sit there wringing your hands, woman, get you ready and on your way while there's still time. Innocent she may be but there's nought going to save her once they see what's there to be seen.'

Tib got up and started to pull her to her feet. She was used to taking charge in emergencies. There might be a time and a place for sympathising but this was assuredly not it.

'Wait, Tibby ...' Margery's eyes went suddenly out of focus, as if she were listening to something inside herself. 'I - I can't,' she faltered, and the eyes she raised to Tibby's were appalled.

'You're not-'

Margery nodded, holding her breath, and then she let it go in a long sibilance, her eyes dismayed.

'I can't take her, Tib. What am I going to do?'

They stared at each other, hands locked. Tibby thought fast. 'Can you manage to deliver yourself?'

Margery hesitated, biting her lips. Then she nodded. 'It's not the first. I've got the birthing stool.'

'Good, then leave everything to me. I'll take her to my house and take the way through the woods; won't no one think of looking for her there. I'll keep her there till you can go your ways together. Don't you fret now, just get on and birth that suckling. Lie up for a little and then come as soon as you can.'

Margery agreed weakly, trying to conquer her doubts.

'How will you get her to go with you? She'll not want to leave me.'

'I'll think of something, don't you fret. Now come you in the house.'

Margery stumbled in getting to her feet; Tibby steadied her and led her indoors where she busied herself with preparations for the birth. She got out the birthing stool that Tom had made, low and backless, with stout arms for gripping and a hollow seat to permit the passage of the child; she dusted it and rubbed it over with the bunch of herbs she always carried in her basket. She moved the little pots of rosemary and garlic from the hearth and set them on the window-sill to discourage the plague from coming in. She brought in firewood and lit it and set the cauldron over it to boil. She dropped in a handful of dried foliage and threw another into the fire. Then she went to the press and took out the worn but carefully folded linen that had served all Margery's babies. The familiar herbal odour filled Margery's nostrils, reminiscent of so many such occasions with Tibby in attendance. Watching her bustling about in the firelight's flicker, it did not seem possible that all the old familiar life was gone, that disaster hung over them and nothing would ever be the same again. Well, there was nothing more that she could do now. She closed her eyes and gave herself over to her labour.

The sound of footsteps took Tibby outside again.

'Set down them buckets, Hazel, and come with me. I want you to fetch back a simple for your mother.'

'A simple? Why? Is she sick, is she took a-bed?'

She started towards the door but Tibby intercepted her. 'She's well enough. 'Tis just some of my raspberry-leaf tea she's wanting, to speed her labour. You'll fetch it back for her a sight quicker than I could, your legs is younger than mine. That's unless you've a mind to stand there all day dithering.'

Hazel set the buckets down slowly. 'Where is she? Why can't I see her?'

At that moment Margery appeared in the doorway, leaning against the jamb and peering, dazzled, into the sunlight.

'I'm all right, Hazel. Go along with Tibby.' Her hand, out of sight behind the door, gripped the edge of a beam to steady her; she raised the other one partly to ward off the glare and partly to shield her face from Hazel's experienced eye. If the girl saw she was in labour no device of Tibby's was likely to drag her away.

'Mother, are you sure?' She was hesitating, her suspicions already aroused. Margery felt another contraction building up.

'Of course!' she snapped. 'Now run along and do as you're told. What a girl it is for arguing, to be sure. Get you gone I' She turned back into the house, not trusting herself further.

Hazel stood uncertain for a moment. Then she yielded to Tibby and followed her away.

Margery leaned her back against the wall and slowly sank to her knees. Now that she was alone she could give way to her tears and they rolled unhindered down her cheeks. She longed to call Hazel back; she wanted to roll back the years and seek the comfort of her own mother again; she wanted Tom, rough and uncaring as he had often been; anyone, just so she was not to be alone in her extremity. Most of all, she wished with all her heart she could have kept Tibby with her.

Something was telling her that alone of all her children since the first, this one was not going to be born so easily. Something was going to go wrong with this birth and she knew it.

Tobias Kemble, preacher, apothecary and travelling quack, produced the parchment from his pouch, unrolled it with a flourish and held it high above his head.

'See for yourselves!' he invited his audience, knowing well enough that none of them could read. They shuffled their feet uneasily, not wanting to call attention to their ignorance. 'It says here,' he continued, pressing his advantage, ' - and this, mark you, is her true and attested confession - that this foul witch, Mother Waterlowe, being brought to judgement, and "being ready prepared to receive her death, she confessed earnestly that she had been a witch" ' - here he paused again

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to assess the effect of the words - ' "and used such execrable sorcery for the space of fifteen years." ' He lowered the scroll and dropped his voice to a confidential level before continuing. 'Fifteen years, my friends! I wonder if you realise what this means. It means,' and here he raised his voice again, 'that for fifteen long years this wicked woman was working away in secret at her malicious schemes and charms, doing untold harm to her innocent neighbours, doing the Devil's bidding without anyone being the wiser!'

He rocked back on his heels, surveying the small knot of listeners which was slowly growing as he talked, judging his moment. 'Could it not be,' he challenged them, 'that there are those among you who should be brought into the light? That there are those whose innermost thoughts would not bear investigation and whose malice wreaks havoc among their enemies ... And if there is one' - a pause more telling than before - 'I say to you, if there is, then her neighbours must indeed be asleep. And if they are not asleep, if they suspect her and yet say nothing-' Deftly he shifted his gaze from face to face among them, scrutinising, accusing. 'Then they are as culpable as she! They are just as steeped in sin, just as much in the service of the Evil One, and just as ripe for the gallows! The Bible says you shall not suffer a witch to live.'

He surveyed with satisfaction the consternation he had caused. Now he would see some action. 'I say to you that he who knows of the existence of a witch and does not come forward is no true Christian and shall himself be damned! I say to you, be vigilant, for there are those among us who work evil things in secret. Has any woman among you had a babe who is hare-shotten?'

A young woman was thrust unwillingly forward from the group to stand before him, twisting her hands in her apron.

'Go on, tell him, Marian!' A chorus of voices prodded her on.

"'Tweren't my fault if the hare crossed my path,' she

blubbered. 'It were up by carpenter's cottage on the way back from the old well!'

Tobias nodded gravely. 'And who amongst you has lost a child?' Several voices answered. 'Or a horse, or an ox?' The chorus swelled to a shout; soon everyone was vying with his neighbour. One had lost a sow and all her litter, another had had his horse go lame, a third recalled that his grandam had suddenly gone blind. And all were convinced, now that it had been pointed out to them, that they were the victims of witchcraft.

Kemble was hard put to it to disguise his gratification. Not for nothing, after all, had he tramped the dusty miles in search of a village without a resident priest.

'It is as I feared,' he pronounced gravely, 'and you will be wise to seek further aid, for from what I can see there is at least one witch amongst you. I thank God that I have passed this way and can deliver you. I shall need a horse.' They looked at one another in bewilderment.

'I must ride with all haste,' he explained, 'to find one Master Lawyer Wilkins, and bring him back with me. He is a great finder of witches and all shall be done in due order and to the glory of the Church.'

'But we know who it is, master!' a dozen voices assailed him, as he had guessed they would. He was ready for them. He raised an imperious hand. The leavings of one poor villager's wife would not line anyone's pockets.

'We may think we know, but it is not for us to judge. And where we may suspect one, a trained investigator such as Master Wilkins can trace her to the nest. There will be others, I can promise you. And we shall flush them out!' Wilkins was expert in manipulating his victims into implicating those with more money. And he, Tobias, was not going to be cheated of his moment of importance - still less of his pickings, which could on occasion be rich. He saw himself officiating at the trial, basking in reflected glory, and later accepting gracefully

his share of the deceased's estate. Let Master Calvin look to his laurels: the name of Kemble might also be writ large in the annals of the witch hunt.

'Brethren, be vigilant. I shall return with Master Wilkins, and then there shall be such a purging as you have never seen. God keep you. Watch and pray.'

They watched him ride away with mixed feelings. Everyone knew that something must be done, but no one cared to be the first to do it. To this extent they were glad of the restraint placed on them. It lifted some of the responsibility but also left them feeling strangely helpless. Kemble might not return for many days and in that time anything could happen. Already since this morning there was another door in the village marked with the red cross of the plague. They knew well enough where to look for their malefactor. Had not all these disasters befallen since the unfortunate death of Tom Wood? It was well known that witches sought to avenge their misfortunes on the world about them. They looked nervously towards the cottage on the hill and huddled together as if for protection, forgetting in their superstitious dread that other men had also died with Tom. Uneasily, in ones and twos, they went their several ways.

Tobias Kemble rode away from the village well pleased with his day's work. Already he was making notes for a long and elaborate trial. No doubt more than one suspect could be rounded up; Master Wilkins would charge a goodly fee from which the preacher could expect a fair commission. He was smiling as he straddled his borrowed horse. He had reckoned without Alice Smith.