

# HIGH WATER



By Harriet Lummis Smith

DRAWN BY W. F. STECHER



"Why, Mrs. Henderson!" she kept repeating

WHEN Charlotte engaged her room it was the proximity of the river that decided her. The cheap rent helped of course, though the difference of seventy-five cents a week between the rent of it and the rent of another more attractive room that she was considering was not great enough to counterbalance its ugliness. When she looked out of the window her face changed magically. "Oh!" she exclaimed with delight. "How near the river is!"

Mrs. Simpson, who kept the rooming house, gave her an odd look. It was clear she did not understand the enthusiasm of Charlotte's tone. But Charlotte explained at once:

"I love to be near water. You see, there was a brook on the farm at home; I could see it from the window of my room."

Mrs. Simpson rubbed her nose. "Yes," she said noncommittally, "we are near the river." And with her mind quite made up Charlotte took the room and paid a week's rent in advance.

It was old Mrs. Henderson, who had the room across the hall from Charlotte, that explained to her why Mrs. Simpson's manner was enigmatic. Mrs. Henderson took most of her meals in her room, making tea over an alcohol lamp and eating baker's rolls and dried beef, with a newspaper for a tablecloth. In spite of her evident poverty and loneliness she was a cheerful old lady, and she and Charlotte were soon in a fair way to be friends. Mrs. Henderson nodded when Charlotte remarked how near the river was. "Yes, that's why the rooms are cheap, you know."

"Cheap!" exclaimed Charlotte. "I should think that would make them more expensive."

Mrs. Henderson stared and then remem-

bered. "Oh, you've never been here in the spring."

"No, I never have."

"Well, when the spring comes and the river rises you'll know why people will pay to get away from it. I've been in this house three springs, but none of them the water was very high. Of course the cellar is flooded every year, and it puts the furnace fire out."

"Dear me!" Charlotte exclaimed. "I should think everybody would take cold."

"Yes, everybody does. If that's all, we don't say much. But if the river should ever get really high, there's no knowing what would happen. This house is old and what you might call ramshackle. A real flood might take it off its foundations."

Charlotte looked serious a moment and then laughed. "Well, anyway," she said, "it's a long way to spring. In the meantime I'm going to enjoy the river."

And she did, though the river had all the drawbacks of other rivers in manufacturing towns. But from her window Charlotte could not see how dirty the water was. In the morning with the mist rising it was like a river of dreams, and late in the day when it reflected the colors of the sunset it brought to her mind the words "a sea of glass mingled with fire." But she liked it best at night when the city was asleep and the moon was high and the river shone with a silvery light. Once or twice during the winter the thermometer fell so low that the river froze across, and there was skating both day and night. Those evenings Charlotte sat by her window with her coat on—little heat reached her third-story room on cold days—and watched the figures gliding over the ice. All that helped to confirm her earlier satisfaction.

Mrs. Henderson too was such a nice neighbor. The

plucky, sunny little old lady had taken a great fancy to the plucky, sunny girl. When Charlotte came in late on a cold evening Mrs. Henderson was likely to ask her into her room for a cup of tea. It was weak tea of an inferior quality, but it was steaming hot, and Charlotte always sipped it gratefully. Sometimes she returned the hospitality by taking Mrs. Henderson to a concert; Mrs. Henderson enjoyed music so much.

The little old lady always locked the door of her room when she went out—a precaution at which Charlotte wondered not a little. She was quite sure there was nothing in Mrs. Henderson's room to tempt anyone. But one night when they were sitting over their tea she discovered her mistake. Mrs. Henderson had owned to being tired. "I've polished all my silver today," she explained.

"All your silver?" Charlotte looked round the room, thinking Mrs. Henderson must be joking.

The old lady understood her puzzled air. "There! To think I've never showed you my silver! But it's a good time for you to see it when it's all nice and shiny."

There was a couch in Mrs. Henderson's room that became a bed at night. Charlotte now discovered that the couch had still another use. The foundation was a long box, from which Mrs. Henderson proceeded to take a number of large pieces of silver. Charlotte's amazement quite overshadowed her admiration. "Why, Mrs. Henderson!" she kept repeating, and Mrs. Henderson took the exclamation as a compliment to her possessions and beamed with satisfaction.

"Pretty nice, aren't they?" she said. "It's all family silver, you see. These tea things date back to the Revolution."

"But, Mrs. Henderson, they must be valuable!"

"Yes, they are. That's why I always do the work of my room myself and lock the door when I go out. You're the only one in the house who knows they are here."

"But couldn't you do something with them?"

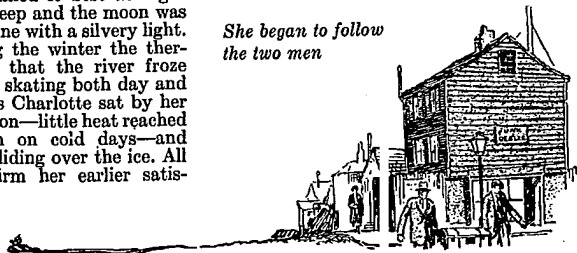
Mrs. Henderson did not understand the question. "Yes, I've willed 'em to my grand-niece," she replied. "She's the only descendant. Kind of sad, isn't it? But I mean to keep 'em as long as I live. They're more comfort to me than you'd believe."

"I suppose you could sell them, couldn't you, and get lots of nice things with the money?"

Mrs. Henderson looked at Charlotte in a queer, unbelieving way, and involuntarily Charlotte smiled, as if the suggestion had been a pleasantry.

"Oh, I see. You were just joking," said Mrs. Henderson in a tone of relief. "Of course I wouldn't sell the family silver any more than I—well, I just wouldn't do it, that's

She began to follow the two men



all. Did you ever see anything handsomer than that tray? Yes, it's solid. There's not a plated piece in the lot."

There was considerable snow that winter, and when the spring rains came the river rose and kept rising. Charlotte found it so fascinating that she could hardly keep away from her window when she was in her room. Swollen, yellow and turbulent, it raced through the city, carrying with it uprooted trees, fence rails and small outbuildings. The cellar was flooded, and the furnace fire went out. Mrs. Henderson wore two shawls instead of her usual one. Charlotte purchased a pair of rubber boots. The people who had rooms on the first floor moved out in a body.

Charlotte came home one night in a heavy rain. For the first time since she had known Mrs. Henderson she found her depressed. "I suppose we might as well make up our minds to leave," said the old lady. "The river's getting higher all the time, and to-night's paper says the lower dam isn't safe. Why, if that dam should break, this house would be smashed like an eggshell."

"Perhaps we'd better pack up then," said Charlotte, impressed by her old friend's manner.

Mrs. Henderson laughed mirthlessly. "I can't do much packing. My trunk is in the cellar, and it must be under water by now. I've got a little market basket to do my packing in."

"You can put your things in my trunk," Charlotte said. "It was my mother's, so it's a great deal bigger than I need."

Mrs. Henderson protested, but yielded at last. They packed the trunk with the Henderson family silver, wrapping up the pieces in Charlotte's garments. It was midnight when they finished, and the trunk was both full and heavy.

Luckily one of Charlotte's fellow workers, with whom she had struck up a friendship, had asked her that very day what she planned to do in case the river kept on rising. "You know folks have been getting out along the river for the last two weeks," the girl had said. "Almost every place is full except the big hotels."

Charlotte looked dismayed. Her wages were such that even one night at a big hotel would be for her an impossible luxury.

"I'll tell you what," said the girl. "If you have to leave, you can bring your trunk to my house till you find a place. When my father bought he picked out the highest ground in the city. We don't see much of the river on Berry Street, but we're not in any danger of being drowned out. You won't mind sleeping three in a bed, will you?" she added as an afterthought. "My sister and I have a room together."

"I shan't mind it if you don't," Charlotte had replied gratefully and then had written down the address.

It was that address she gave to the expressman early the following morning.

The expressman was busy and gruff. "What floor is your trunk on?"

"The third."

"I can't climb to any third floor for trunks this day. You'll have to have it downstairs and out in front and ready when I come by."

Charlotte sighed as she thought of the weight of the Henderson silver. "Well, if I must, I suppose I can, but it's pretty heavy. What time will you come for it?"

"I'll try to be there by half past eight."

Charlotte went back to the house. She was strong, but getting a heavy trunk down two flights of stairs is a man's job. Charlotte was afraid that the bumping would bring Mrs. Simpson out to complain of the treatment her walls were getting, but seemingly Mrs. Simpson had other worries that occupied her fully.

The trunk was on the sidewalk at last, and Mrs. Henderson was fluttering solicitously round the panting Charlotte. "O my! I hope you haven't hurt yourself. It's my silver that's to blame."

They waited for the expressman expectantly at first, then with anxiety and then with rising ire. At ten o'clock Charlotte decided to go in search of him. "You stay by the trunk till I come back," she said to Mrs. Henderson. "I shan't be long."

"It's too bad for you to be so late for your work," Mrs. Henderson answered. "Maybe you'd better go along and leave me to look after the trunk."

Charlotte considered and then shook her head. "I'm so late now that I'll be docked

half a day anyway," she said. "No, I'll stay till I see the trunk started."

She was not back so soon as she had expected, because she did not find the expressman who had promised to take her trunk. He had taken a load of furniture for some anxious householder, and his wife acknowledged that he would not be back for some time. "You'd better not wait for him," she said. "There's real money in what he's doing now, and you can't expect him to bother with a trunk with a few clothes."

"But there's more than clothes in that trunk!" exclaimed Charlotte. "There is a lot of valuable silver!" Stung by an incredulous expression on the face of the expressman's wife, she hastened to add, "It's not mine. It belongs to an old lady I've left keeping guard over it."

The expressman's wife seemed a little impressed. "Well, I'm sorry," she said. "But I don't believe you'd better wait for my husband. There's a grocer in the second block above who has a horse and wagon. Maybe you could get him to help you out."

Charlotte hurried away and found the grocer presently, only to learn that his horse and wagon were already engaged by people who were in the same predicament as herself. She retraced her steps, hoping to meet with some sort of vehicle that she could press into service, but those that passed already had more than a load.

When she came in sight of Mrs. Simpson's rooming house she stopped short. Both the trunk and Mrs. Henderson had disappeared. Her first feeling was one of pleasure; Mrs. Henderson had found some one to move the trunk. Then with a start she realized that Mrs. Henderson did not know the address to which the trunk was to go. She had meant to give it to her before they separated.

Charlotte had halted at a corner, and as she stood hesitating she looked up the cross street. At once she spied two men several blocks away carrying a trunk between them. From their efforts to balance themselves she knew that the trunk was heavy; yet they were swinging along rapidly. Charlotte's brows contracted as she stared after them. Even at that distance the trunk seemed familiar to her. Acting on a sudden impulse, she began to follow the two men. Unencumbered as she was, she could walk faster than they.

When she was half a block away she was sure that the trunk was hers. Her first impulse was to call out and ask what they were doing, but second thoughts led her to change her mind. The men were carrying her trunk away from the river, which was exactly what she wanted; on a day when it was hard to find an expressman it seemed ungracious to object to the unsolicited service. Moreover, there was no policeman in sight. Charlotte decided that it was not the right moment to claim her property.

On and on they went. Charlotte kept well behind them. Once when they set the trunk down and rested she slipped into an alley and waited till they were ready to proceed. Ordinarily the sight of two men carrying a trunk for any distance would have attracted attention and perhaps have aroused suspicion. But in the circumstances people accepted it as a matter of course. Passersby, if they noticed the men at all, glanced at them compassionately.

An empty express wagon, which apparently had carried a load from the neighborhood of the river to higher ground, rattled round a distant corner. The two men caught sight of it and seemed to reach a conclusion simultaneously; they dropped their load on the sidewalk, and the taller of the two gave a piercing whistle.

Charlotte quickened her pace and came up with them. "You needn't carry my trunk any farther," she said a little breathlessly.

The men faced about. Then something threatening in their manner as they glared at her suddenly changed to ingenuous surprise. For as mysteriously as if he had sprung out of the earth a tall policeman had come into view. He stood just behind Charlotte, looking keenly from one to another of the trio.

"Your trunk?" said the taller of the two men as if he were trying hard to speak mildly. "You're crazy, young lady! That trunk belongs to my sister."

"Yes, it's his sister's trunk," said the second. "I never saw you before."

The policeman came a step nearer, and the tall man spoke to him glibly: "There's a lot

of valuable silver in it. That's what makes it so heavy. And there's some clothes besides."

Charlotte understood. The men must have heard her thoughtless confidences to the expressman's wife. But though startled she was not daunted. "You heard me say that!" she challenged him. "Now describe the silver and the clothes too."

"It's my sister's trunk," repeated the man, "and I don't know just what the silver is or what dresses she carried."

"Well, it's my trunk," Charlotte countered. "And I can tell all about the silver and the dresses and everything that is in it." She opened her purse and took out a trunk key. "I'll describe what's in the top tray," she said to the policeman, "and then I'll open the trunk, and you can decide whether it's mine or not."

The tall man and the short one exchanged significant looks. "See here, officer," said the first, "everybody's liable to make mistakes. There were two trunks on the sidewalk, and I took the one I thought was my sister's. But the young lady is so positive, maybe I made a mistake."

"It's one of them unlucky mistakes that need a little explaining," the policeman replied dryly. "You two had better just come along—"

The wagon the men had hailed rattled up, and the two thieves thought they saw their chance; they dodged behind it and started to run. But the big policeman was too quick for them. A shot brought them to a halt, and their hands went up. Then the policeman marched them back for further inspection by Charlotte.

"Take a good look at 'em," he ordered, "so you'll know 'em when you meet 'em in court. I've got an idea the tall one is wanted for something else."



The expressman was interested enough to wait till the policeman and his prisoners had departed; then he inquired casually, "Want that trunk moved?"

"Yes, if you don't charge too much. What will you ask to take it to 618 Berry Street?"

The expressman repeated the address and chuckled. "I could cheat you," he said, "but I won't. This cross street is Elm, and 618 Berry is just round the corner. That pair did you a good turn without meaning to."

As soon as Charlotte had seen her trunk safely housed she hurried back to find Mrs. Henderson. As she had feared, the little old lady was almost frantic. It seemed that while she was standing guard over the trunk two men had approached her and said that a young girl who had been struck by an automobile was asking for her. The girl had been taken into a doctor's office, they explained, and they gave her full directions how to reach it. Of course Mrs. Henderson never found the doctor's office, and when she returned and saw that her trunk was missing she did not even then understand the trick. She greeted Charlotte with hysterical joy that owed nothing to the discovery that she made later—that her precious silver was safe.

Neither of them ever went back to Mrs. Simpson's rooming house, which shortly afterward was condemned and demolished. But, though they no longer live under the same roof, they see a good deal of each other and are as good friends as ever. Indeed Mrs. Henderson has altered her will, and unless she is obliged later to sell her treasures in order to support herself Charlotte will some day be the proud possessor of a colonial teapot in solid silver.

