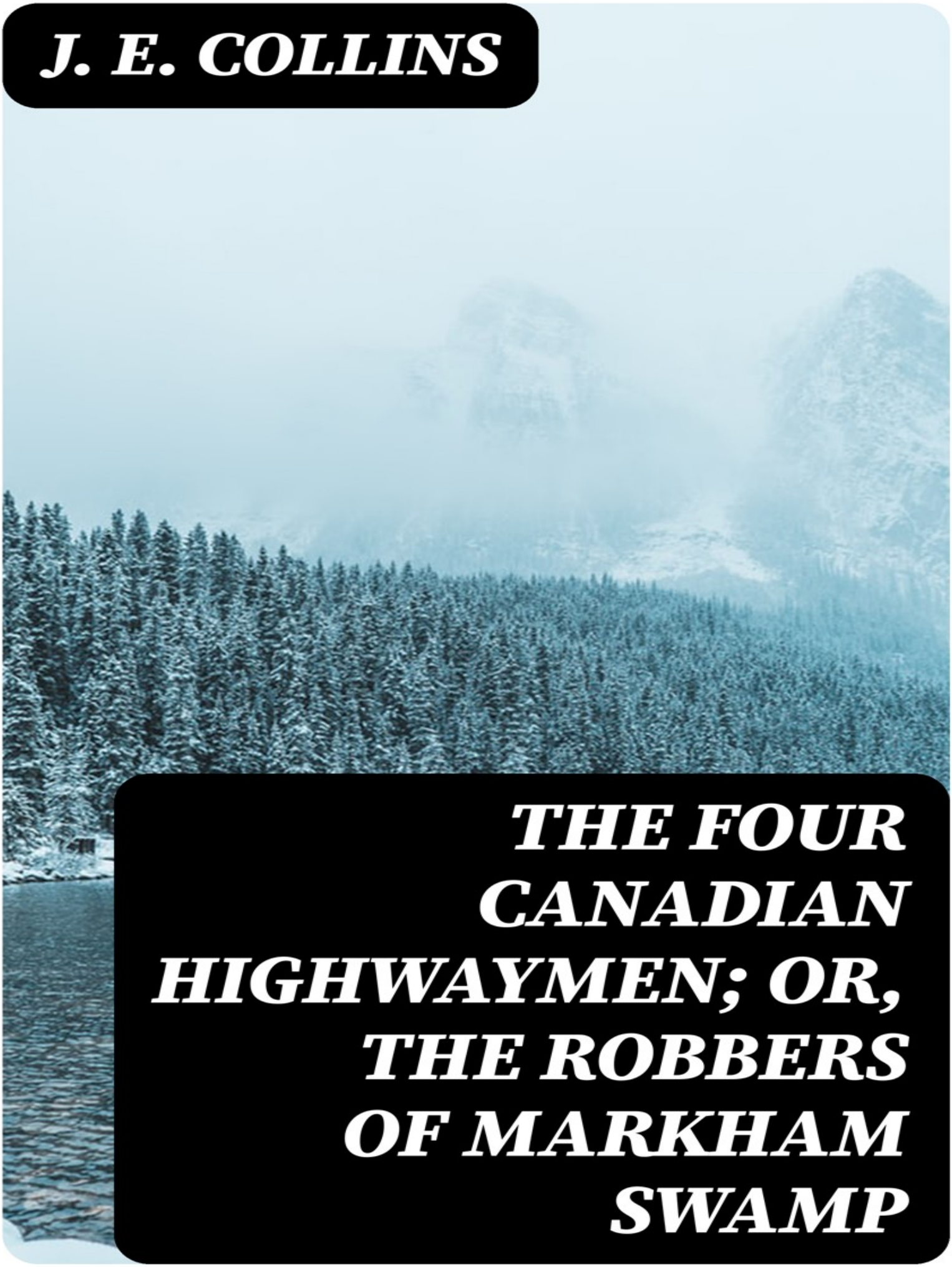

J. E. COLLINS

THE FOUR CANADIAN HIGHWAYMEN; OR, THE ROBBERS OF MARKHAM SWAMP

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The Four Canadian Highwaymen; Or, The Robbers of Markham Swamp

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PREFACE.

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The following story is founded on fact, everybody about this part of
Canada who is not deaf having heard of the gang at Markham Swamp.

I have no doubt that some of my friends who are in the habit of considering themselves "literary," will speak with despair and disparagement of myself when they read the title of this book. They will call it "blood and thunder," and will see that I am on my way to the dogs.

Well, these people are my friends after all, and I shall not open a quarrel with them. For they themselves have tempted the public with stupid books and essays; and they failed in finding buyers. Therefore they have demonstrated for me that a stupid book doesn't pay; and I will not, even for my best friend, write anything but what the people will buy from me. I am not a Fellow of the R.S.C., and if I produced anything dreary I could not look for the solace of having that discerning association clap their hands while I read my manuscript.

As to my subject being blood and thunder, as some of the *litterateurs* will describe it, I have only to say that the author of *Hard Cash* wrote more than a dozen short stories laid upon lines similar to mine. A young man fighting for a

place in literature, and for bread and butter at the same time, need not blush at being censured for adopting a literary field in which Charles Reade spent so many years of his life.

By-and-by, when I drive a gilded chariot, and can afford to wait for books with quieter titles and more dramatic worth to bring me their slow earnings, I shall be presumptuous enough to set such a star before my ambition as the masters of English fiction followed.

E. C.

TORONTO, 1st August, 1886.

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OR,

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CHAPTER I.

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THE PRETTY ASTER AND MR. HAM.

It was the autumn of the year, and the dress of the Canadian woods at that season, forty years ago, differed little from the gaudy garbs of now. Near a small village not far from the town of Little York, I choose as the place for the opening of this true story.

The maple, of all the trees in the forest, was the only one so far frost-smitten and sun-struck. The harvests had been gathered, and the only tenants of the fields were flocks of pigeons that came to feed among the stubble; for many a ripe ear fell from the heads in the tying of the sheaves; many a shower of the golden grain had fallen as the load, drawn by slow oxen, lurched and swayed along the uneven ground.

Nestling in a grove of primeval pines that sentinelled the placid, shining waters of the Don stood a low, wide-eaved cottage. It was completely clad in ivy; and upon the eastern side there was a dull copper tinge through the matted masses of the Virginia creeper.

Many of the earlier flowers had faded; but the pinks and the poppies were still rich in blood; and the sunflower sturdily held up its yellow face like 'a wizened sorcerer of

old,' as a fair and gifted friend of my acquaintance puts it. The cottage and the grounds about it were the property of an English gentleman of taste and means. The nearest dwelling had an air of luxury, and round about it stretched wide areas of land from which the harvest of wheat and oats had been taken. Here and there in the distance a group of boys might be seen with their fishing rods in their hands; for at that day the Don stream was not foul by the drainage of fields, and shrunken from the downpour of the sun, and from the loss of its sheltering forest. Trout and often salmon-trout went into its quiet retreats in the face of the spring freshets; and many a congregation of foam bubbles did it hold upon its breast to screen the greedy, vigilant speckled trout.

In a little summer house through whose latticed sides the gadding vines were so interlocked and twined, as to remind you of the legend of Salmacis and Hermes' son, sat a girl. Her wide-brimmed hat rested upon the seat beside her, and round about it was a double girdle of ivy, as if twining there. Looking through the door of the dainty place you could not see the girl's face; for she had turned her head, and her chin was resting upon her slim, white hands, as she read from a book that lay upon her lap.

Her hair you could see, for it hung over her shoulders and down her white dress, like 'a gold flag over a sail.' For myself I usually prefer dark hair for women; but ah! who could have gainsaid the glory of those luxurious coils that hung over that sweet neck and draping the curving shoulders! Through the open doorway the sun streamed upon it; and the soft tangles gleamed like ruddy gold. Hence

you will see that the colour was not that insipid 'blonde' with which shallow girls may adorn their heads for the sum of ten cents.

But although her face could not be seen, anyone looking at the balance of the head, the statuesque neck, would have surmised that it was beautiful.

A tall, lithe, well-built young man, who had a few moments before entered the cottage, walked into the garden from the back door. His eye was one that the casual observer would describe as 'full of mischief;' but behind the sunny brightness was a pensive cast. He walked softly towards the arbour, and stood for several seconds looking at its beautiful occupant. Then, in moving his foot, the dry branch of a rose-bush snapped, and the girl turned her head.

'Ah, it is you, Roland—pardon me, Mr. Gray.'

'Yes; I have come here to eat your apples and your peaches; and to despoil the grove of their woodcock.'

'Papa said you were coming some time soon; but I did not know when.'

'Why, I met him this morning at the Don Mills, and told him he would have me during the afternoon and evening. I sent that message distinctly to you, Miss Aster.'

A faint shadow passed over her face; and it was plain that she was a little confused, as she stammered:

'Papa must have misunderstood you.'

'Perhaps, Miss Aster; but—well, I hope he did.' At this moment another person entered the garden. He did not come with the graceful motion, and the easy tread of Roland Gray; but moved wily a pompous stride, swinging his arms

almost at right angles with his body. His air you could only describe by the word 'howling'; and he was just the man to immediately catch the attention of a vulgar girl. His hair was as dark as a crow's; and it was as coarse as the bristles of a hog. He was short and rather stout of build; was somewhat 'horsey' in makeup; and had a face rather handsome. But that he was low-bred, there could not be the shadow of a doubt.

'I thought you had eluded me, Aster,' he said in the most familiar way; 'thought you had stolen away up the river with that book.'

'Oh, indeed. I have been reading here during the greater part of the afternoon. Mr. Gray, let me introduce to you Mr. Ham; Mr. Ham, Mr. Gray.' Roland bowed with much politeness; but Ham's stiff, pompous bend was an assertion of superiority.

'I have probably broken in upon your *tete-a-tete* with this young man, Aster; so I'll take a turn out and have a jaw with your guv'nor.' In a moment he was gone.

'This is your next door neighbour, I presume, Miss Aster?'

'Yes; he and papa are great friends. He consults papa upon nearly everything that he does upon his farm; and papa in turn consults him concerning our affairs.'

'I suspected as much. I presume that you and he are very intimate friends. I observe that he calls you "Aster."'

'I did not ask him to do so; and since he chooses to adopt this familiar fashion I cannot well rebuke him, papa and he are such friends.'

'Then do you permit *me* to call you Aster?'

'O indeed, I wish that you would do it; and all the time.' As she said this her eyes brightened.

'Thanks, Aster. I now feel that I am on equal footing with the rest. You are sure that you will not mind me Astering you before *him*? Doing it frequently?'

'Not a bit. I shall be pleased; I shall be *very much* pleased, because he seemed to take a pleasure in being familiar before you. And we are not such great friends after all.'

'You most not talk nonsense, Aster. It would never do to allow yonder well-tilled acres, that sumptuous dwelling, all those flocks of sheep, and herds of sleek cattle to pass into the hands of any other girl. Imagine pulling down the boundary line and joining the two farms into one! Imagine how your "guv'nor"—as this well-bred Mr. Ham styles him—would open his eyes if any other person should nave the temerity to ask for Miss Aster.'

'Then would you be really glad to see these two farms joined in one? To see me marry Mr. Ham?' Her tremulous eyes questioned his face eagerly. When she began her queries there was in them a flash of mocking mirth; but that had disappeared, and there was now only to be observed a grave, questioning expression there.

My reader is probably desirous of hearing something about Aster's face, notwithstanding the assumption that it was beautiful. As a rule we expect to find chestnut eyes with ruddy-golden hair; but this was not the fact in Aster's case. Her eyes were the colour which men like Theophile Gauthier attribute to Venus: they were not blue, neither were they brown; but they presented in the most fascinating *ensemble*

a grey which at night was a fathomless dusk, and by day that green which you perceive where the sea is a hundred fathoms deep. With the light upon her eye there was a glint of emerald, that witching glare which made Becky Sharpe irresistible. Now imagine an eyebrow, dark as the raven's quill, overarching such an eye, and contrasting itself with the burning gold of the hair, and a skin of Parian white and purity. Then contemplate a softness beside which the velvet upon the petal of a pansy would seem rigid; and this eye large and timorous, and fringed with long, dark lashes!

I do not like the work of cataloguing 'divine wares,' especially when my most elaborate estimate must present a picture crude and mathematical compared with the ideal.

This girl's nose was Roman in type; and was precisely like that which the engraver gives to Annette Marton. The nostrils were finely chiselled, betokening sensitiveness: and I may add that I have never known anybody with a thick nostril to be sensitive.

For a moment Roland's eyes were fixed wistfully upon the girl's, and he did not answer her question. But escape from the enquiring, unflinching stare was out of the question; so he said, mustering all the courage that he could:

'Well, to tell you the truth, Aster, I think you are twenty times too good for this fellow Ham; and therefore I should not like to see you marry him; to see the two farms become one.'

'Oh, I did not think that you considered me in any sense a superior girl; and I must feel highly flattered that you put a higher price upon that superiority than upon the splendid property adjoining my father's.' There was now the merest

glint of mischief in her glance; and she was evidently desirous that Mr. Gray should be more explicit in his objection to the match. 'Does Mr. Gray realize what a great compliment he has paid me, a poor rustic, an untutored country girl, with a little knowledge about the bees and clover, and some cunning as to the tricks of breachy cattle? Now wherefore should I *not* marry Mr. Ham? Do I know more about the English authors, or about the French ones than he does? Am I more gifted in mathematical insight; or do I know more about the history of kings and ancient wars? I can paint the merest bit; and my music is attuned for little else than the heavy heels of rustic swains and clumsy lasses. Now, Mr. Ham is more skilled in painting than I, and more learned in all things acquired from books: pray where, then, is the force of your objection to this joining of hands and farms upon intellectual grounds?'

'I think you miss my meaning, Aster. You cannot sum up the superiority of character by counting the items as you "take stock" in a tradesman's store. The highest and most captivating points in human character, especially in a woman's, often have such an evasive subtlety of outline that you can no more define them than you could the message which some blossom, blooming in a wild, far place, has for the human heart as you stoop over it to drink its perfume, and gloat upon its beauty. But you ask me to be definite: will you take offence, if, upon some points which present themselves to me, I become *quite* definite?'

'Not by any means, Mr. Gray. I am very anxious to hear everything that you have to say.'

'Well, Aster, I do not admire your friend, Mr. Ham. I think he is a coarse snob; and under an exterior of brusque frankness I believe he is deceitful and—cowardly. I should consider your union with such a person a monstrous sacrifice.'

'Would you have me wait until some man who reaches your ideal came and asked father for my hand? Or would you have me advertise in William Lyon Mackenzie's newspaper. Or, still another and final alternative, would you have me bloom in this sweet place all my days in celibacy?'

'I simply would not have you marry that person, Ham.'

'No other definite wish with respect to me?' Her head was bowed now, and her mischievous, upward glance was very fascinating.

'I have; but I should prefer for the present to keep it to myself.'

CHAPTER II.

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A GATHERING STORM.

'Oh! We had better go to dinner, then, had we not: I presume it is about ready.'

'Stay, will you not wear this at dinner?' stooping for a pansy that flourished among the late autumn blossoms.

'Keep if for remembrance when I am away.'

'Oh, but flowers fade; and I could only remember you for a couple of days.'

'Why not press it between the leaves of a book?'

'Oh, I will do that; and I will remember your lecture every time that I open the volume.'

'Thank you; but if you can't think a little bit about myself, I don't want you to bother about my lecture. You can feast yourself in contemplation of your loud and gorgeous friend, Mr. Ham.'

They had entered the house: and at the same moment Asters father and Mr. Ham came in. It was quite plain that these two men were confidential friends; for as they entered the room the host had his arm within that of his guest, and both were so engrossed in their subject—talking in a low tone—that they seemed for a time unconscious of the presence of Aster and Roland. When the host did raise his

head he simply gave a cold bow to Roland; and then bestowed a sharp glance upon his daughter. Nor was the rudeness of the host to end here. Turning his back upon Roland he said:

'Mr. Ham and I have been discussing the Marsh, and he thinks that I had better go on with the drainage.'

'It will bring in two years all the money expended in reclaiming it,' put in Mr. Ham. 'Don't you think so, Aster?'

'I don't know, Mr. Ham; I really know very little about such matters.' At this juncture Roland's temper was asserting itself under the slight by the rude parent; so he stepped in among the trio, and looking the girl in the face, said:

'You are quite right, Aster, not to bother your head about bogs and swamps. Let the men attend to all that.' The father was simply amazed; and drawing himself up to his full height he frowned upon the young man. He said nothing, however, and to break the embarrassing silence Aster chimed in:

'I suppose that the city girls of your acquaintance never meddle in such matters; but the truth is, papa always consults me about these things.'

'In the city,' retorted her father, stiffly, 'young women have other concerns; but a girl who is to become a farmer's wife should make the management of stock and the tillage of the soil serious subjects of study.'

'Most certainly,' replied Roland; 'if a girl *is* to become the wife of a husbandman the farm should be her great concern. But I was not aware that Aster had seriously contemplated taking such a step.'