

NIGHT HOUND'S MOON

by

Mary H. Schaub

He knew that something unimaginably horrid was going to happen after the moon set. The moon was only a waning sliver, scarcely bright enough to cast a shadow, but Kennard felt painfully certain that its silver light had to be banished before whatever evil brooded here would manifest itself. He and Jarrel—the potential victims—were clearly in no condition to run away. Kennard, who ordinarily had trouble breathing while lying down, was straining for each breath against the thongs cutting into his cloak and tunic. The outlaws who had initially captured them had not bound them so cruelly tight; but then, to the outlaws, their captive trio had been a salable commodity, not to be carelessly damaged without affecting their price.

Kennard concentrated on his breathing, a mental exercise that necessarily pushed aside most other external sensations. He ignored the chill, gritty stone surface of the platform where they had been placed. He tried to ignore the thongs trussing him up like a piece of meat for roasting—this was harder to do, but gradually he focused solely on the rhythm of his breathing. His heartbeat slowed, reducing the pulsating thumps in his ears as well as the fiery pain of overstressed rib muscles. As always at such times, he recalled Rubeth's irascible voice badgering him during his worst seizures. "Listen, boy! *Think* on what

you're doing. Count to yourself. Breathe as deeply as you can. The more excited you get, the worse you are, as you well know." She had been right, of course. Wise women, especially old experienced ones, tended to know about illnesses and how to treat them. Not for the first time, Kennard wished he had learned more from Rubeth. He should have listened with more attention to her endless discourses on plants and herbs, but he had been a small boy, easily distracted from what seemed to him to be dry, useless knowledge. . . .

He squirmed, unsuccessfully trying to stretch cramped muscles. The one herbal remedy he was familiar with and which would be eminently helpful now was lodged uncomfortably underneath his ribs where he couldn't possibly reach it. Rubeth had bartered with a trader for those oddly wedge-shaped leaves. The trader wasn't sure where they had come from, but he had been told that they could ease breathing difficulties. Rubeth had brewed a tiny sample for Kennard to try, and ever since, he had prized the diminishing remnant of the packet, to be chewed only when all else failed.

The rough paving stones abrading his cheek seemed to exude a moldy dampness that caught in Kennard's throat, setting him coughing. He tried to suppress the irritation. Coughing always made his wheezing worse, and if it was very prolonged, would leave his rib muscles aching. Rubeth herself had died of the coughing sickness three winters before. The remote valley in the Dales where she settled was too far from any trade route or travelers' trail to attract another wise woman unless one might wander there by chance. Kennard had been separated from his parents as a small child in one of the frequent violent skirmishes that afflicted the Dales in those days. Rubeth had always assured him that she would never have noticed him lying in the underbrush if he hadn't sneezed loudly when she passed by on one of her plant-gathering trips. She had brought him back to her cluttered hut and considered him

a professional challenge. "Not every person would know to make a brew of bronzeroot to halt sneezing," she had often remarked. He missed Rubeth's birdlike quickness, and thought now that her craftiness would be a valuable asset if only he could ask her what he should try to do in this situation. Jarrel's experienced advice would also be sound, he was sure, but the old soldier was turned away from him, and isolated too far to call to unless Kennard raised his voice. Somehow, the boy knew it would be wiser to keep silent. The longer he escaped attention here, the better.

The last few days, Kennard reflected bitterly, had been haunted by ill fortune. This current predicament was only the most immediate crown to the tally of woeful incidents. There had been two times, he thought, when his luck seemed to have turned for the better. His encountering Jarrel was one, but the first had been his finding the great hound by moonlight. He could see it in his mind as clearly as if it were just occurring.

Kennard had been wandering alone in this remote area of the Dales near the border of the ominous Waste. He hadn't truly known what he was looking for; he supposed that he was hoping to chance upon another wise woman like Rubeth who might allow him to accompany her in exchange for his unskilled help. He wasn't as strong as the boys of his general age that he'd seen in the few scattered villages Rubeth had visited. Rubeth had guessed that Kennard was about five years old when she found him, thus making him about twelve now. His breathing sickness rarely forced him to bed, but he had never gained much weight, and couldn't run or exert himself without bringing on the wheezing and viselike tightness in his chest. Although he hadn't realized it at the time, Kennard had learned many things from Rubeth. He had developed a good memory for trails and taking directions, and knew which irritating or poisonous plants to avoid. His hands were deft for fine work like sorting or weaving. He also had an inborn friendliness for animals, often helping Rubeth

mend a bird's broken wing or treat a small wild thing's injury.

He supposed it might have been that feeling for an animal in distress those few nights before that had spurred him out of a solid sleep to sit up, blinking in the cold moonlight. Kennard had wrapped himself in his cloak and carried his only weapon, a sturdy wooden staff that he had smoothed and shaped from a tree limb. He wasn't guided to the spot by any noise, but he had clambered down a steep slope as if he had known where he was going. A dim, pale shape had been moving at the foot of the incline, but the movements were cautious and strictly limited, as if there were a tether that pulled each motion up short. Kennard had approached with care, not wanting to find himself attacked by an injured but still lethal mountain cat. But it hadn't been a cat at all—it had been a dog, a huge dog, bigger than any Kennard had ever seen before. Kennard had spoken to it soothingly. "Don't be afraid. I want to help you. Let me see—were you caught in a rock fall?" He had eased closer and the great head had swung partly toward him. He had supposed it must be some breed of hound, but it had looked as large as a hill pony, with a short, thick coat and alert, pointed ears. In the moonlight, it had seemed all pale gray, even its eyes. To Kennard's surprise, it hadn't made a sound, not a whine or a growl as one might expect from a trapped beast. It had been securely trapped. Kennard had been able to see the cause of its distress as soon as he had come within reach of the animal. It had been wearing a collar of silvery metal woven almost like a plaited band, and a protruding tree root had snagged the collar presumably when the dog had slid into the gulley in a subsidence of loose gravel. Kennard had kept talking softly to the dog as he had gingerly inserted his fingers between the collar and the gnarled root. There had been no way to know how long the dog had been held there; it had sensibly chosen to lie quiet rather than thrash about and possibly strangle itself. With some effort, Ken-

nard had finally worried the collar free from the root. The dog had pulled away and shaken itself, but it hadn't bolted. Instead, it had stood still and let Kennard feel over it to make sure no bones had been broken. When the boy had turned at last and reluctantly started to climb back up to the forest track, he had been delighted to hear the dog scrambling after him. Kennard had never before had a companion animal; he couldn't believe that this creature fit to course beside a high noble's horse might deign to stay with him, if only for a brief time. It had seemed uncanny, though, that the creature made no expectably doggy noises. It had given a low grunt when it stretched out to sleep against Kennard's back. Kennard had felt as if he were being guarded by a fabulous beast out of a songsmith's tale.

The next morning, Kennard had discovered that his color sense had been misled in the moonlight. The dog's eyes were light blue, like the clear waters of a mountain lake. Its coat was dusky gray all over, with no sign of white hair on foot or belly. They had traveled all that day in agreeable silence, stopping only for a frugal midday meal from Kennard's supply bag. He had been thinking that perhaps the dog could help him hunt some small game to stretch his scant number of journey cakes when the dog's ears had pricked up.

The dog had turned toward the brush-choked mouth of a narrow valley branching off from the half overgrown trail they had been traveling. Kennard had followed the dog through a mass of clinging brambles, wondering what had so attracted its attention. Then he had also heard the confused sounds of a struggle—muffled blows, sharp cries, and calls by different voices. As they rounded a dense bush, the scene had been all too clear before them. Four or five ruffians were unmercifully assailing two travelers, one of them a white-haired old man, the other a soldier from his dress and long sword. Kennard had clutched his staff, not sure how he could help. The dog had not hesitated. It had plunged into the fray, bowling over two of the outlaws

before they realized what was upon them. The embattled soldier had taken advantage of the sudden respite to help the older man to his feet and stumble uphill to a more defensible position. As the dog had seized one outlaw's arm, the chief of the assailants had slammed it across the head with his thick club. Kennard had cried out and run toward the dog, unfortunately attracting similar attention. He had been struck a glancing blow to the head by one of the outlaws, and his next conscious sensation was being jolted across the back of a rough-haired mountain horse.

After dark, the raiding party had stopped and made camp, giving Kennard his first opportunity to speak to his fellow captives. The outlaws had simply tossed all three close together out of the way while they had built a fire and set about sorting through their victim's belongings. Tumbled close as they were, the captives had been given no chance of freeing one another. One of the outlaws had squatted near enough to prevent any efforts to escape. The first words had come from the older man, but they had made no sense to Kennard. The man he had thought was a soldier had tried to soothe his companion. "Lie easy, Brehm," he had said in a low voice.

Brehm had continued to babble something about metal, then he had abruptly fallen quiet.

The soldier had rolled his shoulders as far as he could in Kennard's direction. For an instant, a flare of light from the campfire had illuminated the soldier's face, with the weathered features of an experienced fighter. From Kennard's years with Rubeth, he also suspected that it was the face of a blind man. The soldier's next words confirmed Kennard's guess, for the two of them were lying in clear sight of one another.

"Stranger? Are you there? Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Kennard had said. "I'm awake."

"I thank you for coming to our aid. I am Jarrel, and this poor muddled fellow is Brehm, a prospector in these cursed border lands."

"My name is Kennard. I don't suppose you know what happened to the dog?"

Jarrel had shaken his head. "I heard no dog. Since the blow that cracked my helm at Morlan, I have been nearly blind. I can tell day from night, but that is all. You sound young, like a lad."

"I am, sir. I believe that I am twelve, or so said the wise woman who reared me. I am worried about the great dog that tried to rescue you. One of the outlaws struck his head with a club. I fell soon after, before I could reach him."

"A brave dog, then, to dare such odds," Jarrel had said. "We shall hope that he recovered from the blow. If he is a large beast, then likely he was but stunned."

"Do you think so?" Kennard's hopes had soared. He couldn't bear to think of the elegant creature lying dead in the trampled weeds. He had described how he had found the dog, and then Jarrel had explained that he had chanced upon Brehm at an inn farther down in the Dales. Brehm had wanted a swordsman to accompany him on a prospecting trip to the edges of the Waste seeking the rare remnants of metal sometimes buried in ancient ruins. Given Brehm's eccentric reputation, no sensible swordsman had been interested.

"When I said I'd go with him," Jarrel had recalled ruefully, "there was much merriment in the crowd. But we had some fortune in our searching, before Brehm became confused. I was trying to fix his attention on the trail when we were set upon by these thieves."

Jarrel had been interrupted at that point by raucous cries from the outlaws, who had just discovered Brehm's hoard of metal.

"Look here, Grund," one ruffian had said, flourishing the semimelted lumps as he transferred them to his own bag. "They be pleased at Darst to see these . . . but not that," he had added, shunning a small mass of silvery metal. He had hastily thrown a dirty rag over it to avoid touching it and had tossed it down a nearby ravine.

"Why throw away good metal?" a younger outlaw had asked.

Grund, the apparent chief of the band, had cuffed him. "Lackwit! Them at Darst want naught to do with moon stuff." In the firelight, his scar-seamed face had taken on an avaricious leer. "That be why our pay is in gold for all we bring as be useful to them."

Having ransacked the saddlebags on Brehm's horses, the outlaws had turned to their captives, prying into every purse and pocket. To Kennard's immeasurable relief, the man who pawed him missed the thin cloth packet containing his precious dried leaves. It had been during this search that Grund had announced it was senseless to trouble traveling any farther with the delirious Brehm. With one practiced swipe of his knife, he had cut the prospector's throat. "The Purple Robes will pay us no gold for a witless man. You, Foss—strip off his clothes. No need leaving them to waste."

Kennard had cried out at the murder, earning himself another dazing blow to the head. He had later recalled little of the rest of that night. The outlaws had broken camp fairly early in the morning, eager to reach the Purple Robes and their reward for delivering their captives.

At twilight the next day, they had arrived at an eerie space cluttered by randomly set standing stones. Very little vegetation seemed to dare intrude on the flat soil at the bases of the stones. Kennard had felt a chill unease caused by more than just the presence of so much cold rock. Grund had dismounted and had struck a blackened metal bell suspended in a niche in one roughly squared stone. With startling suddenness, a form swathed in purple had glided out from between two larger stones. Kennard hadn't liked the color of the robes—they were a sullen purple-red, like an old, unhealed wound.

In contrast to his usual bluster to his men, Grund's manner to the robed personage had been affected and obsequious. His eyes had kept shifting restlessly, as if he

wanted to conclude his business as speedily as possible. Kennard had been too far away to hear what Grund said, but the robed man had a high, whining voice that carried. "Only two?" he had complained. He had peered toward Kennard and Jarrel. "One blind and one a mere lad. We are not pleased." Grund had muttered some apology, and the other had grudgingly counted out several broad coins made of a dark red gold like none Kennard had ever seen before. Grund had seized the coins and harried his men into feverish activity. Kennard and Jarrel had been jerked from the horses and trussed more securely, then hauled by two grunting outlaws to a bare stone platform where the robed man fussed about their placement. The outlaws hadn't even taken time to lead Brehm's stolen horses by their reins, but had driven them along running loose in their midst. They had in fact withdrawn so hastily that Kennard had deduced they didn't want to observe what was going to happen next. That conclusion had not been at all reassuring.

More men shrouded in purple-red had emerged from among the standing stones edging the platform. They had woven in and out in a silent, intricate pattern for a time, then one had chanted some sounds that pierced Kennard's ears and set his already throbbing head aching anew. As quickly as they had materialized, the robed men were gone, leaving Kennard and Jarrel alone in the wan moonlight.

The boy was just succeeding in lowering his breathing rate back near normal when Jarrel ventured to speak. "Lad? Can you hear me? I dare not speak your name in such a place. It might give them power over you."

Kennard grasped the sense behind the other's reticence. "I'm here, sir, safe as may be."

Jarrel sighed. "I would that you had not come upon Brehm and me. This is indeed poor reward for your trying to aid travelers in distress."

"Never mind, sir," said Kennard, anxious to encourage

his fellow prisoner. "It was the dog who led me to you."

"Whatever happens to us," Jarrel said loudly enough for any hidden listeners to hear, "hold fast to those beliefs you cherish. Remember what your wise woman must have said to you about things of the Light, for I feel in my bones that this place has naught to do with the Light. The firmer we can fix our thoughts on those Powers that aid men, the more can we thwart what purposes are lurking here."

Kennard was engaged in trying to follow Jarrel's advice while still regulating his breathing when the scant illumination from the moon faded away. Pale starlight enabled him to make out the standing stones' bulky uprights as well as Jarrel's shadowy form lying dark against the gray paving. He realized that there was another darker shape beyond Jarrel, a slowly swelling pool of blackness that seemed to be spilling up from one corner of the platform. Using a trick that Rubeth had taught him, Kennard glanced to one side of what he was trying to see, achieving a better impression of it in the dimness. It was definitely getting larger, and as it grew, tendrils of dark vapor were peeling off from the initial mass.

Kennard called to warn Jarrel. "There's a misty stuff coming toward you, like a black fog. Oh, do try to roll away from it if you can! Roll toward me—I'm over this way."

Jarrel tried to twist himself and roll, but he was too tightly bound to do much more than rock back and forth. The vapor spilled around him, blotting him from Kennard's sight.

Kennard was also straining to move, and of course his convulsive activity was robbing him of air. He squeezed his eyes shut and desperately counted to himself as Rubeth had drummed into him. Abruptly, he felt a cold, damp touch on his cheek. He would have cried out if he'd had the breath. A sharp tug at his shoulder rolled him over enough so that he could see a silvery shape looming over him. Unbelievably, it was the dog.

"I thought you were dead," Kennard gasped.

The dog didn't pause for conversation. It worried briefly at the thongs binding Kennard, then seized the boy's cloak firmly in its teeth and started dragging Kennard toward a gap between the nearest standing stones. A wave of black vapor pulsed about them. The dog rumbled low in its throat, the first sound that Kennard had ever heard it make.

Kennard tried hard not to breathe, but had to. For an instant, he felt a sickening dizziness, a pressure inside his head, as if an oppressive force were clamoring to be admitted. The vapor's fetid odor immediately set Kennard sneezing, and as always happened, repeated sneezing set him wheezing. He couldn't spare any thought for repelling a mental assault; his sole priority was to breathe. He groped for his memory of Rubeth's brisk voice. "Shut out everything else, boy. All that matters is your breathing." He wasn't aware of the scrapes and bumps his body was enduring as he bounced across the uneven paving stones.

The air was suddenly cold but clean. Kennard opened his eyes. He had been pulled completely away from the platform, into a narrow ravine. The dog was its old silent self again, chewing quietly at the thongs until they were shredded. Kennard lay prone while feeling returned to his numbed limbs. As soon as he could use his hands, he pulled out his remnant of Rubeth's leaves and chewed a dried fragment. The pungent sourness made him wince, but his aching rib muscles immediately relaxed as his breathing slowed and deepened. To his surprise, the dog poked its nose inquiringly toward the packet. Catching the distinctive scent, it snorted and drew back.

Kennard tucked his packet back next to his chest and stretched his arm across the dog's back to help himself to his feet. "We must return and try to help Jarrel," he whispered, as if the dog could understand the words. Moving as quietly as possible, Kennard crept up the rubble-strewn ravine, keeping a sharp watch for any of the robed attendants. Soon he was easing around the rough

flank of one of the standing stones. To his relief, no one else was in sight except Jarrel's prone body, twitching slightly in a pool of receding vapor. Kennard hastily pulled a fold of his cloak across his nose and mouth and ran to crouch beside Jarrel. "I'm back," he whispered urgently. "The dog has come back, too—it must have tracked us. You must get up now so we can escape from here."

The dog had immediately set about gnawing at the soldier's bonds. Suddenly, Kennard's own pressing fear was realized. A robed attendant slipped out onto the platform to check on the condition of the helpless victims. Seeing Kennard free instead of stupefied or worse, he gave a shout and darted away to spread the alarm.

Jarrel, who seemed dazed, fumbled at his throat, murmuring, "Metal . . . medal." Kennard frantically hauled at his shoulders, trying to prop him up. With the dog's great bulk to lean against, Jarrel was swaying on his feet when a flare of red torchlight preceded their enemies' return.

There were five robed figures, but the aura of Power and the Dark that reeked from one tall, gaunt man proclaimed him the master; the others were mere underlings. Those with torches thrust them in sockets bored in the standing stones. Two attendants advanced toward Kennard, but the dog bared a daunting set of fangs at them and they faltered and stood still. In spite of the ruddy torchlight, the dog's collar gleamed pure silver, as did the smooth hair of its coat. When one attendant dared take another step forward, the dog bristled and threatened to charge at him.

"Moon monster!" screamed the attendant, whirling to retreat.

"Fool." The gaunt master gestured with a blunt black wand, and the hysterical attendant dropped, quivering, to the stone floor. Turning toward Kennard and Jarrel, the master gestured again. Kennard felt as if all the energy was being drained from his body, and was trembling, about to fall, when Jarrel finally extracted a metal amulet sus-

pended on a fine chain around his neck.

In a firm voice, Jarrel asserted, "By the Flame, by the Sword wielded in a just cause, by all that stands with the Light, we claim protection."

Strength surged back into Kennard. The master stepped back a pace, as if surprised. These were feeble victims supposed to be stripped of all will to resist. It was rather like finding a supposedly helpless mouse clamping sharp teeth in the predator's paw. The master frowned at such insolence. He moved his wand, leaving black-red strokes hanging in the air. As he began to chant a fell summons, he was abruptly interrupted.

To everyone's amazement—especially Kennard's—the dog threw up its head and howled. A great, roaring echo filled the open space, vibrating against the standing stones. The attendants fell to the pavement, screaming and clutching their ears. The master looked pained, but stood his ground, and pointed his wand at Jarrel.

Without knowing why, but suddenly certain of what he was doing, Kennard seized Jarrel's hand holding the amulet and turned the medal toward the master. Unbidden, words came to Kennard, and he shouted, "Beware the Moon's Hound!"

The amulet blazed silver, as did the dog's collar, dazzling the eyes. Kennard had to shade his from the brilliance. A searing beam from the amulet riveted the master, who shrieked, and, as Kennard gazed in astonishment, shrank and withered within his purple robes until all that remained on the paving was a heap of garments. One attendant scrambled to his feet and fled; the other three lay blasted like their master.

Jarrel stood frozen, clutching at his amulet, which had reverted to its ordinary appearance. "I found this many years ago," he said in a wondering voice. "It was half buried in sand at the base of an ancient guard post in the northern mountains. It must be a thing of Power, as is the

collar on that dog. I could see the light from the collar just now, and then the beam from my amulet, brighter than midday. Tell me what has fared, for I am surely at a loss."

Kennard described what he had seen, as best he could, his own voice shaken by his witnessing such forces wielded too near mortal flesh.

"My wits still seem half-curdled by that fog you tell me of," said Jarrel. "I thought that someone was trying to shout at me within my head—a most unpleasant sensation. By fortune, I recalled my amulet, and thinking on it steadied me until you and the good dog returned to rescue me. The dog is still with us?"

Kennard glanced around, suddenly aware that the dog had slipped away, but even as he peered about for a flash of silvered fur, the dog returned, shepherding a riderless pack horse which Jarrel said he recognized at once by touch to be one of Brehm's animals. "Let us leave this place," Jarrel added. "Although its servants are dead or fleeing, I do not like the smell of it."

Because he was somewhat unsteady, Jarrel at last agreed to ride on the horse while Kennard and the dog paced alongside. By the time the sun rose, they were entering a quiet valley that felt far removed from the blighted lair of the Purple Robes. Kennard divided a slightly stale journey cake salvaged from one of Brehm's saddlebags. When they had eaten and drunk from a nearby stream, Jarrel stretched his hands out toward the dog, who sat up as if it knew it was the focus of attention.

"I thank you for your valiant help," Jarrel said to the dog, as gravely as he would have addressed a person. "We likely could not have stood against those servants of the Dark had it not been for you and my amulet." He pulled the metal pendant out into the sunlight. The dog cocked its head to one side, watching the glittering amulet. "Would you come with me as companion?" Jarrel asked the dog. "I feel a drawing toward you like none I've felt since my

sword brother died. I know not your name, but if it please you, I shall call you 'Silver.'"

The dog gave a vast, contented sigh, and snuggled up to Jarrel, nearly knocking him down.

"He must think you are his lost master," suggested Kennard.

"No, he would not mistake me so, but perhaps I may stand in the place of one he has lost, if only for a time."

The dog licked Jarrel's hand, then marched in a businesslike way to Kennard, tugging at his sleeve. The boy had to follow the persistent animal through a stand of ferns to the edge of the stream, where the dog freed Kennard and sat down, looking very pleased with itself. Kennard glanced all around, seeking some reason for the activity, and suddenly recognized a clump of shiny, wedge-shaped leaves. "My medicine!" he exclaimed. The dog wagged its tail, and loped back to Jarrel's side as if satisfied that it had rendered one good service in return for another.

Kennard gathered an ample supply of fresh leaves and packed them carefully between layers of cloth as he'd seen Rubeth do. Jarrel had rubbed down the horse, readying it for the trail.

"Brehm told me there was an inhabited Dale to the west," Jarrel said. "If we continue on, we might find it. I must admit I feel at a disadvantage without my sword at my belt. As soon as I can, I should like to trade for a new blade. Brehm said he must watch for a distinctive peak with a great rock near its summit shaped like a snow cat's head."

"But . . . but," said Kennard, excited, "I can see such a rock from here, above those trees to the west."

"Lead on, then," said Jarrel. "No doubt we shall surprise some landholder when we arrive on his doorstep, for we are a strangely assorted trio." To Kennard's surprise, Jarrel suddenly laughed. "Do you realize, lad, that while we have been otherwise occupied, the year has turned. We

are no longer in the Year of the Raven; we are now in the Year of the Night Hound." He ran his hand lightly over Silver's graceful head. "And we have our very own hound companion fit to defend us against any perils of the night. It must be a sign of a change for the better in our fortunes."

Kennard gave a contented sigh of his own. He had finally found someone to travel with and belong to again. The road ahead shone brightly in the sun.

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Afterword

I have been keeping one mental foot in the Witch World ever since I read the first book in the series. When I was asked to contribute a story set there, it was both a joy and a special challenge. At the time my father was having serious surgery, so between waiting outside Intensive Care and worrying at home, I slipped off to the Witch World to try to construct a story.

For some reason, the idea of a great dog presented itself, along with a young man reared by a wise woman far up in the Dales. Medical matters being on my mind, I also thought my young man might be familiar with the asthma I knew as a child . . . and why not have him encounter some particularly nasty outlaws with links to even worse forces? The story shaped itself from there. I found my title the instant I saw the Year of the Night Hound in the Witch World calendar. I am thankful to say that my father's surgery was successful. I hope that my story may divert readers as pleasantly as it did me during a trying time.

—MARY H. SCHAUB