

THE RED DEBT

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

GOLIATH'S BRIDE

THE APOSTLE ON HELLSFORK

A GHOST'S VENGEANCE

THE REDEMPTION OF ZACK MCCOY

MR. HARTEM'S SPECULATION

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William Oberhardt del.

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“ . . . use me as best you can for a grandfather?”



THE RED DEBT

ECHOES
FROM
KENTUCKY

BY
Everett MacDonald

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM ORIGINAL DRAWINGS
OF
WILLIAM OBERHARDT



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The Red Debt

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WITH UNUTTERABLE LOVE I DEDICATE
THIS VOLUME TO

My Mother

THE AUTHOR

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I A Mighty Man	1
II Belle-Ann Benson	12
III The Traitor	20
IV An Ultimatum	32
V Orlick's money Spurned	44
VI Upon the Altar	55
VII Dedicated with his Blood	66
VIII "Lessen he kills the Revenuer"	73
IX Orlick works Evil	83
X In Prison	93
XI A Friend in Need	106
XII The Stigma	115
XIII Rubric Drops	124
XIV "The onlyest Lutts"	132
XV Buddy forces an Issue	139
XVI The Murder Partners	151
XVII Circuit Court	160
XVIII The Graveyard Massacre	168
XIX Hatfield overtakes the Traitor	176
XX In the Hands of the Enemy	184
XXI "Draw—now—Coward!"	191
XXII The Mission School	198
XXIII Belle-Ann visits Lexington	206
XXIV The Guest of a Grandee	213
XXV Know Ye the Truth	224
XXVI Belle-Ann has a Vision	230

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXVII	A Grandfather	236
XXVIII	A Confession	241
XXIX	The Red Debt	247
XXX	The Shooting of Peter Burton	254
XXXI	In which Slab prophesies	260
XXXII	The Near Assassin	266
XXXIII	Belle-Ann comes back	272
XXXIV	The Reunion	277
XXXV	The Downfall of Sap McGill	282
XXXVI	Belle-Ann's Recanted Creed	288
XXXVII	The Ghost-Man	296
XXXVIII	The Haunted Church	305
XXXIX	The Flight	314
XL	His Rock of Ages	321
XLI	In which Providence takes a Hand	329

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	TO FACE PAGE
“. . . use me as best you can for a grandfather?” (See page 243) <i>Frontispiece</i>	
“Yo’ know where <i>they</i> be”	51
“He kilt my maw—he ded—an’ he kilt my pap” . . .	97
“Who air th’ head o’ th’ people—who air Cap’in heah in Moon?”	144
“Hit air God’s buryin’ now”	330

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THE RED DEBT

CHAPTER I

A MIGHTY MAN

NO imagery can adequately picture the profound grandeur and wide wild beauty of these Kentucky highlands. At the age when its purity was whitest, a great moon hung midway between Southpaw peak and Moon mountain. Its divine splendor, unalloyed with any tinge of partisanship, laved with a mystic luster these two primeval ranges that had scowled impenitently at each other, behind their mask of flowers and tinselled verdure, across the lethal gulch separating them, for fifty blood-touched, feudal years.

This wondrous effulgence purged every exposed crevice, naked rock and open cove with its chastity. On the ground underneath the patch-quilt of virgin petals and emerald leafage, it peopled a theatre of animated pictures. And the coppice pooled the shadows, creating a hippodrome of transitory caricatures, fanciful, grotesque and fearful. Each sullen moss-hooded boulder flung its distorted, exaggerated image down and fixed a creeping mummy hard by.

Still another white beacon leaned over the hills where, like a stellar flambeau, the lead-star trembled

and sputtered, kindled just on the apex of Henhawk's knob. The chasm that furrowed between and, topographically, held these two warring communities apart, sunk its rock-lined bed sheer two hundred feet below. Through this sinuous adamantine artery the head waters of Hellsfork dashed in rampant flight, beating themselves into a madness against a troupe of gigantic, orange-tintured boulders polished glassy by the torrents Nature had unloosed at the beginning of time.

The onrushing wavelets leaped like furious creatures at these menacing things which evermore preyed upon their foaming, impotent wrath; shaping crystal goblets that bubbled over and burst, and flung showers of magical frothy flowers aloft. From across the silvery expanse of spectral mist that overhung the mountains, near and afar, a hundred voices of the wilderness night were calling.

That this barnacle of blood-lust should leech itself upon the fair face of a modern civilization; that in this nineteen hundred and twelve epoch of obeisant civism, hedged about with emollient Christian culture—such a vast stratum of malignant strife should coil here, hidden amidst a congress of Nature's sublime artistry, is an irony at once awesome and hopelessly insoluble. Nevertheless, immured upon natural ramifications on the shoulder of Moon mountain, old Cap Lutts, a strategist and mountain despot of kingly renown, dominated as the head of an implacable dynasty that boded ill to inimical invaders; be it agents of the government or spies of the shaggy Southpaw clan where Sap McGill, who had stepped into his father's war shoes at the end of their last fatal encounter

with Cap Lutts, now marshalled his horde of bushwhackers, bent upon the speedy annihilation of the Lutts folk, kith and kin.

Supported on a platform-like plot projecting from the hip of Moon mountain, the domicile of old Lutts stood out in the moonlight, traced in silver brocade against a somber ribbon of scrub timber that girded the waist of the mountain.

From the Lutts abode the eye traveled for miles along the gorge to the right. To the left the chasm cut deeper into the hills, until it ended in the valley where Boon Creek and Hellsfork intersected; where the paw-paws and the ferns, the weeping willows and the familiar, unnamed flowers were luxuriant.

Straight ahead, traversing the dry bed of a blind gulch, a train of pigmy peaks, left dun and naked by a river dead a thousand years, rose up and bared their serried spurs like hound's teeth.

On the opposite side of Hellsfork, lifted the stupendous Southpaw range—the stronghold of the enemy—rearing its savage peaks higher and higher, piling upward and onward until they pierced the myriad stars; then tumbled downward into the russet realms of lilac mist.

Beyond the Lutts cabin and towering above it, a single monster boulder jutted outward from the perpendicular wall of granite and hung perilously over sheer space. This freakish rock, known as Eagle Crown, looked like a ragged punctuation pause in a folk-lore story; a relic tossed on high by some legendary, boastful giant.

The wonder was how Cap Lutts gained its forbid-

ding lofty platform, for surely there was no visible means of ascent. Howbeit, Eagle Crown had been the old man's retreat for sixty-odd years. This imperishable shelf of granite offered him sanctuary when travail and sorrow, that weighted his life, pressed hard upon him. There he had spent his moody hours since boyhood. There his father and his great-grandfather had gone to be alone. And there to-night, high up and alone, his majestic form was silhouetted plainly against the sky.

A mighty man, this Lutts. At seventy-six he stood six feet seven inches—straight as an arrow; a seasoned ball-bearing pyramid of big bones, mounted with iron-fibered muscles; and a drop of chilled steel for a fighting heart. In the premises of peace, this same heart swelled up to proportions of compassion and generosity that named him father of all the community north of Hellsfork—a man who never failed his people; one to whom they hurried with their woes when they needed material help, succor, sympathy and protection.

From this height, the old man fondly turned his eyes downward toward the clearing that now held his sacred treasure—a log church. There, high up toward heaven, in the profundity of his liveness, only God knew this somber, silent man's thoughts—this feud-hunted, law-hounded man whose soul brimmed with his own religion; whose being was wrapped about with that which he took for the right; whose heart spurned all that he thought wrong.

His so-called bandit-spirit was insulated with the convictions of his own peculiar faith. His every utter-

ance and deed were tempered with the tenets of a unique creed handed down by his mountain forefathers. In his heart there murmured a runic cadence, the language of which was only interpreted by the omnipotent, all-merciful Over-soul.

Why the menacing hand of an outer world was lifted against him was a problem he had long since despaired of solving. Fondly now he gazed down toward the spot where the new cedar clapboards of the meeting-house shimmered like a disk of true gold beneath the moon's whiteness; beckoning to him with an insistence that stirred his stoic heart to its depths.

A tender look softened the old man's opaque mask-like features, as fumbling in his shirt-pocket and bringing forth a worn tintype picture of a woman, swathed in buckskin, he held it to the moon's rays and for a full minute peered tenderly at the kindly pictured eyes and smiling lips. Then, clasping the tintype reverently between his two mighty hands, he leaned against the natural buttress at his back, and his great head, crowned with its hoary white mane, was bowed down.

"To-morry—to-morry," he whispered, and he knew that the picture smiled forgivingly and happily back to him.

With the proceeds of moonshine whiskey, backed by the brawn of heredity and a righteous purpose, old Cap Lutts had at last realized the dream of two lives—his own and that of his dead wife, Maw Lutts. Although grievously late, he had now moulded this double dream into a tangible reality; for now before him, in the center of the clearing at the frowsy, feudal base

of Moon mountain, and just where the rabid waters of Hellsfork leaped like live, wild things in their down-grade race across forty-odd rugged miles of Kentucky, this grizzled hill-man viewed in sober, pious exultation, the product of his log church, all but finished.

A church is an acquisition strangely alien to this mountain-piled country, where the strategy of family wars and illicit distilling is religiously pursued. Nevertheless, he and Maw Lutts had dreamed in unison for years and had longed for the culmination of this extravagant, divine purpose.

Formerly, it had appeared to him that the propitious hour in their furtive existence had not arrived, although daily he had clearly foreseen it in the rising sun of the morrow. Always with the firm intention to do, he had added postponement to delay, and another broken promise on the creased brow of Maw Lutts and another prayer in her sorrowing heart.

However, the belated church was finally upon the perilous premises. Then with the poignant achings that many desirable citizens had felt before him, the old man had gone to the orchard like a penitent truce-breaker, where on his knees in supplicant whispers he had unfolded his tardy atonement and laid it like a tarnished sceptre at the woman's mute, unseeing grave-side.

Since the majority of native adults were babies, the magic name of Cap Lutts was mouthed in every cabin on the border range. He held the novel status where popularity was abreast with notoriety. Long since the populace had heard of his intention to build a

church. Looking across the epitome of delay, they told themselves that this was the first pledge the old man had ever made, which he had not kept, so now the redeeming news of Cap Lutts' finished meeting-house and the day of dedication had penetrated the remotest habitants of the mountains. This intelligence had gone hither to friend and enemy, pious and wicked alike, with the same mysterious agency and puzzling rapidity that characterizes winged warnings of the oncoming revenuer.

Every man and woman in the district, big enough to pull a trigger, knew that he held a certain latent stock in this meeting-house. It came like an unknown heritage suddenly delivered. While some would, surreptitiously, have exchanged their interest for a mustard plaster, they knew that it was not negotiable. They lied aloud, but in their hearts they knew that sooner or later they would follow that magnetic spark Luttsward. They knew that they would either cross the hypnotic threshold of that sanctuary into the halo of sacred enlightenment, or halt without in the darkness of superstition and feudal malice and spend their ammunition to help crush it.

There was no intermediate platform. There was no neutral grand-stand wherein the indifferent could take refuge. The populace stood either for or against. Even the lethargic, voteless clay-eaters sat up and took notice like a nest of snakes in the sunshine. The relatives and friendly factions representing the prospective congregation, did homage to Cap Lutts and clamored to make the church a success. The enemy over in Southpaw had already advanced the prophecy that

they would take the meeting-house. But the flapping of feudal wings did not perturb this veteran hawk of the hills. His one apprehension was of the common enemy, the "revenuer."

There was now but one day between the new church and its dedication. In secret service circles, down in Frankfort, it had long been mooted that the pet aim of Peter H. Burton was to capture old Cap Lutts.

Burton had, during his service, previously captured many members of the Lutts faction. The commissioners were ready enough to bind them over, but trials never carried a conviction. Burton had even juggled cases, alternately, on venue writs, between the six Federal Courts in the Eastern District, but the Lutts blood invariably cropped up, stealthful and rich in sympathy, in the precincts of the petit jury room. Acquittal followed acquittal.

But now Burton, feeling himself close upon the heels of the King of Moonshiners, altered his procedure and, armed with a premature change of venue to Frankfort, he hunted Lutts with a renewed zeal, keen and pleasurable.

Indeed, the younger attachés of the office regarded Cap Lutts as an historic myth. In jest, knowing Burton's affinity for wildcat skins, they hinted that the Lutts in question was merely a wraith-pilot pointing toward new skins—a favorite platitude upon which to stage another hunting vacation. But to Chief Burton, the subject of this jest was far removed from joking premises; mainly for the adequate reason that he himself, like many of his predecessors, had eyed old

Cap Lutts more than once. His corporeal being had felt Lutts' lead.

Although the astute Burton had toiled a part of each season for eleven consecutive years on the border trail of this subtle law-breaker, Lutts had as yet never seen the county calaboose, or the barriers of a blue-grass jail. Burton had surprised him time and again, but inventory of these encounters always told the same trite story.—the moonshiner had simply melted into absence.

After the smoke of some of these sorties, Burton had either limped or loped away with hopes mounting over a trail of blood. But these red splotches never led to the man. This feud leader and distilling chieftain of the range still reigned and the stereotyped report to headquarters was simply dated and signed with open blanks, a form to apprise headquarters that the officer was still alive.

Under pressure the county authorities periodically sought old Lutts. The times when they did find him, they merely flirted mutually with the faction and subsided harmlessly.

With the completion of the meeting-house, Cap Lutts had attained his goal; nor had he suffered the neighboring denizens of the foothills to raise an axe, or donate a single clapboard toward the erection of this infantile sanctuary. It was an enshrined monument to Maw Lutts. It was a mural hanging against Moon mountain, the place of her birth and the scene of her death. It was her own cherished endowment to the rifle-toting, tobacco-swallowing, snuff-chewing community. It was Maw Lutts's and his individual, holy

triumph. All Cap Lutts expected of the people was, he told them:

“T’ cum when th’ ridin’ pahson rid up t’ ded’cate th’ gawspel-house; an’ tote thar sins t’ th’ altar, an’ donate ’em at th’ cross t’ be wyshed ’way with th’ blood uv Calv’ry—an’ keep on a comin’ thet they mought be clean an’ onspotted an’—Gawd an’ my gun’ll damn ary hill-billy what darst lift a han’ to hender.”

The church represented months of hard toil, interrupted only when Cap Lutts fled up to the rock-ribbed pockets of the mountain or down into some untrodden ravine to escape Burton, the revenuer. Even in such intervals, the old man had sallied out into the night like the crag-panther, when the moon had turned white; and climbed high, with rifle ready and the hollow-flanked hound at his heels, to visit the clearing and gloat in solitude beneath the trembling stars over the progress of his sacred enterprise.

The church itself stood on “squatted” soil. Crowned with rhododendrons and laurel blossoms, it reared its exotic head in defiant challenge to Satan, like a single star upon the horizon of feudal gloom.

The level space had cost Lutts nothing but labor. The logs had cost him nothing but work. With his own hands and crude appliances of the back forests he had split, shaped and trimmed eleven thousand cedar clapboards; but when it came to interior finish he was extravagant and fastidious.

The white-pine tongue-and-grooved boards that he used to make the platform and the altar, the window and door plates; and the wide, smooth planks turned into benches, all represented cash—and cash was a

rarity in the sterile Moon mountain district. And, too, the new gold-hued bell, which now nestled in its cotlike belfry, about to utter its virgin exhortation across those Godless hills, cost money.

Cap Lutts had paid this money ungrudgingly, for it was his own. Had he not, together with his son Lem, and Slab, the negro, and the two red steers, plowed the slanting plot that hung on the hip of the mountain and sown the grain, and tilled it, and reaped it, and carried it to the hidden still, where he had brewed it into money?

It was Lutts's own scant, hard-earned dollars that had bought the boards, the nails, and the bell.

True, it was not a regular church bell; but it was the largest farm bell he could procure and it had taken the steers five hot days to go to Flat Gap Junction and haul back the bell, and the nails, and the polished boards and glass.

CHAPTER II

BELLE-ANN BENSON

BENEATH Eagle Crown the four-room cabin reposed in a shelter of spruce-pine, hemlock and cedar. Its plot was covered with countless quaint flowers and its rock-hemmed path to the horse-block in front was lined with pink wild roses and forget-me-nots. Here the creeping ivy and honeysuckle ran wild.

Although the mound of Maw Lutts, in the scrub orchard behind the log barn, was green again for the third time, her beloved flowers had come back to earth each year with reassuring, tender messages for Belle-Ann Benson, who had adopted them and had nourished and tended and cherished them with a pathetic devotion.

Belle-Ann knew their language well. And when they died—more than at any other season—the kindly, smiling face of old Maw Lutts followed the girl all through the chilly fall days.

It was Belle-Ann who had folded Maw Lutts's two hands, one upon the other, back on that terrible day. It was Belle-Ann whom the men found after the battle, crouching in despair over the dear, still form lying in the yard, and crying out to God for Him to make the mute lips speak back to her.

Belle-Ann had never known her own mother, but she had found a mother in Maw Lutts. So it was Belle-Ann who fed the martins, and encouraged the wild birds, and the tame squirrels Maw Lutts had loved.

The Lutts family now consisted of the old man, two boys, the adopted girl and an old negro who had fled from Lexington when a boy, in the first days of the Rebellion, and who subsequently had found sanctuary at the Lutts abode. He had been permitted to remain because no form of persuasion could induce him to leave the premises, once fed, and had the distinction of being the only negro on Hellsfork.

Belle-Ann was a daughter by proxy, since her own mother had died in her babyhood and Maw Lutts had opened her heart and home to the child. Belle-Ann was now some months past sixteen and her unusual physical beauty was noted throughout the mountain community and wondered at by the few strangers who chanced to reach the isolated cabin on Moon mountain.

To-night the girl dropped a wooden bucket and gourd after watering the plants, and walked briskly over the carpet of shadows, stepped out under the radiant moon and stood gazing intently up to Eagle Crown, where she saw the magnified outlines of Cap Lutts against the sky.

Near by a huge witch-elm butt, sawed into three steps, shaped a horse-block. Upon the topmost step of the block she seated herself. Her brow puckered slightly and she waited with an expectant air. Even the pale moonlight revealed her marked loveliness.

Her form was tall for sixteen, with that subtle grace

wholly undefinable. Clinging about her head and mantling her shoulders, a mass of natural curls clustered in riotous abundance, shimmering like polished ebony in the moon's rays.

Her features were chiseled with a delicate, hellenic touch, and sweetly oval. Her thin nose was straight and short and small; and her red mouth told of unfathomable depths of emotion. Her wide, limpid eyes were like two blue patches of early June sky.

Her sleeves were short of her dimpled elbows, and her skirt reached scarce below her knees. Her graceful legs were bare, but her little feet were incased in neat, cowhide moccasins with the hair on, laced and thonged about her round ankles.

A great measure of the girl's physical beauty had been transmitted by her mother, who had been a gentle blue-grass woman, of noted beauty and lineage, and who had in a fit of pique, married the picturesque trapper of the Cumberlands and buried herself in her unloved husband's wilderness existence.

Many pathetic tales were told of the great-hearted Tom-John Benson's patient struggle to make his wife happy; but the most beautiful woman the mountain people had ever seen had pined away and had gone to an early end.

Belle-Ann's father now worked for a lumber company, down on the Big Sandy. It was only now that he had saved sufficient money to send Belle-Ann to the mission school at Proctor, and so fulfil his wife's last request.

Belle-Ann had heard the news only three hours ago. Jutt Orlick, returning from one of his mysterious,

periodical visits abroad, had stopped to say that her father had sent word that he would come for her the following week and take her to the school at Proctor. And Orlick, whom the girl distrusted, had not departed without the usual flattery she always half resented.

As Belle-Ann sat on the horse-block her little heart was prey to many emotions, and she was well-nigh reduced to tears.

Impatient to tell the tidings, she was waiting for the boys, who had been away since early morning, and for the old man to come down from his lofty station. From the cabin door a vague, lank shape came toward her through the shadows.

“Yo’, Slab!” she called.

“Heah me!” responded an old treble voice from the dappled path.

When Slab reached the horse-block, although he said nothing to the girl, he took a posture that indicated pointedly that he expected something of her; and she slipped from the horse-block and sat down on the big grapevine family bench a few feet distant.

Here a blind hound appeared and, feeling his way slowly and uncertainly, laid his old muzzle in the girl’s lap and raised his sightless eyes to where he knew her face must be.

Then Slab took Belle-Ann’s place on the witch-elm block and produced his beloved instrument—a cross between guitar and banjo, self-made of gut and a gourd. Just as he had done every fair night for years, he was ready to sing his favorite song.

He maintained vigorously that if he sat elsewhere

than on the horse-block the banjo fell bewitched and refused to answer its master's fingers.

Tentatively, he plucked the strings; then launched abruptly into the song he had rendered for years—a sad and stirring melody, telling the early love-story that had been his before the days of emancipation:

“You ask what makes this darky weep,
 Why he, like others, is not gay?
 What makes the tears roll down his cheek,
 From early morn till close of day?
 My story, darkies, you shall hear,
 For in my memory fresh it dwells,
 ’Twill cause you then to drop a tear
 On the grave of my sweet Kitty Wells.”

When the notes had died away Belle-Ann spoke up:
 “Slab, ef pap er th’ boys don’t cum short now, I’ll
 blow th’ horn, I reckon.”

“No—no, honey; doan yo’ blow dat horn. Yo’ let
 dat horn blow itse’f if it’s got t’ blow; but doan you
 blow it, honey. Yo’ jist let pap be—he’ll cum heah
 soon. ’Sides, ain’t Slab heah wif yo’, honey—ain’t
 Slab heah?”

The old negro picked the strings with a preface to
 the second verse of “Kitty Wells,” his condolence be-
 ing entirely lost on Belle-Ann.

As he gathered a solemn breath to begin, the dis-
 consolate girl, sitting on the vine-bench in the moon-
 light, raised a protesting hand and stopped him.

“Slab, ef I don’t blow th’ horn I jest got t’ cry.”

Slab settled the banjo jerkily between his long, thin
 legs and rolled indulgent eyes upon her.

"Now, looky heah, honey; yo' ain't gwine t' take on so, is you? Yo' oughter be tickled inter a kenption fit, yo' ought, 'stead of actin' up. Why, honey, jist give praise to de good Lord dat yo' at las' got de chanst! Yo'll cum back home powerful smart an' edicated, like my missus wus 'fore de war.

"An' when a li'le gal gits edication, she naturally gits purttier; an' if yo' gits purttier dan yo' is now—why, honey, yo'll shore cum back er angel! Now, doan be pesticatin'. Smile up, smile up! Gwine t' school ain't gwine t' kill nobody."

As Slab concluded these cheering words, he poised his banjo again and as his lips parted the girl stopped him with a gesture.

"Slab, air thes my heart heah—right heah?" she queried, pressing a hand upon her breast.

"Sho', honey!" Slab assured her testily, striving to disguise his own impatience. "Now, tell me why yo' ax dat—jist tell Slab what fer yo' ax sich er sorry question nowadays?"

"Slab, I 'low my heart 'll burst in two when I got t' go 'way!" she returned unsteadily, her black-fringed lids blinking bravely to keep back the mist that would creep across the violet of her eyes.

Slab gazed at her speechless, and heaved a hopeless sigh.

Tenderly, Belle-Ann lifted the blind hound's reluctant head from her lap, stepped nearer to the old negro, and held a profound, exacting finger close to his face.

"Slab, will yo' promise me somethin'? I kin trust yo'all, Slab, ef yo' promise ag'inst the witch. Will yo' promise Belle-Ann somethin', Slab?" urged the girl.

and her sweet bell-voice fell subdued and imploring.

Slab's mouth opened slowly and he hesitated. He would have died for Belle-Ann; but he was much opposed to dragging in the witch, because he feared to make his sacred witch a party to any contract that carried the slightest chance of rupture, and thereby hold him to eternal reprisal.

"Will yo' promise thes, Slab?" the girl urged solemnly.

"Air yo' sho' I kin do it, honey?" he probed, loose-lipped and with eyes that rolled wider.

"Sho' yo' kin!"

"Ez yo' say I kin do it, me promises," he assented dubiously.

"Cross yo' heart on th' witch-block!" she demanded.

He solemnized the pledge with a gnarled and bony hand, and the girl's eyes welled full and her throat pained.

"Slab, yo' must promise to be good to ol' Ben heah—feed em an' bed em reg'lar, but don't give em no cracklin's. An', Slab, yo' must promise to pick the flowers every Sabbath, jest like I alers do—yo' knows the ones well's I do—petic'lar th' for-get-me-nots over yon by th' grindstone. Yo' must pick 'em in th' mornin' early, Slab—every Sabbath—an' put 'em on Maw Lutts's grave. Will yo' fergit?"

A deep breath relieved Slab's tenseness as he agreed effusively.

"Lord, goodness! Yo' jist leave it t' Slab, honey! He do dat ebry single Sabbaf!"

"An', Slab, when hit gits cold an' th' leaves air gone an' th' flowers air all daid, yo' must pick th' geraniums

outer th' boxes inside an' put 'em on Maw's grave—
an' when hit gits powerful cold an' snows hard an' th'
snow gits piled up on Maw's grave—would yo' care—
would yo' go, Slab, an'—an'—an'—push hit off—
an'——”

Her petitions thickened, tumbled together in her aching throat, and refused to cross her trembling lips.

She turned away quickly. At the log bench she sank slowly down with her black head in her arm. The heavy curls clustered around her face and caressed her neck. She sobbed in soft, whimpering outbursts.

The blind hound thrust his nose questioningly into her lap, licking her free hand, and caught the tears from her young heart warm upon his gray face. He whined aloud and reached for her wet cheek.

The old negro fumbled at random and did not speak.

Turning, he looked upward to where Cap Lutts sat in the flood of moonlight on the palm of rock; as silent and motionless as the inanimate pillar of granite under him. Slab's eyes wandered down to the trail and he spoke hastily to the distressed girl.

“Honey, heah cum de boys!”

CHAPTER III

THE TRAITOR

BELLE-ANN jumped instantly to her feet, looked, brushed her eyes with her hand, and hastened to meet them, her curls bobbing and her bare legs and arms gleaming in the moon's luster.

Little Bud turned off toward the cabin, but Lem's tall figure came straight ahead.

"Lem," she cried excitedly, "I got t' go—dad sent word by Orlick. Dad's a comin' heah t' take me t' th' mission school. Air yo' sorry, Lem?"

Lem halted as if struck. Then, recovering from the surprise, he took her hand and they continued toward the witch-elm block. Slab had disappeared.

"Sho', I'm sorry, Belle-Ann," Lem answered. "Yo'-all don't 'low I'd be tickled t' lose yo', do yo'? But I 'low hit's fer th' best, an' yo' know Maw wanted hit, too," he ended, with a touch of sadness.

"Yes, Lem," she agreed, "thet's why I'll try t' be brave, 'cause Maw Lutts alers talked t' me 'bout my schoolin' same's she did 'bout th' church. Lem, I do wish Maw could jest see th' new church now thet pap's got hit finished! Hit looks jest like she said, Lem. I 'low she'd jest cry fer gladness, wouldn't she?"

Lem nodded absently and quickly put a question

that had been waiting from the instant he heard of Orlick's visit.

"What time ded Orlick cum?"

"He cum short past sundown," returned Belle-Ann as the two sat down on the bench.

"Ded he parley 'bout long?"

"Jest a short spell. I wouldn't talk t' em much."

Lem stood up. He was long and lank, but broad of shoulder for a boy of eighteen. He had a pleasing, intelligent countenance, with light, steadfast eyes that never looked askance. He removed his wide, soft hat and gazed up to Eagle Crown.

"Ded pap see Orlick?" he asked.

Belle-Ann shook her curls in the negative.

"Belle-Ann, ef yo' takes pertic'lar notice, every time Jutt Orlick cums t' Moon mountain somethin' alers happens—somethin' goes wrong. 'Peers like things starts back'ards."

"I 'low he air a hoodoo," observed Belle-Ann; "but he do look soldierfied, don't he, Lem?" she added, with a subtle regard for Orlick's military aspect and his bombastic airs.

Lem shot a jealous, reproachful look at the girl, turning sharply as she rose, and pointed down to a gap in the scrub timber, which was half lighted by the moon. They caught the fleeting shadow of a horseman mounting the trail to the cabin.

"Hit's Orlick!" Lem announced.

The sound of metallic hoof-strokes came rapid and distinct. When the rider had looped the spur they beheld the front of Orlick's horse coming head on up the moon-path, his hocks now in the air. As always,

Orlick had flank-spurred his mount on the last lap, and the animal plunged, panting, to the horse-block, and brought up stiff-legged, with red-rimmed nostrils and distended jaws, fighting a cruel Spanish bit.

Orlick rolled out of the Mexican saddle, laughed shortly, and drawled:

"Howdy, yo'-all?" and smirked as he always did. "I hain't seen yo'-all in a coon's age, Lem," he added cordially, though his evil eyes were upon the girl as he extended his hand in greeting.

Lem Lutts touched the outstretched hand briefly.

Belle-Ann stood aloof with a look of suspicious admiration on her lovely countenance.

"I hain't seen yo'-all 'bout much nuther," answered Lem, with a contemptuous scrutiny of Orlick's brave trappings. Orlick chuckled.

"Yes—I'm gittin' over th' country a little nowadays. But, say, Lem, I cum up to tell ye thar's a stranger down at th' cypress cut what wants to come up. He's down yonder now a waitin'. He's got some business with the cap'n."

Belle-Ann shrank away, shuddering.

"I rec'on hit's Burton, th' ghost-man," she muttered under her breath.

Always since that memorable day when she had knelt beside Maw Lutts' dead body in the yard did the coming of a stranger thrill her with a great fear—a fear that stirred the venom that already tenanted her heart; a vivific thing, spawned at the killing of Maw Lutts. Time had never healed this wound. Time had only nurtured its corrosive, growing poison. Time that

came to others of mankind to succor and heal, had never assuaged Belle-Ann's heart-hurt.

Struggle as she would to forget, she only remembered that she had struggled, and the aching grew on. It was a silent, self-contained suffering,—a hatred for the law that sneaked into their home and dealt death. This supernatural hulk, Burton, embodied the law. Burton, this lupine, leering lover of blood—this killer of women.

When Orlick announced that a stranger had business with the old man, the revenuer's ugly visage popped before the girl more vividly than ever. That grim hated shadow of prey darted upon her tensioned senses and made her shiver, sending a-scatter and a-scurry all the innate righteous instincts whose home had been her heart; leaving in its void a well of hate that congealed and turned into a live thing, that squirmed, burrowed, and crawled to and fro in her soul; armed with a hundred claws to goad and agonize and spread a misery through her young life. All this warped the girl's spiritual being and imperiled the beauty of her countenance, for at times it mingled the lettering of its presence with the charms of her face.

Without a word, but with a significant look at Belle-Ann, Lem took the cow-horn suspended over his shoulder by a rawhide, pointed it upward toward the lone figure on the cliff and gave a long, sonorous blast. Instantly the solitary figure on high moved and disappeared from view.

Belle-Ann drew apart, while the two men stood to-

gether, Orlick doing the talking, and watched for the old man to come out into the trail.

There came a slight sound behind and, like a shadow, old Cap Lutts stepped forth under the trees and confronted them, his polished rifle gleaming in the moonlight, and a big, spotted hound hugging his heels.

His straight, powerful form rose to giant proportions. His very presence pulsed keen discernment, subtle alertness, an agile, seemingly implacable strength and aggressive tenacity.

He listened in silence as Orlick told his mission and then said quietly:

“Lem, you an’ Orlick go down yonder an’ lead th’ party up heah ef he’s alone; if he ain’t yo’-all blow the horn. An’ yo’, Orlick,” the old man added, with eyes that bored into Orlick’s smirking face, “what air thes I heered about your trapesin’ around over yon in Southpaw?”

Orlick shifted his weight to the other foot.

“Yo’-all ain’t ’lowin’ to fix nothin’ on Jutt Orlick—on a Orlick, cap’n?” he cried huskily. “Where’s my pap an’ four brothers—where’s Hank an’ Bill an’ Tom Orlick, an’ Tod an’ old Elijah Lutts Orlick?”

“Shot to pieces heah on Hellsfork, fightin’ the reve-nuers an’ th’ McGills! I kin lead yo’ to their bones down yonder!” He pointed his trooper’s hat trembling in his outstretched hand.

“An’ whut air I heah fer t’-night? Yo’-all ain’t ’lowin’ to fix nothin’ on the onlyst Orlick left, cap’n?”

Throughout this fervent defense not for one instant

did the piercing, chill eyes of old Lutts leave the boy's face.

"Orlick," he began slowly, "I hain't studyin' 'bout the past. Hit's the time a comin'. I jest axed yo', have yo' been over in Southpaw?"

"Naw, I hain't!" declared Orlick, flushing slightly.

"Have yo' snooked with the revenuers below?"

"Not by er damn sight!"

"Leastways," observed the old man as he drew back, "I 'low yo're in bad company, son; but ef yo' ever cross Hellsfork er I know plumb sho' thet yo' snook with th' revenuers below, don't never 'low me t' git eyes on ye', Orlick.

"Don't force th' old man t' lift a hand ag'in' yo' pint-blank, git out o' th' mountings first. Now, yo' boys go an' fetch th' stranger party up. Ef hit's thet infernal ghost-dog revenuer, don't skeer em off—bring em up, quick! Ef hit's a sheriff, don't hurt his feelin's—bring em up, cose I'm lonesome like."

Orlick fully understood the import of Cap Lutts' parting words, and, casting a covert look toward the cabin where he knew Belle-Ann lingered in the shadows, he swaggered along after Lem, leading his horse. And the while a bold design shaped itself in his perfidious heart as he pretended loyal friendship to the silent boy trudging beside him.

A cloud of dark suspicion hung over the head of Jutt Orlick.

Things had happened in the mountains the past two years which subsequently pointed accusing fingers in his direction. Unless he was present no one ever knew just where Orlick was.

Two years since he had disappeared and come back after nine months, wearing soldier's garb, which he had affected ever since.

He told lurid tales of his conquests and adventures with the Mexican revolutionists. He elaborated on the gilded splendor and the beautiful things that the big cities held.

He recounted deeds of heroism abroad in which he was sole hero and he poured these fabulous tales into Belle-Ann's ears at every opportunity.

At the end of his periodical migrations he always returned with a new horse, and sums of money that astounded the humble mountaineers.

For more than two years, Orlick had been determined to possess himself of Belle-Ann Benson. But he resolved first to free himself of Lem Lutts.

He had noted of late the subtle little courtesies exchanged between Belle-Ann and Lem, and he knew that they had arrived at the realization that they were not brother and sister. Was it not reasonable to conclude that, in view of the girl's beauty, it was only a matter of time before Lem would take Belle-Ann for his own?

The mere thought stirred Orlick's hot blood to a fury, as with a scowl he fixed his eyes upon the figure leading the downward trail and he was seized with a mad impulse to shoot Lem in the back.

His hand crept downward. The cool contact of steel in his holster woke him to his folly and he trailed along, curbing his impatience, resolved to follow to the letter the plan he had worked out to get Belle-

Ann out of the mountains and away, or bring ruin down on the whole Lutts family.

When Lem Lutts returned to the cabin an hour later, with a large, tired man and a fagged-out horse, Orlick was not with them.

Old Lutts was pacing to and fro in the moonlight. He was occupied mainly with thoughts of his new church and the dedication on Sunday.

The stranger below was to him a matter of secondary concern. He had been a hunted man all his life. Therefore, there was neither novelty nor consternation in the reflection.

The old man stalked up to the horse-block and greeted the stranger.

"Howdy? Sort o' warmish t'-night. Whut mought be yo'-all's business seein' me?"

"This is Mr. Lutts, I take it?" ventured the newcomer.

"Thes air ol' Cap Lutts, o' Moon mountain," corrected the old man in a precise tone.

"Yes, certainly," continued the man hastily. "Well, captain, I'm a deputy sheriff. I was despatched to see you and deliver a message from the sheriff."

Here he revealed his shield, then unbuckled his belt, containing a pair of pistols, and hung them over the saddle-tree.

"And, captain," he pursued wearily but genially, "I'm dog tired. I've been five hours coming up the last five miles. Can I talk with you a bit, captain?"

The old man, who had listened intently, spoke up now, and there was a touch of sarcasm in his drawl.

"Yo' air a new deputy, I 'low—hain't yo', sheriff?"

"You are right. I was appointed two weeks ago, and I'll get even with somebody for sending me on this Godless trail—I smell some spite somewhere."

"Wal, set down heah, sheriff, an' perceed," invited Lutts, with a generous gesture toward the bench.

"I can state my position and my errand, captain, in very few words," began the new deputy, who had plainly lost a measure of his official zeal along the almost impassable trail, and now appeared disgruntled.

"The sheriff, the district attorney, and the collector of this district have gotten together and have drafted an ultimatum and I was chosen to deliver it to you and get your answer. They propose to quash all the various indictments now against you for illicit distilling and for shootings alleged through warrants by some of the McGill faction.

"Both the Commonwealth, the civil and Federal authorities stand as a unit to clear the dockets of these charges, providing that you come down and sign an agreement to cease all further operations pertaining to feud wars and the illicit distilling of liquor and turn over all your present distilling property to the government. That's it in a nutshell. I just want your answer—yes or no, captain—and my work is done."

The sheriff looked up into the inscrutable face for answer. The old man smiled good-humoredly and tossed his long hair backward.

"I air all-fired sorry, sheriff," he responded calmly, "thet yo'-all hit heah so late. I want t' show yo' th' gawspel-house. I built hit all myself—every dang lick an' cut, sheriff; an' I air a givin' hit t' Kaintucky, pertic'lar these parts whar hit's needed bad like. Lem,

tote thes hoss back an' rub em an' fresh em an' fill em an' stir thet Slab roun'. Tell em t' step like a catamount an' hash up a hot snack fo' th' sheriff. Pull a yaller young pullet offen the south limb o' th' burnt cedar over yon. An', Lem-boy, yo'-all tell Belle-Ann t' jog thet Slab up a pinch. Sheriff, yo' hain't a goin' 'way from heah, leastways till mornin'.

"Ez I wus a sayin', sheriff, we-uns air bin a needin' a gawspel-house hyarbouts fo' a hundred yeers—now hit's arriv'. Thar's some powerful pesky folks hyarbouts, sheriff," with a deprecating gesture towards Southpaw.

"Th' McGills mought hev j'ined in ef they'd ac'ed right. Maw wus fo' peace—Maw Lutts wus—Maw alers hankered fo' peace. She air up yon in th' groun' now. Thet damn ghost-man, Burton, kilt her!"

Lutts turned his face quickly away and was silent. A huge hand slid coaxingly over the gleaming surface of the rifle-barrel between his legs.

"Sheriff, hit hain't thes rifle-gun's fault—hit hain't my eye ner my hand, I'll swear. Sheriff, I've hit thet damn ghost-revenuer ez many times ez yo' see rocks at yore feet thar. He air holler inside, sheriff.

"Yo' know outside shoots hain't a hurtin' nobuddy—hit's when th' bullets gits down in a buddy's in'ards an' gits tangled up with his insides thet counts. Thet revenuer hain't got no insides. He air holler, sheriff!"

The old man paused in silence, his auditor pondering the manner of man before him.

"Ez I wus a sayin', sheriff, th' McGills mought 'a' j'ined my gawspel-house ef they had ac'ed half right. One Sabbath mornin', 'fore I built th' gawspel-house,

I follered Maw Lutts down t' th' brink of Hellsfork, Maw a totin' a truce-flag.

"I hollers across t' ol' Sap McGill; an' I says, 'Sap McGill,' I says—'seein' thet we-all air even up now on th' killin', ef yo'-all lays down I lays down.' An' Maw Lutts up an' hollers across, too, an' says: 'Sap McGill, ef yo'-all lays down yo' kin jine th' gawspel-house pap 'lows t' built on Hellsfork, an' we-uns 'll all have our sins wyshed away an' stop a fightin'.'

"Sheriff, ol' Sap, he hollers back, quick like, an' onery ez a varmint, an' says: 'To hell with yore gawspel-house on Hellsfork! Hyars yo' answer.' An' he shot me twice 'fore I could believe he wus so low-down onery an' pesky as to do hit, an' Maw a holdin' up th' truce-flag! So I had t' kill em."

The old man's eyes swept the moonlit distance that embraced the church as he went on.

"I 'low we-uns 'll show yo' th' gawspel-house early in th' mornin', sheriff. Ef yo' don't 'low t' go I'll pick yo' up in my arms an' tote yo' down thar. Yo' got t' see hit. Thar hain't no purttier gawspel-house down Bluegrass."

Belle-Ann stood before them.

"I 'low yo'-all kin be comin' along now, pap, 'fore th' snack gits cold," she said shyly in her low, sweet drawl.

As the men rose the sheriff caught himself ogling. Following the gliding, moccasined feet, he noted the grace and loveliness of her lithe, round form. He assured himself that he had never beheld such artless, unusual, natural beauty in a girl.

And he pondered soberly upon a lineage of blue

blood manifest in her face, her form, her voice, and manner.

A restless murmur rippled through the cool cedars where the birds had gone to sleep. Cautiously a small shape with wizened face slid from out the mystic shadows, lugging a rifle twice his length. Even for his eleven years, Buddy Lutts was undersized.

His body was thin and small. His reasoning was little. But his heart was big with hate for that devil-thing, the law. He vanished as noiselessly and furtively as he had come. Little Bud had overheard every word the sheriff had uttered.

CHAPTER IV

AN ULTIMATUM

A VEIL of azure morning mist lingered at the apex of Henhawk's knob. A young eagle—aggressively bold in his youth—sallied forth into the mystic dawn, setting himself high on Eagle Crown rock, and surveyed the dim world with a challenge in his blinkless agate eye. The air was fragrant with the perfume of a thousand blossoms.

Splashes of crimson and gold dappled the east, and a great sun shot its lances of molten glory beyond the mountain-tops.

Before the sun showed half its russet disk the deputy sheriff sat his horse at the witch-elm block in front of the Lutts cabin, preparatory to departure.

The Lutts household, including Slab, was on hand with hospitable farewells—though little Bud hung back suspiciously.

At no time during the sheriff's stop had Cap Lutts uttered a word of reference to the business that had brought the officer to his door. Nor had the sheriff broached the subject again. With keen understanding and quick insight he waited patiently for the answer to his mission.

But now, as he sat his horse on the verge of de-

parture, he looked at old Lutts expectantly and with direct inquiry in his eyes. Lutts caught the import, and answered with small concern.

"Oh, yes! Yo' jest tell th' sheriff an' them revenuers down below thet ef they want th' ole man bad 'nough, t' cum up an' root em out."

The deputy knew this was final, and as the old moonshiner's great hand closed over his in parting the officer secretly hoped that the arm of the law would fall short of the Lutts domicile.

"Well, captain, I'm afraid they'll start something below—especially that man over from Frankfort—that Burton. He's awful determined, and he blames us some. Good-by!"

A short distance away the officer pulled up short and, turning in his saddle, beckoned to the old man.

The deputy leaned over and spoke in undertones, as though the rocks and trees had ears.

"Captain," he asked significantly, "is that fellow, Jutt Orlick, a friend of yours? Remember, I haven't said a word, captain; not a word!"

For a full minute the old man stood looking after the rider. Then a new light was added to his fixed suspicion of Jutt Orlick.

High noon of the following day found Orlick riding slowly, with loose rein, up the twisted trail toward the Lutts cabin. His horse was lathered and blown.

He had covered the rugged distance from the junction since dawn, where he had held all-night counsel with Peter Burton, the revenuer.

With astuteness and cunning Orlick had instigated

a conspiracy that would have done credit to a city-bred malefactor, and for which Burton praised him extravagantly and, incidentally, liquorously.

Burton had offered to secure Orlick an appointment as deputy marshal in the eighth district at Danville as recompense for his espionage and treason against his people. But even Orlick's audacious spirit cast the thought of this honor out of his mind decisively, and not without a shudder.

Providing the raid succeeded, upon the plea that Orlick feared the Luttses, Burton had pledged himself to keep Lem and old Captain Lutts in jail to the last technical hour. He further promised to frustrate any attempt at communication with the Lutts faction and intercept any messages that they might attempt to launch from the prison.

Burton confided to Orlick that his chief aim now was to capture and take the Luttses to Frankfort, out of the jurisdiction of the county, and isolate them from the subtle influences that had always favored them in the surrounding counties.

The revenuer admitted that he entertained grave doubts as to taking old Captain Lutts alive; but he hoped to capture Lem Lutts, at any rate, and break the boy's stoic spirit and coerce him into disclosing the whereabouts of the old still that had flooded Hellsfork with moonshine for two decades.

But Burton did not know Lem as Orlick knew him, and to Orlick the prospect of a long term of confinement for Lem Lutts was very pleasing. Notwithstanding, Orlick knew that Lem would get out of jail sub-

sequently, and that he—Orlick—might by then be a marked man.

Orlick was fully aware that when the suspicions already against him on Hellsfork had shaped themselves into convincing proofs of treason, his life would be worth nothing in Kentucky.

The Lutts faction would follow him even into the blue-grass precincts. They would dog him to the very threshold of the sheriff's office. His undoing would be swift and certain—and pitiless.

But all this was now a remote contingency in the face of his unbridled passion for Belle-Ann, and it was with a sense of bravado that he realized it was a mere matter of time before the calamity of exposure would overtake him.

But against the advent of this unerring nemesis, he banked on at least a few weeks, and probably a few months, during which, he told himself, he might win out and have Belle-Ann ensconced safely in some big city, far removed from the arm of the law and the limits of Kentucky.

After that he did not care.

He had cast the die, and had staked his life upon the outcome. If by any ill luck the outcome demanded his life, he stood ready to pay the toll. That Lem Lutts should never get Belle-Ann he had fully determined.

He regretted that Peter Burton had not killed Lem long ago, as he had always hoped.

He would have risked the chance and steered Burton up to the Lutts still, but he could not do so for the ample reason that he did not know where it was.

He had known, so long as he had remained a mountaineer in good standing; but old Captain Lutts had moved the still in the early stages of Orlick's mysterious sojourns, and the faction had not since volunteered to tell him its whereabouts, and he was loath to jeopardize his own skin in looking for it.

However, while Orlick was serving Burton, he had served himself doubly. The smooth, unruffled manner in which his plans were unfolding up to date filled him with high glee, and his spirits soared to the skies.

Wild and desolate as this wilderness country is, it is nevertheless almost impossible for an outsider to invade its precincts without his presence being mysteriously communicated to the denizens of the hills. Whenever an invasion is accomplished secretly it is invariably engineered by some traitor who knows every nook and cranny in the mountains.

But Orlick had determined to double-cross Burton and circumvent his plan, if Belle-Ann manifested any substantial symptom of requiting his suit for her hand or yielded to his persuasions.

To-day as Orlick halted in the shade of a poplar to rest his spent horse, he rolled a cigarette contemplatively with a half smile on his lips. If Belle-Ann favored him, he told himself that he would remove every seeming obstacle that promised to come between them. This was a compact ratified with himself when he rolled the cigarette and smiled; and if he could not win her, he would at least deprive her of Lem Lutts, through the medium of a quick, desperate coup, the details of which he had already confided to Burton.

As Orlick lit his cigarette, cast the match away, and hooked his right leg over the saddle-horn, he gave himself up to the favorite meditation upon which his fancy had fed for months. With a vain-glorious grunt he regarded his new trooper's outfit.

He was exuberantly conscious of the great roll of bank-notes bulging in his pocket. And, too, it was all easy money. He confessed this as he muttered above his breath:

"Dead easy—easier 'n easy!"

In truth, he had never imagined that one man could get hold of so much money so easily as he had done since his lucky affiliations with a certain one-eyed gentleman known as Red Herron, who engineered a nocturnal business in Louisville.

Money was a necessary adjunct, especially to a lover, and lent an atmosphere of reality to this lover's stock of artifices.

Moreover, Orlick nurtured a robust desire to see Belle-Ann's physical beauty adorned and enhanced with smart attire in emulation of the handsome girls that met his admiring eyes in the streets of Louisville. Orlick's fancy, furthermore, had the hardihood to picture his wedding tour, with Belle-Ann as his wife.

Their trip on a luxurious Pullman train to Omaha! Ah, how the people would stare at this lovely, stylish girl—his wife! And he had the money in his pocket at this moment, and knew where to get more.

So excited was he by this scintillating dream of requited love that, as if to hasten to its glorious reality, he threw his foot suddenly into the stirrup, rolled the

spur against the horse's ribs, and proceeded toward the Lutts abode, flushed with a mighty confidence.

Nearing the cabin, Orlick's brow grew black as he thought that Lem Lutts's possible presence at home might thwart his conquest.

A young hound, with a foreleg bandaged in splints, lay in the shade near the horse-block. The dog, emitting barks of alarm, sidled up on three legs and sniffed suspiciously.

The Lutts' dogs knew Orlick well enough, but they had always met him with growls of distrust, and had never become reconciled to his presence.

Orlick cast his eyes about, but he saw no signs of the family. He stripped the horse; and, picking up a cob, made shift to clean the animal's hind quarters, where the lather had congealed into hard, salty cakes, while his eyes were searching the premises for the object of his visit.

Leaving the horse to follow his own will, Orlick sat down on the bench and waited.

He remained there for a full half-hour, in compliance with ethics of the mountains, which prescribes that a caller shall wait at a distance, especially where there are womenfolk, until invited to advance.

When the dogs bark and the inmates fail to appear there is all the more reason why he should wait.

With the peculiar instinct a horse has for locating water, Orlick's animal had taken himself off at a brisk trot toward the log stable.

Missing his horse, Orlick looked about and caught a fleeting glimpse of him through the vista of trees, and, knowing that if he got to the water in his heated

condition he would founder, Orlick dashed away in pursuit.

Thus it happened that he came unexpectedly upon Belle-Ann, who stood at the horse-trough, urging Orlick's animal away from the water. Orlick stopped short, regarded her confusedly; then, removing his trooper's hat, executed a bow and smirked copiously.

His heart thumped wildly in that instant. Each time he saw Belle-Ann he vowed mentally that she was more beautiful than before. The sight of her invariably threw him into a state of nervous flurry, and drove from his mind the pretty things he had previously decided to say to her.

Small wonder then that he stood abashed before her. Never in all his travels had he seen her equal.

"Yo' wusn't jest a lookin' fo' me—eh—Belle-Ann?" he managed to say awkwardly. She scanned him deprecatingly.

"No—I jest wusn't," she agreed. "Th' boys hain't home, Orlick," she added pointedly, seating herself upon an inverted wagon-bed near by.

Orlick sauntered over and sat down, too, now regaining his poise.

"I didn't know I wus comin', either—till a short spell 'fore I started," he said tentatively.

Belle-Ann eyed the horse, now standing under a poplar, too tired to crop.

"Yo' must hev started frum th' ocean, didn't yo'?" she asked, with a gesture toward the animal.

"Aw—he's soft, Belle-Ann. I 'lowed I'd rest em up a bit—till th' boys cum," he ended lamely.

"Why don't yo'-all buy a mountain hoss? Thes

hoss wusn't cut out fo' thes country," observed Belle-Ann.

"Mabby hit's 'cause I hain't aimin' t' stay in thes country, Belle-Ann."

She shot a quick look at him. He met her eyes and noted a glint of suspicion in them, so he hurried to forestall any utterance in reference to his mysterious sojourns the past two years.

"Yo' see, I'm layin' off t' git married, Belle-Ann," he explained, watching her oval features narrowly; "an' when I do, I 'low t' settle down below, whar th' folks stan's t' give a honest man a chanst."

Belle-Ann turned wondering eyes upon him.

She had never before heard anything coming from Orlick but arrogant self-praise; hence she marveled at his meek voice and doleful aspect.

"Whut makes yo' look so sorry—air yo're gal so powerful ugly?" Try as she would, she could not restrain a sudden burst of mirth, and she laughed outright.

Now, if Belle-Ann's accents were soothing and captivating in speech, verily, her laugh rivaled the rippling sweetness of the lute. It trailed across Orlick's mood like a tonic and fired his face with a hot flush of anticipation.

"Ugly!" he ejaculated—"ugly—no, Belle-Ann. She air th' all-fired'st purttest gal in all Kentucky—an' she hain't fer away, either, I 'low!"

Saying this, he came perilously near to overrunning the ethics of the mountains and seizing her in his arms and smothering her with his kisses.

With an effort he restrained himself.

His vehement words had startled her. She scrutinized his countenance keenly. What she saw brought the hot blood to her cheeks and left no doubt in her mind as to the significance of his eulogy and his impassioned eyes.

His look was an insult. She rose and tossed the elf-curls back from her dimpled face. Orlick sat a moment speechless, his mouth open, and studied the graceful length of her back.

Now she faced him again and spoke, and her words carried a volume of reproach.

"Orlick," she began, "why do yo'-all cum t' see th' boys fo'—when you're a drinkin'?"

By way of denial he suddenly gave vent to a raucous guffaw and whipped his knee with his hat, which artifice he calculated would enhance his prestige off-hand. On the contrary, his strident laugh grated strangely upon the girl's mood.

"Drinkin'—drinkin'!" he cried out, amazed. "Why, Belle-Ann, I hain't teched a drap o' liquor fo' six months! An' what's a heap sight mo', Belle-Ann, I hain't never a goin' t'!"

Here he stood up and raised his hand high over his head. "An' I hope Gawd 'll paralyze me daid ef I ever touch th' stuff agin!" he declared with a profound, solemn flourish, calculated to emphasize a pledge.

A sudden look of pity grew in the girl's eyes as she studied his face, a look which Orlick mistook for interest.

"Yo' hain't a gittin' down on me like th' tuther fools, air yo', Belle-Ann?"

Belle-Ann smiled ambiguously, lifted her pretty

arched brows, and centered her azure eyes upon a red-head which at that instant was hammering a hole into a dead sycamore hard by. Orlick sighed.

"Yo' orten t' git down on a feller lessen he's done somethin' pesky," he resumed tentatively. "What hev I done more'n cum an' go peaceable—an' make more money than any of 'em? Yo' see, Belle-Ann, our people hain't got no use fer a feller whut's got spunk enough t' git out o' th' mountains an' make money. Hit's hard draggin' when a feller 's tryin' t' do right an' everybuddy ag'in em."

His words stopped. Belle-Ann gazed his way. Orlick looked like a martyr, the very picture of persecuted righteousness. The left corner of his mouth, usually tilted, descended in emulation of its mate.

His woebegone eyes followed the sky-line, and he appeared to be on the verge of an oral prayer.

Belle-Ann's tender, unsophisticated heart was momentarily swayed with compassion. She glanced covertly at his averted, forlorn face, and her frigidity thawed a trifle as she was cognizant of an element of truth in Orlick's claims.

She knew that a mountaineer was respected and eligible only while he stayed closely in the mountains.

Orlick sat rigid, immobile, with eyes afar and apparently utterly oblivious of Belle-Ann's presence at that moment. She walked back to the wagon-bed.

Her low, dulcet voice roused him out of his lethargy.

"Orlick," she said, "why don't yo'-all stop traipsin' round an' snookin' below—an' cum Sabbath an' jine pap's church? Don't yo'-all want t' be a Christian?"

If all the sins of Orlick's past had taken life and

come up out of the ground at his feet to confront him he would have been less shocked. He flushed guiltily.

He started perceptibly and squirmed in speechless discomfort. Belle-Ann's wide, clear eyes were upon him, and as he hesitated her lips parted to speak.

"Eh?" he gurgled.

"I say—don't yo'-all——"

As though not daring to hear that seductive voice repeat its query, he spoke up hastily.

"Why, sho', Belle-Ann!" he blurted in confusion. "O' course, I'd like t' be a Christian—an' I'll sho' be at th' ded'cation Sabbath. Belle-Ann, air yo' down on me 'cose I go below t' make money what I can't make th' likes of hyarbouts?"

Orlick suddenly produced the roll of bank-notes, and, shuffling them up, rained them down in one greenish, crisp pile of opulence upon the wagon-bed.

This unexpected spectacle staggered the girl's senses for the moment. She had never seen so much money in all her life before. Her eyes grew round with astonishment.

CHAPTER V

ORLICK'S MONEY SPURNED

OH, Orlick!" she breathed in amazement. Unconsciously she sat down on the wagon-bed, with the pile of money beside her; and thus, wholly enthralled, she muttered faint exclamations. Orlick's eyes glittered in their devouring scrutiny, fixed upon Belle-Ann's beauty.

"Oh, Orlick," she reiterated, "is thes all yore money? Where did yo' git all thes money, Orlick?"

For an instant he fumbled blindly for words; then found them at the end of his short, ingratiating laugh. He lied with a gusto that reddened his face.

"Git hit!" he echoed blatantly. "Why, Belle-Ann, I worked fo' hit! I'm trainin' hosses below, I git a hundred a month, Belle-Ann; an' I don't drink, an' I 'low t' save my money, I do, 'cose yo' know I 'low t' git married, Belle-Ann; an' hit takes a powerful sight o' money t' keep a wife like I'm aimin' t' do.

"I hain't aimin' t' keep my wife in these mountains. She'll dry up an' blow away 'fore a buddy kin git to her to bury her. I air a goin' t' buy a nice house in Louisville an' fill hit up with fancy fixin's, an', talk about fine, fancy clothes—well, mebbly my wife won't hev some fine things, 'cose I got th' money t' git 'em with, Belle-Ann!"

"Orlick," she said, "how much do yo' 'low is heah?"

So engrossed was she in lifting the bills one by one out of the tangled heap, examining both sides minutely, and laying them in one smooth stack, that she had heard little of Orlick's discourse, being vaguely conscious only that he was talking.

"Why, Belle-Ann," said he, "hit's fo' hundred dollars!"

He chuckled immoderately and pressed his cowlick down, which defiant tuft popped instantly back to its position of attention.

"Yes," he went on, noting every look that crossed her lovely face as she proceeded, deeply absorbed in handling this dazzling pile of wealth. "Yes—an' a hundred a month comin' 'long all th' time. Thet hain't powerful bad fo' a boy like me—air hit, Belle-Ann?"

Orlick rubbed his hands in the throes of self-exaltation and added a laugh that grated upon the girl's senses, inspiring her with a sudden impulse to end this conversation without delay.

"I reckon I'll be a goin'. Slab 'll cum soon from th' mill, an' I got some bakin' t' do."

She made as if to rise. With a swift stride Orlick stood close to her, defeating this move. The money lay in one even, smooth pyramid on the wagon-bed.

With one hand he snatched up the bills and laid them in Belle-Ann's lap.

She tossed her curls, lifted her face, and fixed an inquiring look upon him. Above her his face had changed to something evil. His features were shot

with a dull red from chin to brow. His lips were aquiver with the words that clamored in his throat.

"Belle-Ann, thet money 'is all yo'ren," he blurted out, "an' all I make's yo'ren, Belle-Ann; an' I want yo' t' run away with me an' marry me, eh? I want yo' t' go now!"

This effrontery brought her to her feet, and the money spilled out on the ground. He stepped quickly in front of her and held up a restraining hand, blocking her intent to move away.

"I bin a lovin' yo', Belle-Ann, I hev. I bin a lovin' yo'-all fo' mo' than two year gone. I'm a goin' t' keep on a lovin' yo', I air, an' I hain't 'lowin' t' let any man take yo' away from me. I make mo' money in a month than Lem makes in six, Belle-Ann. Yo'-all hain't got no business in these mountains noways.

"Yo' belong down below where th' worl' kin see yo'—down in Louisville, er Lexington, among th' fine folks where yo' maw wus born, an' all dressed up like I'm lovin' t' dress yo', with a diamond ring, an' a watch, an' a gold bracelet; an' a trap with a cob-hoss which has a hock fling t' em—an' a fine house full o' fixin's.

"Thet's the place yo'-all belongs by rights, an' thet's th' place I'm a goin' t' take yo'. I bin in all th' big towns below, an' in Mexico, an' I'll swear t' Gawd I hain't never seen a gal with yore purtiness! They hain't no gal a livin' with curls fixed aroun' a face like yo'ren! Gawd only made one pair o' blue eyes—yo' got 'em! Heah, Belle-Ann, I want yo' t' marry me, eh? Cap an' th' boys air gone, an' Slab's away. Let's hurry off now, eh, Belle-Ann?" he urged in breath-

less tremor, his eyes afire with the quest that trumpeted in his heart.

Throughout this impassioned discourse Belle-Ann had covertly maneuvered inch by inch toward the cabin. But Orlick had hedged in front, and they now stood scarce twenty feet from the wagon-bed.

His words stirred her to a resentment that at first suffused her neck and face with a flood of crimson indignation; a humiliation that ebbed slowly away before the chill of a fear that now crept into her countenance, leaving her sweet, bowed lips a trifle pallid.

"What ails yo', Belle-Ann—don't yo' 'low t' go?" he blurted out fiercely.

She pointed toward the wagon-bed. In his voice she had sensed a note that boded ill.

"Pick up yore money, Orlick; yo' mought need hit," she advised with calm dignity, while he stooped and gathered up the bills in a flurry of haste, stuffing them in a tangled mass into his pocket. When he turned about Belle-Ann was walking leisurely, but directly toward the cabin. He was at her side in a trice.

He kept pace with her, dinning into her ears an avalanche of torrid appeals, urging her to flee with him. To his onslaught of frantic words she maintained a stoic silence.

This apparent indifference seemed to enrage him beyond all self-restraint. At a point near the open door of the kitchen, he suddenly grasped her wrist and pulled her toward him. With a dexterous turn she put her back to him, twisting her arm so a cry

of pain rose to her throat, though she closed her teeth hard upon it.

He held on, and she felt the wheeze of his hot, fierce breath beating against her shoulder.

She could not alter her position without throwing herself face to face with him, so she leaned outward, and then slowly turned her head and their eyes met; and in that instant Orlick loosened his grip as though a hot bar had been laid across his two hands.

Sin had long been Orlick's adopted brother. Since early boyhood odious temptings and wild deeds had been his running-mates. When a soul has known naught but abasement and evil the sight of good is appalling. He stood away now, puzzled at first and strangely disturbed.

She still stood half smiling. It was a pitying smile. Orlick was dismayed and crestfallen, and in that minute he knew that he had jeopardized his last hope.

With a tenacious persistence, born to the breed of his kind, he ventured a lame apology. With his perfunctory laugh he suddenly stammered the fragments of words, confused and inarticulate.

"Sho'," he was muttering, "I wus jest a funnin', Belle-Ann. Yo' thought I wus a goin' t' kiss yo'. I warn't. Ha! ha! ha!—thet's one on yo'-all! Yo' thought I wus a meanin' thet. I wus jest a funnin', Belle-Ann," he ended in a faltering attempt at vindication.

"I air powerful sorry," she breathed in her soft tones, "I've hearn lots th' folks says, Orlick; but I wusn't a believin' thet yo'-all'd hurt a gurl thet-away."

Her mild reproach stirred him to a vehement de-

fense. He sprang forward. In two strides he was beside her.

With a hand that shook perceptibly he strove gently to touch her hand. But she deftly raised her hands and locked them safely behind her head; a posture which seemed to fix the crucifixion of his one last, fleeting hope.

"Good Gawd, Belle-Ann," he cried, "yo' hain't hurted! I wus only foolin'. I wouldn't darst kiss yo', Belle-Ann, lessen yo' let me. I'd die daid ten times 'fore I'd hurt yo'-all! Don't be mad, Belle-Ann," he pleaded guiltily.

"I air powerful sorry—sorrier than I kin say—thet I ever knowed a man's name whut'd hurt a gurl. I don't know what pap an' Lem 'll say."

The terrible look that flamed up into Orlick's face stopped her words. The mention of Lem's name had a galvanic effect upon him.

It seemed to rake across all the rampant, violent passions of his nature.

He was transformed instantly from a penitent subject to a dangerous animal-thing that knew naught but the power of its own brute strength. A scowl of jealous rage distorted his features. He stepped near to her.

"I want yo' t' marry me, Belle-Ann," he panted. "Air yo' a goin' t' run away an' marry me? Jest say yes or no."

The desperate, unbridled fury in his eyes sent a chill to her heart. Notwithstanding this, she preserved her outward calm and smiled back serenely upon his menacing grimace.

"Well—yo' better saddle up. See, yore hoss is at th' trough. I'll wait at th' block."

For a moment he stood nonplused. His shifting eyes lighted with the back tide of hope that had all but ebbed away.

"Yo're a meanun' t' go?" he cried out in a voice husky with new exultation.

"I said fo' you'-all t' saddle an' I'll meet yo' at th' block," she repeated.

He started away, then jerked about and looked searchingly into her face, the light of a sudden suspicion aglitter in his eyes.

"Yo're aimin' t' run in an' shet th' door on me, hain't yo'?"

Indignation was now in her eyes as she tossed her mass of curls and regarded him with a sense of outraged veracity.

"I said I'd wait fo' you'-all at th' witch-block," she said once more.

He turned quickly and hurried after his horse.

True to her word, Belle-Ann was waiting for Orlick at the horse-block. She sat serenely, watching his advance. At the ends of a rawhide thong a cow-horn dangled at her side, and there was no longer any fear in her heart.

When Orlick caught sight of the cow-horn he stopped as though a gun was leveled at him. A flash of fury swept his face. Then she raised the horn to her lips.

"Lord!" he ejaculated; "don't blow, Belle-Ann. They hain't no need—I'm a ridin' now."

His rage had instantly given place to a sudden meek-



William Oberhardt del.

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“Yo’ know where *they* be.”

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ness, and he came on, his twitching features the hue of chalk and the gloom of utter defeat in his eyes.

Belle-Ann slowly swung the horn to her side. She leaned against the horse-block and watched him saddle. Her look was neither triumphant nor scathing. Orlick did not glance at her, nor did he speak, being strenuously engaged with the horse which, having recovered its spirits, fought the bit determinedly. The saddle was double-cinched, and when Orlick tightened the flank girth the animal revolved, kicking in a circle like a buckler.

When he had leaped into the saddle Orlick wheeled about facing the girl, grinning, arrogant, and bombastic. The only sign of his thoughts was a peculiar glitter playing in the depths of his eyes.

"I'll say good-day t' yo'-all, Miss Benson," he said, with mockery in his tone and giving vent to a laugh, though it carried a threatening note.

"I 'low yo'-all'd be happier, Orlick," ventured Belle-Ann, "ef yo'd change a bit an' jine pap's church tues Sabbath a comin', an' settle down in th' mountains an' marry some gurl thet's better matched t' yo'-all."

His vibrant laugh cut into her words.

"Belle-Ann Benson," he cried, glowering down upon her placid face, with one arm pointing downward across the sunlit valley, "yo' know where *they* be. My pap an' my fo' brothers air asleep down yander under th' willers on Pigeon Creek. They died fo' the Luttses, they ded—shot t' pieces a fightin' fo' yo'-all!

"Who knows hit better 'n yo'? An' this day yo'-all run th' last Orlick offen yore place. Whut fer—'cause I'm a lovin' yo'? Whut fer air yo'-all so stuck up?"

'Cose yore beaut'f'l, an' 'cose yore mother wus a blue-grasser, an' 'cose yore a goin' below t' school?

"Yes, I reckon yo' an' Lem Lutts 'll be satisfied now—yo'-all run th' last Orlick offen yore place."

With a vicious jerk he turned the horse's head around and spurred the animal so cruelly that it reared and plunged away down the steep, rocky trail at a gallop that threatened disaster to both horse and rider. And above the jumbled clatter of the horse's shod hoofs the echoes of Orlick's wild, defeated laugh came back to Belle-Ann's ears.

She lingered a while at the horse-block, and pondered soberly upon the advisability of acquainting the old man and Lem with Orlick's visit. There could be only one consequence if she did this.

Presently she decided humanely to keep her own counsel, and, slipping to the ground, she walked slowly toward the cabin.

She walked slowly to allow the two unfortunate dogs tagging at her heels to keep pace with her. One was old Ben, the blind hound, the other a pup with a broken fore-leg which Belle-Ann had bolstered up with splints. As she approached the kitchen door, she beheld Slab standing in the yard, rigid, and looking at her with a beaming countenance. Slab, always an optimist, ever presented a hopeful face. But at this moment when she noted his presence with the tail of her eye, she glimpsed something so extraordinarily illuminating as straightway to pique her curiosity, and she stopped short and regarded him inquiringly. A prodigious grin now lured the corners of

his mouth beyond sight; inspiring the freakish suspicion that they met at the back of his head.

"Lan's sake'—what ails yo'—Slab?" she interrogated.

The sound of her voice seemed to fuse some combustible deposit of exultation cached within him. Instantly he began leaping up and down in a most frantic and alarming manner, yelling in loud outbursts, causing the girl mentally to question his sanity.

"I tol' ye so—I tol' ye so—I tol' ye so——"

"What ails yo'-all?"

"Halliluja'—halliluja'——" he answered, keeping time with a grotesque dance.

"Slab—have yo' gone plum offin' yore haid?"

Belle-Ann watched his antics curiously. Presently he ceased this puzzling exposition as abruptly as he had startled her, and advanced, smearing the sweat over his seamed face with one gnarled hand, and she noticed that he kept the other hand concealed behind his back. His unique plaudits having subsided, he stood before her. He screwed his head around and looked furtively about, his sable features now drawn into a visage of deep and profound solemnity. He spoke in low, mysterious accents.

"Lil'le gal," he began softly, "lil'le gal,—sompin' hev drap—some mammon hev drap—some mammon, lil'le gal—drap plunk inter de ole man's han's. I got sompin' heah ter show yo'-all,—sompin' whut makes dis ole man nigh bus' wif gratatudness an' praise fo' de good Lo'd,—no—no—now yo' jest wait, honey—Slab'll show yo'—I mos' bus' when dis mammon drap down ter de ole man—drap down ter Slab, lil'le gal,—jest like olen times when de good Lo'd drap mammon

down ter his starvin' chillens—de good Lo'd do sho' love dis ole niggah man, same ez he do good white folks. Belle-Ann—fo' seben nights Slab, he pray jes' ez hard—he pray de good Lo'd fo' wharwithal ter buy some flannel shirts wif. I done pray fo' seben nights, lil'le gal—den las' night, er big ole owl he sot on dat sycamore, an' he call me outen ma sleep—den I snuck down dar by dat wagon-bed, an' I wait, an' when Mr. Owl say 'hoo-ho' I say 'hoo-hoo' back—den when owl say 'hoo-ho' seben times, he goed away—Slab, he know zactly what dat mean—den I look rour' an' fine er lil'le bitty obeah-stone, an' lay it on de wagon-bed. Den dis morn'n' 'fore I goed ter de mill, I tuk er peek—but de obeah-stone war jes' zactly whar I lay him—den on ma way back jes' now, I tuk er nudder peek—obeah wus goed away. Den I look all roun' an' ma eyes see sompin' layin' clost up ter de wagon-bed—den ma han' reches down an' picks it up—an', lil'le gal, I mos' bus' wif happiness—whut yo' think I pluck, lil'le gal?—looky—looky—jes' look at dat bull, feedin' on dat green."

A triumphant, gloating grin broke over his face again, as he exhibited to the impatient girl a crisp, new five-dollar bill, with a buffalo engraved thereon.

As Belle-Ann took a bucket and gourd, and proceeded to water the flowers on the shady side of the house, a knowing smile lingered at the up-turned corners of her little red mouth. Again she was holding her own counsel.

CHAPTER VI

UPON THE ALTAR

THE following morning, being Saturday, Cap Lutts held a conclave in the cavern that concealed the illicit still. When the conference was over half a dozen men were scattered about the mountain to watch for the approach of the law, which now seemed likely.

Not until late in the day did Lutts and the boys reach the clearing and the gospel-house. By the time they had placed the last window casement and hung the church door nightfall was near at hand.

As the old man sat rigid on a log in the clearing, at an angle where he could view the church—front, side, and bell-crowned roof—he was filled with a profound, soul-satisfying joy.

Beside him sat Lem and little Bud; and the family of three regarded the church in silent admiration, for all was now ready for the great dedication tomorrow.

The sun had turned from yellow to a crimson glory as it made for a niche in the haze-shrouded peaks. The billows of emerald, capped with frothy banks of blossoms that tumbled down from the savage heights above, grew somber as the shadows reached out and wrapped their arms about Moon mountain.

Silhouetted across the clearing, the little church contributed a quaint design.

In the cool laurel thickets a hidden chorus arose. A redbird dipped through space from across the creek, and his florid wings shed a flash of blood as he forded a shaft of fleeting sunlight.

The long-drawn cry of a she-panther echoed up from the shaggy maw of the ravine, answered straightway by the quick, broken squall of her mate, betraying an early forage plot. With magic minstrelsy issuing from the thickets the wilderness evening drifted in.

With common impulse the two boys awoke from their reverie and looked up at their father.

The joy of a moment since had gone from his eyes. As he stared in blank pathos at the church a face rose up and blotted out the vision of the belfry—the smiling face of his dead wife.

“Ef Maw had lived t’ see thes, Lem!” deplored the old man in a faint voice.

“Yes, ef Maw had lived, pap!” echoed Lem.

“Ef Maw had lived!” repeated the small voice at the end of the log.

“Leastways, Maw’s better off ’n we-uns, boys,” consoled Cap Lutts, “’cause she air up thar whar they hain’t no sorry—ner pain—ner fightin’ an’ killin’—an’ I ’low as how Maw air a lookin’ down on hit all now—on th’ gawspel-house an’ on we-uns, boys. An’ say, boys, mebbly yo’ pore good Maw hain’t glad like—eh? Why, I kin jest see her now—I kin see Maw now jest as plain—a smilin’ an’ a smilin’—an’ whar——”

“Yes—so kin I,” interrupted Lem reflectively.

“I kin see Maw now,” supplemented little Bud.

Suddenly a look shot into the old man's eyes like the florid tongue of flame at the muzzle of a gun. Instantly it was communicated to the two brothers. If the volcanic fires reflected in the eyes of the men were terrible, the molten, satanic hatred that crossed the countenance of little Bud was appalling because of his tender years. Each knew of what the other was thinking. Each recalled that hillside fight when Big Pete Burton had again struggled to do his duty and a misdirected bullet had killed Maw Lutts.

The old man kicked viciously at a root, then pointed to the belfry.

"I kin see Maw jest this minnut," he resumed. "a smilin' an' a smilin' an' a walkin' 'mong th' folks an' a shakin' han's like she done down Sandy thet air time th' ridin' pahson stuck fo' two weeks. I kin jest heer her now a tellin' 'em as how Gawd an' we-uns walcums every pizen sinnah in thes end o' Kaintucky—an' as how th' spurrut o' Gawd 'll he'p we-uns an' stop all th' fightin' an' killin' an' cheatin' an' lyin' an' cussin' an' chawin' 'mong th' weemanfolk.

"Jes' wait till Sabbath day—an' thet's to-morry; jest wait till th' ridin' pahson cum t' ded'cate th' gawspel-house—I bets yo'll see a rousin', whoppin', boostin', prayin' 'vival—yo' sho' will, boys," promised the old man in the heat of growing anticipation as he wafted the rebellious hair backward with a jerk of his head.

"Aw—my soul!" ejaculated little Bud.

"An' I kin tell yo' a heap sight more, boys; I kin," promised the old man, rubbing his huge hands together gloatingly. "One day nigh yo'll see th' steers

a pullin' a real slappin' new organ machine into th' clearin'—yo'll see th' steers cum jest in 'twix' yon two spruces an' pull jest roun' thar, an' stop jest a frontin' th' do'r!"

At this moment the long, ominous blast of a cow-horn echoed across the ravine with startling import, and the utterance failed and died in the old man's throat.

Immediately the faint note of a bell reached their ears, followed by a second horn-call, strong and clear, farther up the gulch. The three rose to their feet simultaneously, and the old man felt instinctively about him for something that was not there. For the first time in his career his groping hands encountered neither stock nor steel. The rifle was absent!

A pallor overspread his face. With head reared like a bull elk he listened to the portentous sounds of mountain warfare that floated into his brain.

The pallor was not from fear. It was the mantle of chagrin—he had forgotten for the moment where he had rested the rifle. He stood befuddled, but alert.

His gun gone, he felt that a part of his big body had suddenly been dismembered. The thought that he had been such a fool seemed to lock his two feet to the ground.

Again the blare of the horn followed the notes of the bell.

"Sompin's sho' bust loose, boys!" growled the old man as the three listened through several tense seconds. In his extremity he wondered if he could coax the lost information out of the lad behind him.

"Han' hit heah, Lem! han' me hit!" Without turn-

ing his head he thrust both hands behind him, his working fingers begging for the gun.

The boy, as innocent of the whereabouts of the weapon as his father, only muttered and pointed toward the rim of the clearing. The next second came the crackling noise of dead brush, then the sound of a rush to the left.

The old man clenched his teeth as a horse mouths the bit, and his birdlike eyes snapped when he saw the disheveled figure of a girl burst through the wall of laurel that bordered the clearing. She halted for an instant, then dashed toward them.

"Hit's Belle-Ann!" cried the awe-stricken Bud.

The girl fairly leaped over the space that intervened. Her black curls streamed in the wind. She was wild-eyed and panting. Her bare legs were bleeding from brush scratches, and the tatters of her torn skirt were weighted with burs.

"He's cum! He's got through, he air! He's a cumin' now! Go! Go! Run, Lem! Run away!" she cried in a choking riot of fear, throwing her body against Lem and fairly pushing him before her.

"Whar's yo' gun, pap? Whar's yo' gun? Run, Lem! Fo' Gawd's sake, run away! He's follerin' right ahin' o' me—thah! thah! thah!" she screamed in her terror, pointing, heaving, gazing with charmed stare at the spot where she had emerged from the thicket.

Despairing, horrified at the stunned inactivity of the Lutts men, the frantic girl grabbed little Bud by one arm and half dragged, half carried him across the clearing. Together they disappeared into the undergrowth.

Then, rousing suddenly, stung to action, the old man remembered his gun and started for the church, while Lem fell prostrate and lay close behind the log on which they had been seated.

Old Lutts had no more than gained the threshold of the sanctuary when a giant figure, with heaving chest, sprang into the open behind the church and just to the right. It was Peter Burton, and the surprise was full and complete, for his rifle was leveled at the old man's blue shirt-front as he called:

"None of your damned nonsense now, Lutts! I've got you at last, and I want you alive! Stand where you are!"

His voice rang triumphantly as he hurried nearer, and he leered and cried:

"Maybe I'll take you down Blue Grass this time, eh? Well, I guess yes!"

Cap Lutts hesitated for just the fraction of a second.

In that fleeting time a horde of impossibilities raced through his brain. The downfall that had haunted him for years was at hand.

Fear of death was beyond his comprehension, but the sting of defeat was agonizing.

Then, glaring defiance and hatred, he whirled about and fled into the church, and there he leaped toward the altar. With a feline bound the big revenue detective was through the door and into the church after him.

And now the old man had gained the pulpit itself, and was reaching for the rifle he had left leaning against the wall.

Through the little church an ear-splitting crash rang out that fairly rocked the walls!

In the pulpit the war-scarred moonshiner drew gently, deliberately backward, leaving the rifle untouched. Straightening up with strange majesty, he turned half around, and the malevolence melted away and left his face empty of all hatred.

His eyes grew very soft, gazing upward at something beyond this world; his lips moved in soundless speech.

Then, abruptly, his legs crumpled beneath him. He sagged and swayed for an instant; there was a ghastly, ragged, spongy gap between his shoulders.

Then, with a crash, the mighty form sank to the altar, and lay there motionless upon its back, legs close together, the arms stretched straight outward from the body.

Burton mopped his wet features and eyed his awful work without emotion.

A little the hard-breathing man-hunter pondered. Then, having taken a fresh quid of tobacco, he leved upon his strength and lifted the body from the pulpit, and placed it upon a bench. He wiped the blood from his clothes and shoes and, rolling his handkerchief into a ball, tossed it away.

He stared at the pulpit for a time.

The red blood had crawled upward and touched the old man's hoary crown. It had traveled downward toward his heavy boots. It had followed the coat-sleeves of his two sprawling arms.

And now that the body had been taken away, the vermilion imprint of a ragged, dripping cross was

clearly etched upon the smooth pine of the unpainted altar.

When the crash of the gun had died away, Lem raised his head and peered over the log toward the church, expecting to see his father emerge. He waited several seconds. He wondered why the old man did not call. He yearned for his own gun now, inside the church.

Then he lay down behind the log again with a sober fear creeping upon him. Then he remembered whose son he was, and almost snickered aloud at his fears. The boy could not conceive any odds that his father, Cap Lutts, could not vanquish. His thoughts flew backward to the valorous achievements of his parent.

Now he crawled to the end of the log and peered again toward the church door. He told himself that the old man would come out of that door where he had gone in. He knew that the old man would come out of the church dragging the revenuer after him—hauling the thing as he had seen him haul a half-dead, struggling bear.

Lem lay on his stomach and waited.

Presently he spied a yellowish-white vapor trailing out of the church door into the lifeless air. Instinct told him that it was not his father's gun that had spoken. He started to his feet.

A terrible, sickening apprehension filtered into his numbed senses. Then, weaponless and forgetful of the prowess of the uncanny man-tiger within, the boy grabbed a huge wooden mallet near by and rushed inside.

As he ran toward the altar his fire-shot eyes swept the church for the old man. He saw only the towering hulk of the hated Burton standing erect, with hands in his trousers-pockets, calmly eyeing his approach.

When Lem reached the altar he halted short, dumb, fear-stricken, trembling. He stared at the bloody cross. He whirled around.

His eyes fell upon the still form on the bench, and he knew. With an inarticulate scream he fell one step backward and aimed a terrific, deadly blow at the unblinking, fishy eyes of the animal-headed thing before him.

Some minutes later Lem Lutts crouched upon a bench, hunched up, naked to the waist, broken, bleeding, panting, heaving, piteously weeping, his chin down till it touched his bare, lacerated breast.

Without, amidst the darkling shades of night, the she-panther crept from the gloomy haunting depths of the ravine, up to the very rim of the clearing. Up-reared, with her bowed fore-legs upon a scrub cedar stump, the big cat's spotted lips parted and she cried out a tremulous portentous wail across the dusk. Then came the sound of the pattering of padded jungle feet as she skulked back to her lair down in the bristling bowels of the shadow-peopled gulch.

The man of iron who stood scowling over the conquered, broken youth, felt a compelling loneliness picking upon his steely nerves.

"Come, Lutts! Let's hike out of here," ordered the detective as he pulled the stupefied boy to his feet.

He half dragged Lem to the door of the church, saying:

"I guess I'll take you down to Frankfort. Mebby when you're there a while you'll tell where that damn whisky shop is you've been running up here the last hundred years."

Near to the door in the dim light, a few scant feet to one side, the boy caught sight of a long, vertical streak of yellow rope crossing the dark background of the gloom. Then it was that, with a lightning-like quickness, Lem lunged sidewise and fastened his fingers like dog's teeth upon the length of hemp suspended from the belfry. With a growl of rage Burton sprung upon him.

He rained blow after blow down upon the boy's head and body, torrents of resounding smashes, awful, crushing, killing blows.

The terrific struggle, with the bell-rope for a prize, set the new bell ringing, and the reverberations carried for miles up and down Hellsfork. Its frantic utterances resounded across the hills like the screams of a woman.

In despair the revenuer ceased his beating, and his fingers, reeking with the boy's blood, found Lem's neck.

His terrible hands garroted Lem's throat flat and stopped his breath. With all his mighty strength, the revenuer choked him until the lad's face blackened and his tongue and eyes started.

Then, with a great heave upward, he shook his victim as a terrier shakes an old boot, and cast him away and stood panting in the dark and cursing breathlessly.

The damage was done. The revenuer knew that he could count himself lucky to get away alive now, far less drag a prisoner; even at that moment desperate men were hurrying to answer the call of that church-bell.

Burton fled into the night toward the spot where he knew that Jutt Orlick awaited him.

CHAPTER VII

DEDICATED WITH HIS BLOOD

OUT into that troublous, tempestuous night a hundred alarmed militant mountaineers rushed down through the jungle shadows, over a score of savage, rugged trails. Onward they hastened, down toward the startling night-cry of the bell which they knew emanated from the new church on Hellsfork. That choking, desperate bell-scream had raked across their senses like the cracking of a hundred rifles. To them its importunities had resolved into the sanguine roar of a fusillade. It had aroused in them an audacious, desperate quickness to kill. They rushed hither, prepared to sprinkle the white-clover with their blood, and die there in the churchyard, or vanquish whatever the menace might be.

They pictured an assault on the church by the McGills or the revenuers, and in their fancy saw old Cap Lutts, his great figure in the forefront, spouting soft-nosed bullets from his hot rifle! The ringing of the bell inspired those oncoming loyal mountain hearts with a red-eyed animal fierceness, and lent a lightness to their heavy feet that brought them to the church within the hour.

Men and boys, and indeed a few women, with weap-

ons of all sorts, descended on the church, wild and panting with the lust of conflict.

When Lem Lutts opened his dazed eyes the place was half filled with frenzied people. Belle-Ann knelt beside him, bathing his wounds and uttering in her soothing, low drawl, little phrases of encouragement and condolence.

Buddy's hard little visage protruded out of the lantern light like a ghostly mask done in white marble.

Lem finally got to his feet and staggered toward the altar. A dozen lanterns were scattered about the church. The shaggy band stood around gazing at their dead leader. Crazed with rage, they stood and wept, walked aimlessly and cursed, or knelt and prayed.

To a man they were for beating the mountains for the revenuers; but Lem held them back. He climbed upon the altar, and little Bud scrambled up beside him, hugging his father's rifle which he had hungrily recovered.

With the realization that Lem was now their leader, the Moon mountain men crowded up toward the pulpit, eager for his words.

Lem pointed one unsteady hand to the bloody cross at his feet, and the other to the dead form of his father stretched on the first bench. He raised his bruised, torn face upward; then, in a voice that was terrible in its calmness, he said the only prayer he knew, while the grief torn host fixed their eyes upon him and drank in every word:

"God Almoughty, plead thou my cose with them thet strive agin we-uns. Lay a han' on yore shiel' an' buckler an' stan' up t' he'p we-uns. Let 'em

be confound' an' put t' shame, fo' they hev privily laid thar net t' destroy me withouten a cose—even withouten a cose hev they made a pit fo' my soul. Let th' sudden destruction cum on our'n enemy on-awares, an' his net that he hev laid privily keech hisse'f, thet he mought fall int' his own mischief his ownse'f. Ahmen!"

And a great volume of vibrant amens rose from the hot hearts present.

Lem talked from the altar for an hour; exhorting the clan to stick together and cleave to the tenets of his dead father. All through the discourse little Bud kept close to his brother on the pulpit, steadying the long rifle with one caressing hand and not once did a word escape him; his eyes were glued to his brother's face.

Finally, Lem wound up his appeal with a stern adjuration. His calmness deserted him at the end, and his voice soared to a frenzied pitch that carried it through the open windows, far out into the brooding night.

"Yo'-all heer me? Yo'-all heer me?" he shouted in vibrant tones. "Not a bein' o' yo'-all darst lift a han' t' harm the revenuer—not a han', yo' heer? He air my houn'-dog t' kill.

"He belongs t' me, an' ef yo'-all ketch em, yore t' han' him t' me, ole Cap Lutts's boy whut stan's heah frontin' his pap's daid body, a callin' on yo'-all t' see jestus done! I'll bring th' skunk heah, my men, an' kiil em heah—heah whar he kilt my pap!"

His mouth fairly frothed as with both clenched fists he beat his breast. Bud beat his own thin chest

and wrenched his peaked face into a terrible grimace, but said never a word.

The watchers relapsed into dumb, stunned silence and waited with their dead—waited for the saddest of all days; a day crowned with a grievous memory that followed them through life.

No Sabbath born to the mountains had ever dawned as this one. The early morning was charged with a sepulchral mist, impinging upon the senses like sounds vocal, telling of some great sorrow hanging on the crest of the world.

The first chill light saw the gospel-house holding its dead to its breast—the venerable sire that begot it. The dawn-breath floated down from the blue-wooded ridges to the clearing and stooped to kiss the pallid belfry.

And all the blossoms bowed down their tremulous heads and shed their dew-tears amidst the chanting of spirit-voices. The tumultuous cry of the cascade, wont to rant in the ragged throat of Hellsfork, was now hushed to a repining monotone.

The first beam of sunlight, pallid as a candle ray, parted the vapor shroud enveloping the gospel-house, and a dolorous ring-dove mourning on the pinnacle of a dead sycamore tolled her triple-noted angelus across the clearing in measured, solemn accents.

Before the day had fairly broken, an exodus of humanity had begun, bound for Hellsfork. For weeks and months the day of dedication had been discussed throughout the mountains. Hour after hour the rock-strewn highways of the hills were traversed by travel-worn crusaders. This stream of human souls converged

at the church clearing, filling it up like the gradual rise of a tide.

They came on mule-back, on horse-back, in buckboards. They came singly and in twos and threes.

Bed-ridden cripples were borne hither by their loved ones, that the great preacher might lay hands upon their infirmities and implore the merciful God to alleviate their sufferings. The halt and the maimed were come to sue for absolution and to be made whole again.

One mis-shapen hunchback—a veritable Quasimodo—with stubby bowed legs, abnormal arms, and ape-like visage, carried his helpless offspring eighteen miles to this sanctuary; begging prayers to relieve the creature's torture.

Every man and boy of them was armed in some fashion, and by high noon the clearing was filled with a multitude of people, sorrow-torn, racked with abject grief.

Over in Southpaw the enemy gazed down from the heights upon this spectacle in amazement. As young Sap McGill stood on a crag and watched, his eyes met a sight unlike any which the ranges of Kentucky had ever witnessed.

His old arch enemy's strength in death was a force that appalled him. It was only now that he fully realized the peculiar far-reaching power wielded by old Cap Lutts throughout his lifetime. The dead monarch had always ruled his followers through strength and love. Fear had never been a dictator. He repelled his enemies through a will and courage

that never flinched, and elicited from them a meed of awesome respect.

The church was wofully inadequate and would not hold a twentieth of the mass. A great abundance of live laurel was cut and piled beneath a tree in the church clearing. And hundreds of eager hands hurried into the byways of the vale and returned with arms heaped with blossoms. These tender tributes were carefully placed on the couch of laurel until it rose to a great bier of fragrant petals.

Tender hands removed the old man's body from the church and laid him in this laurel-thatched casket of many-hued flowers.

Later, a great yellow mule paced out of the west, bearing a tall figure garbed in black, and the voices were hushed to a murmur and the church-bell began its tolling.

When the circuit rider reached the clearing the mass of awed humanity parted and opened an aisle leading to the mammoth bier, where smiling death reposed, cradled amidst billows of blossoms. The parson had been a lifelong friend of old Cap Lutts.

His towering figure moved on toward the bier and his clean-shaven features were drawn in a terrible sorrow. When his anguished eyes rested upon the still form, a great sob convulsed him; and like an echo the pent-up achings burst in a horde of throats; subdued, piteous weeping ebbed and rolled over the dead hero of the host.

Two benches had been carried from the church and placed near the dead man. One was for the parson; on the other sat Lem and Bud and Belle-Ann. Little

Bud crouched like a shrunken, lifeless thing. Belle-Ann's beautiful eyes were swollen and her heart wrung dry of tears.

Lem's eyes, too, were dry as bone; not a single tear had he shed. For hours he sat staring over the heads of the people, and on his bruised and swollen face was stamped a grief more soul-searing than words or tears could tell.

At eventide a cortège reaching from the church to the cabin bore the old man to the barren orchard, and there they laid him beside Maw Lutts. Old Cap Lutts, monarch of Moon mountain, had passed out of feudal history, and beyond Federal jurisdiction; his church on Hellsfork had been dedicated with his blood!

CHAPTER VIII

“LESSEN HE KILLS THE REVENUER”

TOM-JOHN BENSON did not come up to Moon mountain the following week, nor the next. But at the end of the third week he appeared to take Belle-Ann below to Beattyville and across the Kentucky River to the mission school at Proctor.

He came riding a strong, mountain horse and leading another for Belle-Ann. He unwrapped a huge bundle, and displayed an entire new outfit for the girl—two blue sailor dresses with white collars, shoes, hat, and kindred articles of apparel.

Belle-Ann dressed herself in these store things; and while Slab prepared a lunch for Benson, she walked out and down toward the spring, where she thought Lem was lingering. But Lem was not there, and she continued on to the old honey-bee tree, where he sat on a log in deep meditation.

He wished to see her alone. He knew she would find him.

He looked up with a smile when he saw her trim, round figure approach, beautiful even in the cheap clothes.

She tossed the black curls from her oval face, smiled back at him, and stood demurely waiting his approval of her apparel.

"Yo' sho' do look purty, Belle-Ann," he observed. "Air yore pap ready yet?"

"Yes. When he's done his snack, I 'low we-uns 'll be goin', Lem," she answered, with an assumed cheerfulness she was far from feeling.

Although her heart ached, she had determined before she came to meet Lem that she would not cry. She had been steeling herself for days for the ordeal of this parting. Down in the depth of her heart she held fast to one great purpose; and if she gave way to her feelings and cried, she knew that it would be shattered.

"I 'lowed yo'-all wanted t' say good-by, Lem," she said presently. He aroused himself and stood up before her, his eyes full of a meaning she had never seen there before.

"Naw, Belle-Ann, I hain't wantin' t' say good-by; but I 'low I hev t'. But thar air one thing I air wantin' yo' t' promise me, Belle-Ann," he said soberly as he reached down and took her small, tanned hand.

Belle-Ann's heart was throbbing wildly now. This was the crucial moment she had foreseen, and now was the time to summon all the forces at her command.

"Mebby I cayn't promise hit, Lem," she rejoined almost inaudibly, with violet eyes that wandered guiltily away from his face.

He stared at her. There was a timbre in her tone that startled him. He saw and felt instinctively that she had discerned what he held in his mind. The fact that she had divined correctly, and answered in this way, filled him with a sudden, sinking apprehension.

Her words shocked him into a stupor. He thought

that he knew her very soul as he knew his own soul. Had the years that had unfolded her young life before him, betrayed him and withheld deep things from his understanding? Things that would join in the pursuit with other searing grievances to sting and urge his being onward toward desperation? There was, in truth, a depth to this girl, whom he had known all her life, that his cursory penetration had failed utterly to fathom. When Lem's parents had been killed by the revenuer, then it was that an inexorable avowal had resolved itself in the soul of Belle-Ann. An inviolable thing, the evulsion of which could never obtain save at the shrine of death—the death of the hated Ghost-man. Lem had only a general and superficial conception of the intrinsic intensity of this thing that had taken hold of the girl. Little did he know of the doleful hours she had brooded away over this theme of vengeance. Long, brain-dulling hours during her waking time. Haunting, troublous hours during her dream-time. And always in the imaginings of her girl-heart she nurtured and built up an ideal, who would kill the revenuer. A hero who would hasten to her with the affiliating tribute, and lay the crimson laurels of the deed at her feet. She well knew that Lem thirsted for the life of this uncanny man, who had come and deprived him of his beloved mother and father. She knew that day and night as he traversed the hills he was ever waiting and watching for him. She was keen, and appreciatively sensible to this, and ever prayed that Lem would succeed. But all this was not the deed. Theoretically, it occupied the tenure of a debt. A promise that looked for no advancement

save payment. Until this thing was done they would both suffer. She told herself over and over again that she would never betray her true feelings to Lem until he had killed Burton, and appeased her vengeance. Love him as she thought she did, some vital element was poignantly amiss. However unwarranted, and fatuous, an indefinable barrier would stand between them until the culmination of the yearning that had made ugly crosses in her heart.

Never could she forget the past. As she stood now before Lem, with downcast eyes, the past rushed upon her more vividly than ever. That sun-smitten day, made dark and dreadful, when she had hovered over the still form of Maw Lutts in the yard. Maw Lutts, who from Belle-Ann's baby-days to the woman's last minute in the yard, had never uttered to the girl a cross word, or cast her an impatient look. Her parting smile was rooted in Belle-Ann's soul, climbing and wrapping its tendrils around her heart like an evergreen.

Even at this instant in her gloomy retrospection, she could put her finger on her own bosom, precisely where the bullet had struck. That reddish-purple spot that did not bleed. Very often the vision of that small, round death-sore multiplied and floated in one gesticulating mirage before her eyes. Often they consolidated into one compact darkish background, against which would develop the satanic, puffed visage of the revenuer who had done this thing. When old Cap Lutts' spirit went out by the same hand, the girl's soul had sickened to a distortion of mingled

fear and hate, which at times bade fair to drive her primitive mind bereft.

A devouring monitor of revenge had skulked into her life, following her better self relentlessly, as a panther stalks a spent beast. To her it was all like the happening of the past hour. Three weeks only had elapsed since she had witnessed the last withering stroke of this evil creature bent upon their destruction. Across her every mood the prickling echoes of that frantic bell-scream raked. It filled her ears when she strove to shut it out, and projected its curse into her slumbering hours.

She felt that unhallowed hour upon her—the moonlit night when the very trees shuddered as she and little Buddy, clinging to each other, had crept through the ghastly shadows back to the meeting-house after the mad bell’s appeal had died and the demon had gone.

Never, while reason held its throne, could she obliterate from her eyes what they two saw in the church that night. So it was that Belle-Ann had long since, secretly, reared a citadel within her, and down in a remote grotto therein, had locked away her love; isolated it from her impulses and fealty.

With valiant, tender delicacy, she always tried not to sully and overshadow Lem’s life with this that she knew was in her. She knew that Lem had a cross of his own to bear. Although she fancied, as humans are prone to do, that his burden did not parallel her own. But she would not contaminate the boy’s love with the presence of this red-rare oath sticking like a projectile in her being. This rubric, monastic avowal

of vengeance that now hung in her soul like a garnet etching. But always she prayed that God might direct Lem to avenge her, and thus tear down this phantom picture that overshadowed her life, and thereby redeem her peace.

Like animated photography, all this dashed through the girl's mind in a trice when Lem expressed a wish that she would promise him something. And with it her cryptic avowal centralized and surged up strong within her. Taking a firm hold on her will, she raised her eyes full upon his supplicant figure suing before her. Lem looked, and acted like a man who had been stunned by a blow. He was confronted with a new and unexpected phase of her nature. As his own gaze met her eyes, he discerned the indelible lettering of some palpable, deep purpose. What strange alien agency had laid hold of her? Was this the call of her blue-grass blood asserting itself in this, the hour of parting? The celerity of the transition, from his romping, hilarious play-fellow, to this serious, solemn, sudden incarnation, who denied him so unexpectedly, the pledge upon which he had staked his future, was a cyclonic blow that left his faculties bereft and numbed. Belle-Ann was looking fixedly at him. His lips were palsied. His mouth moved mutely to form words. Suddenly he found his voice and launched forth out of a daze.

"Why, Belle-Ann, yo' kin sho' promise me thes, cyan't yo' now?"

"Yo' hain't tol' me whut hit air yet, Lem," she protested faintly.

"Belle-Ann," he blurted out huskily, "I air pizen sho' yo'-all knows whut I air a firin' at."

She shook the silken mass of black curls that would insist in tumbling down on her small face, and elevated her pretty brows negatively. But beneath her drooping lids a flicker of tell-tale light was playing.

"Looky heah, Belle-Ann,"—his voice dropped to pleading tones—"Lem wants that yo' should promise em sompin' 'fore yo'-all goes away. I want yo' t' promise, Belle-Ann," he went on earnestly, recovering the hand he had dropped in his amazement. "I want yo' t' promise that when yo'-all cums back t' home that yo'll marry me—eh?"

Not rudely, but reverently and slowly she drew her hand away from him. With eyes averted, her bosom stirred and she struggled with the choking in her throat.

She removed her sun-hat, and stood swinging it in her perturbation. With a great will she steadied her voice.

"I cyan't promise that, Lem—leastways not now," she answered slowly, without looking at him.

He fell back, crestfallen and hurt.

For a minute silence stood between them. Never before had he seen her so bewitching.

Then she turned her matchless violet eyes upon him.

"I hain't a spitin' yo', Lem," she explained hurriedly. "I hain't a spitin' you, cose yo' air a good boy an'—an' I like yo', Lem. But I jest cyant promise whut yo' want me t' now."

Astounded, he stood fumbling for words. Then he

suddenly tossed his long hair back with a jerk of his head—a gesture that had characterized his father.

“Belle-Ann,” he cried hotly, “whut ails yo’, little gal; air hit some tuther bein’ yo’ love? Air thet Jutt Orlick bin a pesterin’ yo’ an’ yo’re afeerd t’ tell me? Belle-Ann, little gal, do yo’-all love Orlick? Air hit em whut yo’ love, an’ afeerd t’ own on hit? Air ye ’lowin’ t’ get shut o’ me, Belle-Ann?” he pursued vehemently.

She faced about and fixed her liquid eyes upon him. Her heart hurt and she turned away again. And he was instantly sorry that he had accused her.

She stepped over and sat on the spruce-log, dangling her hat and regarding her tan shoes.

“Looky heah,” he burst out fervently, “cum, deah little Belle-Ann; cum kiss me.”

Very slowly she shook her raven curls.

“I cyant, Lem,” she said; “not now.” At this refusal from her a pallor swept his features. Utterly crushed, he walked to and fro, a prey to conflicting emotions.

Her mysterious mien and unaccountable frigidity drove the chill of another fear into his being. Could it be that this was the first bud of a fruit that had already started to thrive in Belle-Ann’s heart, before she had even reached the school?

She was going out into a new world away from him. Did she already regard herself exalted above the things that made up his humble life?

He looked at her sitting on the log, silent, beautiful, mysterious—another girl from the one he had known all his life.

Abruptly he halted before her. Her eyes sought his

face. He fell back a few paces, now white to the lips with feelings that tore him. He stretched his two arms toward her beseechingly.

“Looky heah, Belle-Ann! Look t’ me now, little gal!” he cried out in words that tumbled over each other. “Hain’t I fittin’? Gawd cyan’t find th’ bein’ thet loves yo’-all like me, Belle-Ann! Hain’t I honest? Hain’t I knowed yo’ all yore little life, Belle-Ann? Whut would maw say, seein’ yo’-all driftin’ away from me like thes? Do yo’ ’low t’ go below an’ never cum back, Belle-Ann? Hain’t I alers fit fo’ yo’-all, Belle-Ann? Hain’t I fit for yo’ all my life?”

He took a step nearer, and with his two strong hands ruthlessly ripped his flannel shirt open and exposed his naked breast to her eyes.

Transfixed, the girl stared at the twenty wide, white scars that criss-crossed his bosom. At sight of this, with sheer will and gallant courage she fought back the tears into her aching heart—fought them back desperately, just as he had fought off the she-bear that had made those marks when they two were children—fought her off single-handed with a club, and saved Belle-Ann’s life.

With wide eyes she regarded him as he reached out for her.

His impassioned words penetrated to her very soul. She heard him on vaguely, struggling to control herself. The tide of emotion past, his petitions came now in low, entreating accents.

“Gawd ’lows I air honest, Belle-Ann. I hain’t pesky, Gawd ’ll tell; I hain’t sneakin’, Gawd ’ll tell. Lem wus rise up ’long side o’ yo’, deah little gal; an’ he

loves yo' now, same as alers. Why, I'd stan', ef yo'd say th' word, with a laff on my face an' let yo'-all fire on me, an' die a grinnin'—cose I knowed yo' done hit, Belle-Ann.

"I air jest pore regular Lem, little gal, whut has loved yo' all yore life—frum a little bitty gal up t' now. An' my heart's jest heah whar hit alers was—jest heah fo' yo', Belle-Ann, with nothin' hidin' out!"

With back-flung head he paused, his pleading eyes still upon her.

Throughout this, Belle-Ann did not meet his eyes directly. She dared not. She prayed he would stop.

She could no longer withstand his pleadings. She rose up from the log and, in her turn, though more slowly, her little feet trod where Lem had walked.

Unconsciously, her hat dropped to the ground as her fingers relaxed and she placed her two hands upon her bosom. She looked full into his eyes.

"Lem," she breathed, the carmine leaving her cheeks, "yo' axed me t' marry yo' when I cum back. I cyant promise. Yo' axed t' kiss me, Lem; oh, please, please don't kiss me. I—I——"

She shut her teeth tightly, and pressed hard upon her turbulent bosom. Alarmed, he sprang up to catch her. With a quick gesture she held him off.

"Lem, I took a vow—I did," she panted. "I took a vow on th' witch-block. I took hit t' myself—nobuddy but Gawd knows. Now, I got t' tell yo' all, Lem. *I took a vow that no livin' bein' 's goin' t' kiss my face lessen he kills th' revenuer!* I took a vow thet I'll never—never—*never*—marry nobuddy, till th' revenuer's daid; I vowed on hit, Lem!"

CHAPTER IX

ORLICK WORKS EVIL

LEM listened in awe to her panting, hurried words, looking down into her pain-swept features, struck dumb with the earnest vehemence of her avowal. The girl went on:

"I couldn't bust my vow, Lem. Hit air jest heah in my breast by day an' by night. Hit follers me alers, Lem—follers me like a hant. I don't lay no store by nuthin' till hit air gone away—an' hit 'll never go away till th' ghost-man's daid."

Lem lunged forth out of a stupor.

"Gawd'llmoughty, Belle-Ann, yo'-all hain't a-lowin' thet I don't want t' kill em, air yo'?" he cried, in a tempest of chagrin and amazement.

"No, no, no!" she interposed hastily. "I know thet yore a-watchin' an' a-waitin' an' a-lookin' fo' em."

She took the hat Lem picked up from the ground, saying:

"Yo'll do somethin' perticular like, Lem, when yo' do kill em. Keep a-watchin', an' a-tryin', Lem, but don't 'low em t' git first bead on yo', Lem. He air a hant."

"Ef I air lucky, an' kill em—will yo'-all promise then, Belle-Ann?" implored the boy in low, yearning tones. Side by side they were walking now.

"Yo' jest ax me when th' revenuer's daid, Lem," she returned, looking up, the dimples playing and her small Grecian face aflush with the thought.

He could not mistake the light that flickered between her fluttering lids. There was an answer hovering about the red, bowed lips. Her enhanced loveliness in the new sailor dress ravished his senses.

Such a girl! She had always been his, he told himself. He knew she would come back to him. Then a sober fear assailed him again, that contradicted his faith.

"Belle-Ann," he queried, "when yo'-all git yore deah little haid stuffed with th' larnin', an' th' high-tucked ways at th' school—an' know all 'bout books an' sich, mebbly yo'-all won't never 'low t' cum back heah agin? Mebbly I won't never see yo'-all agin, deah little gal, eh?"

She stopped and stood rigid.

"I kin promise thet, Lem. Heah, watch me, I cross my heart thesaway, Lem—see? Now kiss my han'. I'll sho' cum back some day, Lem—I promise."

Eagerly, ravenously, he grasped her small hand, brown, but fine-textured. A dozen times he kissed it hotly, fervently, wrung with sorrow. So much might happen before he saw her again!

At this juncture, a cow-horn sounded, and they knew that Belle-Ann's father was waiting. The time of parting was at hand. That vibrant horn-call sank deep into Lem's smarting soul.

"Kiss me heah, Lem," the girl said, showing the top of her head. He well knew what she meant.

He placed his hands on her soft curls and pressed

his lips to the little white scar that crossed the part in her hair. He had kissed it before. Many times now, did he press it.

His throat pained terribly as he poured his fervent kisses of adoration upon this tiny scar that he had accidentally inflicted years ago, in the excitement of a sham battle.

She suddenly tore away from him and ran ahead. She dared not trust herself to linger longer. He followed, a tribute of grief in his resigned, dull eyes, like a man with flowers to put on a mound.

When Lem left the spot, Orlick ducked sneakingly out of a dense clump of laurel where he had watched the love scene with burning eyes—eyes glittering with hate and jealousy.

Unheard and unobserved, he slunk away through the pawpaw thicket into the impenetrable rhododendrons. For hours he had followed Lem that morning. But he had been too far away to overhear anything that passed between him and the girl.

Now that old Cap Lutts was gone, Orlick had hidden here with the intention of killing Lem. He had worked his way up on his stomach and was just inching his rifle into position, when the girl appeared, and he desisted for some remote reason of his own. However, he slunk away, his foul heart beating high with hate.

If he could not have Belle-Ann, he would make sure that Lem would not. As she neared the horse-block, Belle-Ann turned and waited for Lem.

“Will yo’ sho’ kill th’ ghost-man, Lem?” she reminded him in parting.

He nodded apathetically. He was beyond the heat of any enthusiasm in this tense minute. He only knew that she was going away from him.

In her drawling, sweet voice she continued as they proceeded toward the horse-block where they could see Benson and the horses ready.

"Ef yo' do, Lem, hit 'll smoke all th' sorry outen my heart, an' I'll be glad agin, like 'fore maw an' pap wus kilt—gladness th' kind whut hain't a-carin' ef hit rains, or ef hit suns. Don't be sad, Lem," glancing into his woful, tragic eyes. "Belle-Ann 'll be a-prayin' fo' yo'-all. An', Lem, when I cum back, mebbly yo'll kiss me heah," she ended with a finger on her puckered, red lips.

Buddy and Slab and the dogs were mingling with the restive horses in the sunshine. Benson had already mounted.

Forgetful of her precious dress, Belle-Ann dropped on her knees in the dirt beside old Ben and, with her arms around the blind hound's neck, she hugged the old dog to her and kissed his soft ears. Buddy hung on to her with appeals for her early return. Old Slab shuffled around her with a medley of adjurations.

She turned in the saddle and called back:

"Keep a-watchin' an' a-tryin', Lem—an' yo', Slab—don't yo' fergit whut yo' promised against th' witch."

Her voice was unsteady now.

Benson was leading the way a few rods ahead. As they looped the spur and headed down the trail toward the cypress cut, Belle-Ann could no longer combat her feelings. Bending low over the saddle horn, she wept inconsolably.

At the gap below she looked back. Lem stood up on the horse-block waving to her. Through dim eyes she looked and flourished her wet handkerchief above her head.

Far down in the valley, where they struck the faint wagon trail and the horses came out to the ford at Boon Creek, Belle-Ann turned her eager eyes up toward Moon mountain and there, as she had expected, she discerned Lem's outline high up on the apex of Eagle Crown.

And as the horses paused in mid-stream to drink, she caught flashes in the sunlight, and she knew that Lem was waving his hat to her, and she knew he was straining his eyes and his heart for her.

In these troublesome times, gray and somber with woe, the Lutts cabin on Moon mountain was a dismal and cheerless abode.

Lem and little Buddy were inconsolable, and the monotonous days following Belle-Ann's departure were sad and long—and very lonely.

Slab was tireless in his efforts to keep the boys cheered up.

On pleasant nights he would sit on the witch-elm block before the cabin and sing "Kitty Wells." This sacred duty over, he would turn his talent to enlivening negro melodies, interspersed with doubtful tales, well put together, dealing with war times in general, and the wonders of Lexington in particular.

And when the storms came, and the lightning crackled, and the cascade in Hellsfork raged, and the lashing trees souged in the rain and tempest, Slab

would render the same musical program in the big front room, but vary his plots of fiction woven about his beloved Lexington. In case Lem and Buddy glanced at each other approvingly, or applauded his comics with even a half smile, his old face showed plainly that he was amply repaid.

Lem had eight trusty men working "The Worm" up in the secret cave, but spent most of the time each day, after counting the demijohns to be turned over to the bootleggers, in wandering aimlessly over the mountains. He was always alert and watchful.

Over in Southpaw there were evidences of unrest, and Lem looked for an attack from the revenuers at any hour.

Indeed, so furtive had this habit of vigilance become, that in these days he rarely traveled the trails, but moved under cover parallel with the paths.

One day he stepped out in the open trail and picked up a fledgling hawk that had tumbled out of its nest. Ahead was a group of boulders, one of which was immediately under a spruce sapling.

To these he walked leisurely and, resting his rifle against the first rock, he climbed up to put the youngster beyond reach of the badgers and razor-backs.

He was in the act of reaching up when, at a slight sound, he turned and looked straight into the round, black end of a rifle, less than six feet from his chest!

Down at the stock was the big bull-dog face of the ghost-man, leering at him triumphantly.

The peculiar, erratic impulses of the psychological moment are ever puzzling and insoluble. Lem gazed calmly, almost unconcernedly, down upon Peter Bur-

ton. Indeed, at this instant, there was no more evidence of excitement in Lem's face and mien, than had the revenuer been a venturesome fox squirrel gamboling about.

Lem almost grinned pleasantly, as he turned and reaching up, placed the young hawk safely on a low branch.

The little creature threw out his wings. Lem steadied it with careful deliberation, then leaped down from the boulder. The instant his feet struck the ground it seemed to shock his very blood into icy currents that congealed and left him befuddled and shivering.

As he stared into the revenuer's insolent face, the earth looked like a pinwheel.

Suddenly the film lifted from his brain and he was conscious for the first time that the revenuer had taken his rifle. The man's thick lips were moving. He was talking to him. Lem's poise came back. Fully aroused, his face went livid with rage. The revenuer perceived this and thrust the rifle muzzle closer.

"You don't doubt that I'll shoot, do you?" he inquired, with his eyes fixed savagely upon Lem.

"Naw, houn'-dog," returned the boy in low, quavering tones. "Yo'd kill a female baby."

The revenuer laughed.

"Don't you know when I first saw you on that rock training that hawk to sit up, you kind of scared me?" He expelled a volume of tobacco juice. "You scared me some, Mr. Lutts. I thought you was fixing to ring a church bell on me."

He let loose of Lem's rifle and it fell behind him.

He held his own, pistol-fashion, under his arm, with his finger in the guard, as he stepped nearer and shook a huge menacing fist in the boy's pallid face.

"You'll have a swell chance ringing anything on me again unless you've got a church bell in your pocket. You pulled a swell trick on me that night, didn't ye? You thought the bunch that galloped down to your dog-house would get me that night, didn't ye? Young man, I'm going to bust this gang of thieves up here, or I'll drink Hellsfork dry! And you—you—you're not only carrying on your daddy's business——"

A blinding, reckless fury that fired Lem with the strength and savagery of a tiger propelled his body through the air like a catapult. He landed on the revenuer's neck and with his naked hands he tried to kill him.

He learned speedily why Burton had not fired, for a second man who had been concealed behind the boulders, together with Jutt Orlick, sprang out and upon him. These two heavyweights soon overpowered and handcuffed the boy, while Orlick lay with gloating eyes, peering out at the scene.

Burton rolled Lem over on his back, and left him to exhaust the maledictions he was heaping upon their heads.

As Lem scrambled to his feet, Burton launched forth as he deftly cut the leather thong and relieved Lem of his cow-horn.

"Lutts—your family owes the government a million dollars and then some. And you're going to pay in some shape or form—you're in the hands of the law now. You ain't monkeyin' with these county peo-

ple. You're on your way to Frankfort now—and I think I'll be able to send you to Atlanta for a while. Eh, Tom?"

Burton turned to his perspiring companion.

"Sure—they say the punk tastes like cake down there, too."

"Now, Lutts," resumed the revenuer with his bullying insolence, "you've got one chance, and if you could see what's ahead of you, you'd take it quick! You lead us to that layout of yours and you're free. Otherwise, you're going to jail for a year anyway. I got the evidence all right. What you going to do about it?"

Lem's brain was busy.

If he had been sure that there were only the two of them he would have been only too eager to comply with Burton's proposition—because he knew that these two men would never again report for duty. But how was he to know how many men Burton had hiding to trail them.

Upon second thought Lem declined to put his own people in jeopardy.

"Well," growled Burton, "don't be afraid to talk. Are you going to lead me to that liquor hole?"

"Yo' kin blow my brains out first," replied Lem scornfully and emphatically.

"Well, fool, you're on your way. Tom, let's get busy. Bring his gun."

The revenuer produced a length of strap and, tying one end to the short chain connecting the iron cuffs, he motioned Tom ahead.

The iron cut into Lem's flesh at the slightest pressure, and acted like a bull-ring. In their desire to get

the prisoner away with as much secrecy as possible they avoided the trails, traveling cautiously under cover.

A few minutes after the revenuer and their captive had departed, Orlick crept out from the rocks like a reptile, and warily dodged along in their wake.

CHAPTER X

IN PRISON

AT high-noon the next day Lem Lutts was landed at Frankfort, a United States prisoner. This dismal trip represented the first ride Lem had ever made on a railroad. The terrible chagrin and consternation that obsessed him, and the bullying presence of his furiously hated arch enemy made it one that lingered long in his memory.

In the early hours of the trip the revenue officer and his deputy had plied the boy with a torrent of questions in their vain attempt to break him down. This cross-fire finally wearied Burton, as Lem acted like a man deaf, dumb, and blind; and the surly officer desisted with a series of dire predictions, mingled with some exquisite punctuations of choice profanity.

A pall of far-stretching clouds obscured the sky and a film of drizzling rain veiled the atmosphere. Through this thin downpour Burton walked his shackled prisoner to the Federal Building.

After a wait of almost an hour—which added nervous agony to Lem's grim speculations—he was led into the austere presence of the commissioner.

A row of ornate heavy chairs was lined up against the east wall of the high-ceilinged room. Across the room on the west side, the commissioner sat at a long

claw-footed table, hemmed about with various other pieces of massive office furniture, while to the left of him a pale, icy blonde woman hammered a typewriter.

On the walls were the portraits of five men, presumably former commissioners.

The whole atmosphere of the chamber was charged with a chill that went to the heart of the prisoner. When they first entered the room the two officers escorted Lem to one of the chairs against the wall. While the deputy remained seated here with Lem, Burton swaggered his damp hulk across the room and halted before the commissioner, his big shoulders slumping awkwardly. Here he stood mopping his sweaty, heavy features.

Lem's eyes were fastened upon his blunt profile. When the commissioner threw his pen down and looked up, Burton met his gaze with a leering grin, the while wetting his thick lips with his tongue and jerking his thumb toward Lem and the deputy with some words that were inaudible.

As Burton grinned now, Lem had seen his own dog grin, and, at this tense moment, the analogy almost coaxed a smile to Lem's tight lips. Lem had seen his own hound lay a limp, dead rabbit at his feet and look up, and lick his lips with his tongue, and grin just as Burton grinned now.

A subdued and lengthy conversation followed between the commissioner and Burton. From their expressions and gestures it was apparent that Burton was describing the killing of old Cap Lutts. Finally Burton beckoned the deputy, who led Lem across the great room and stood him before the commissioner.

The latter leaned backward and slightly to one side, while with curiously wrinkled brow he started at Lem's boots and glanced slowly and critically up Lem's corduroy trousers, past his heavy belt, across his gray flannel shirt front, and finally rested his keen eyes upon Lem's face.

He did not see a hang-dog criminal.

He saw before him a young mountaineer, in height a good six feet; spare of flesh, but with back-flung shoulders that promised to develop at maturity into the frame of a mighty man. He saw a candid, open countenance, though now a trifle pale, little short of handsome, and absolutely free from any indications of dissipation.

He noted a well-shaped, firm mouth above a square chin; a thin, hawklike nose leading to a wide vertical forehead.

Throughout this acute examination Lem's steady gray eyes never wandered from the commissioner's face. He focused his own gaze upon the commissioner's eye as intently as he would have watched a ground-hog hole in the hills. Then the commissioner leaned forward and, taking up his pen, spoke softly:

"So you are old Lutts's boy?"

"He's a dangerous man, Cap'n," interposed Burton. "He ain't no boozer. He makes the stuff, but he don't drink it himself so you can notice it; and that makes him more dangerous. I can hook seventeen rummy-shiners before I can get half-way to a sober one. Then again, he's got the nerve of the old man, and that helps some, I reckon. He's the old man over and over—he's fixin' to lead us a dog's life, Captain."

The commissioner studied Lem again.

"I knew your father, Lutts," he said. "In fact, I have a small piece of lead inside me yet that your father put there." He paused again and, oddly enough, the severe frown with which he had raked the prisoner at first now vanished. He continued evenly:

"Do you see those portraits along the wall? They are men who worked themselves up in the service during the thirty-five years that I can remember. They all looked for your father; they all found him. But none of them ever brought him in."

The commissioner shifted his eyes to Burton.

"So it was left to you, eh? Well—well, of course, I rather expected—that is, I hoped to get old Lutts alive, but——"

He broke off abruptly and added his signature to the blue printed blank he had filled in, then handed the slip to Burton with:

"I'll continue the hearing for further evidence—take him over to the jail, Burton."

He now looked at Lem.

"Have you anything to say for yourself?"

Throughout all this the boy had stood straight and unflinching. His features were pale but his jaws were hard set. Friendless and moneyless, he knew his chances were small. He knew that he stood on the perilous brink of some dire happening. He understood the import of the commissioner's order to hold him for additional evidence, and while he was not wholly unafraid, he stood tense and determined, boding no retreat, like a brave horse taking a deep,



William Oberhardt del.

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“He kilt my maw—he ded—an’ he kilt my pap.”

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wide ditch in the dark, with yawning depths beneath him, and the gush of waters in his ears.

"I said, have you got anything to say?" repeated the impatient commissioner.

"I hain't got nothin' t' say—only—only——" he began, in a voice that split and ruptured in crowding past the lump that choked him. He turned his gray eyes and fixed them upon the bloated, triumphant visage of Burton.

"Only," he struggled on, quaveringly, as he lifted his two cuffed hands and leveled them at the revenuer, "he kilt my Maw—he ded—an' he kilt my pap, he ded—an'—an'——"

Burton grabbed one shoulder with a snort, the deputy the other, and they led him out.

As the door closed, the blonde typist resumed her machine, and her chilly eyes were moist. She glanced covertly at the commissioner. His downward drawn mouth was ajar, and he was gazing blankly at a familiar ink spot on his desk.

Once again Lem found himself marching through the rain between his captors, and all the unknown strange noises of a city consolidated and merged into a tumult that harried his very soul. His next distinct impression came when he realized that Burton was unlocking his handcuffs.

He was now inside of a jail. He stood before a desk and a man in uniform was putting various questions to him in a curt and gruff voice, concerning his age and residence, to which Lem answered in an apathetic, dazed way. The man made a record of these responses

in a book. While he was thus occupied, Lem was eyeing his awesome surroundings.

Now for the first time, he was conscious that Burton and his deputy had disappeared, and another man in uniform stood at his side. The desk-man presently handed this officer a pink slip, and he in turn told Lem to follow, leading the way across a big rotunda of concrete to a huge iron-barred gate which he unlocked. He ushered the prisoner into a long corridor, and transferred him to the care of a second uniformed guard, who proceeded to search Lem's clothes with a skill and deftness that would have inspired envy in the bosom of a professional pickpocket.

The guard seated Lem on a bench which was already occupied by two men in blue cotton shirts, and the perversely striped trousers of convict garb.

"Blinky," said the guard, "where's Last Time?" addressing a huge convict with red hair, a mop and a bucket.

"He's over at the bath house."

"Send him front when he comes back. And you," turning to Lem, "sit there till you're wanted."

Whereupon, with the pink slip in his hand, he walked to a small desk at the farther side of the corridor and sat in an arm-chair with his back toward the three now on the wooden bench, waiting for Lem knew not what.

In the meantime, Lem's eyes roved about making a grim inventory of this great merciless cage that had engulfed his body. He was inside a mammoth arcade-like structure that stretched its repellent length out a thousand feet and more to a blind, sinister end.

Along its sides, equi-distant, appeared high arched double windows, bolted and barred with a lattice-work of iron. Wherever Lem perceived a spot of God's light, a cold, forbidding hand lay across it like a blasphemy, spreading out its unyielding, black, skeleton fingers to enmesh a human soul.

Moreover, this stupendous, invulnerable shell incased and jealously protected a second structure equally strong and grisly, for as Lem looked, he noted this other structure occupying the center of the arcade. It was a tomb within a tomb, and the boy's already heavy heart sickened as his eyes slid down the seemingly interminable vista of small iron-barred doors, some four feet apart, that diminished in perspective toward the distant end until they shrank to the size of a newspaper.

The doors in this cunning edifice were accessible by means of a steel skeleton-work forming lengthwise porches five stories high, where even a sluggish imagination could visualize convenient gibbets stationed just outside these black, mysterious doors, awaiting the condemned necks of the inmates.

While Lem made further notations in undisguised wonderment, convicts were constantly passing to and fro. They were "short time" men who had their allotted duties, working about the tiers and corridors.

Presently, Lem became suddenly conscious that the two men at the other end of the bench were eyeing him curiously. Their interchange of looks and low words to each other made it obvious that Lem was a subject of comment. Now that Lem was looking

straight at them, the man nearest slid along the bench, smiled good-humoredly, then whispered:

“What did ye draw, bo?” The man watched Lem’s mute lips for response.

“What did they give ye, pal?” he repeated, while the second man slid over and craned his neck for the answer. Lem still looked puzzled, but finally answered.

“Nothin’.”

The other started a laugh which was squelched with an elbow punch in the ribs from his companion.

“I mean, pal,” pursued Lem’s inquisitor, “did ye git a sentence in this jail, er did they bind ye over?”

“I air continued,” replied the boy gloomily, “wher-ever thet takes me.”

“Oh, yes—is this your first pinch?”

Lem risked a nod, with only a vague notion of what “pinch” meant.

Presently the man spoke again.

“Say, pal, you ain’t never been in jail before, have ye?”

“Naw,” responded Lem without hesitation, “an’ I ’low I want out o’ heah, too.”

He delivered this earnest sentiment with such guileless sincerity that both men snickered.

“Don’t you care. You’ll feel dopy fer a day er two—then ye won’t mind it. It’ll git your nanny the first time. This is my fifth time in this joint,” he volunteered. “I got eight spots ahead of me. Say, pal, sneak me th’ makin’s, will ye?”

Lem did not answer.

“Have ye got any tobacco on ye?”

“Ef I had, yo’d be welcome to hit—I never use hit.”

The man looked disappointed.

"Say—when the bull frisked ye—did he git all your matches—ain't ye got no matches either?"

"I haint got nary a match."

Here a big, husky fellow in stripes, who walked as if he had springs for shoe-soles, passed by. Then he stopped, and turning back, looked keenly into Lem's face. Lem met his gaze and noted that he wore a livid scar from the right cheek-bone down to the chin. He did not appear to see the other two men on the bench, but stood looking with open interest at Lem.

"Hello, Last Time," greeted the man next to Lem. Wherefore, the newcomer shifted his gaze searchingly, then grinned. With a furtive backward glance toward the guard's desk, he thrust his hand out.

"What did you draw, Rox?" he probed.

"Eight."

"A mere speck—I could stand on my head that long. I may see you to-night." He hurried on with his elastic tread toward the guard's desk.

"I'm dead sure we'll git some tobacco now," predicted the man beside Lem. "That's 'Last Time'—he's a time-lock expert—believe me, gents—he's some cracker, too. I met him in Joliet, and I met him agin in San Quinten. Say, Monk, do ye remember readin' about that back-track stunt Last Time pulled off five years ago? No? Well, that was a funny caper. You see, Last Time touched a big joint in Cincy and got four thousand bucks. Then he beat it west. Two days later he got stewed in Chi—then he boarded a train with a bottle of booze, thinkin' he was bound fer Omaha; but he woke up that night and walked

smack into the arms of the fly cops in Cincy. What do ye think of that? They didn't prove it on him very strong, but he drew two spots at Columbus on general principles. I wonder what he turned this time. I met him last winter in St. Louis and I was up against it good and strong, too, but Last Time slipped me fifty as easy as dirt. He's got a heart as big as a cow's. Don't you worry—we'll git tobacco now. I wonder how much longer they'll keep us here," he faced about and addressed Lem. "I'm waiting to git my top-knot clipped—I reckon ye wouldn't want to lose your hair, would ye, pal?" he observed, regarding Lem's flowing locks.

"I reckon he will lose 'em, though," projected a raspy voice.

The three looked up. Blinky was standing over them with a pair of clippers in his hand.

"What are you, anyhow," chided Blinky, sneeringly. "Are you a cowboy or a preacher?"

Lem felt a warm sting rise to his cheeks, as he fixed his eyes inquiringly upon Blinky's insolent face.

"What else could he be," interposed a new arrival, "but a preacher? He ain't no convict—the Captain jest sent fer him. He's goin' to live here amongst us and reform a lot of you bad guys."

At this juncture, still another convict came up, bearing a blue cotton shirt and a pair of prison trousers over his arm.

"Is this the new duck?" he queried.

"Duck—duck," echoed Blinky. "Ain't ye got no manners? I'm ashamed of ye—ain't ye got no respect

for a preacher? This is Brother Silsand—he got a call—here.”

“Oh, excuse me. Well, Brother Silsand, you’ll carry these elegant pants and this fancy shirt on your arm when Last Time comes to escort you to the beach. When you come back, you’ll feel like a gentleman sure enough.”

Other men were attracted, and now a little group clustered around the bench, all eyes turned upon Lem, as though he were some strange animal. And all in turn contributed their jest calculated to furnish fun for the others.

“Here comes Brizz now,” announced Blinky. “Ha, there, Brizz—I brought your clippers down. Pipe this guy’s hair—you’ll never git that reaped twixt this and sun-down. Say, Shorty, you been bellerin’ for a mattress ever since I knowed ye—now’s yer chance—rake this pretty hair up as fast as Brizz mows it, and feed it to that hungry tick of yourn. I’ll bet my plug Saturday to three matches that the bell won’t wake ye up.”

At this moment, Brizz, a heavy man with a ponderous paunch, crowded in and took the clippers out of Blinky’s hand. Brizz was the official reception room barber.

“It do look uncommon extensive, don’t it?” said Brizz.

All this while, Lem had grown more and more uneasy, and his first resentment was rapidly amounting to real anger under these unkind criticisms, and the jeering faces that now encircled the bench.

“I’ll swear it do,” reiterated Brizz. “Still, I’m a regular old rip when it comes to mowin’—come here

young feller," he urged with a business-like flourish of the clippers. "Let's start early so's we'll get done for supper."

He laid a hand on Lem's shoulder. Whereupon, Lem rose up, his jaws set, his muscles tense, while a steady light shot his gray eyes.

"Ef yo'-all tech me with them things," he said, low and steady, "I'll take em away from yo' an'—an' hit yo' with 'em."

The men were so enthralled with these festive proceedings that they failed to notice Last Time sneak up from behind, where he was taking it all in. When Lem stood up and showed fight, a chorus of low derisive laughter rippled around the circle which was instantly disrupted as Last Time burst ruthlessly into their midst, throwing one of the convicts completely off his feet.

"What you fixin' to do, Brizz?" he growled.

"Who—me?—I'm here to cut this man's hair," wherefore, the barber applied the clippers so unexpectedly and so roughly to the head of the man who had been seated next to Lem, that the unlucky fellow protested loudly. Last Time turned upon Blinky. He scowled at him for a second, his lips curled away fiercely, emphasizing an under-shot jaw.

"You old clothes thief," he hissed, "you rod-ridin', cheap, ugly leather-snatcher—you forgot the hammerin' I handed you last month, eh?" Last Time shot a quick look across the corridor at the guard's back. Then he reached out and took a clutching handful of Blinky's shirt-front, and thrust his right fist close to

Blinky's nose. Blinky, who was a head taller, now hung away, white and dumb.

"You let this new man alone—do you get me? You let him alone. The next time I get at you I'll take your jaw off—I'll send you across the lot for many a day—get away—get," he snarled, with a violent, contemptuous push.

The minute the other onlookers had noted Last Time's attitude toward Lem, they faded noiselessly away like so many rats. All except Shorty. He stood meekly, holding the shirt and the trousers across his arm.

"That's the bully of the jail," said the convict, following Blinky with a belligerent look. "He's got 'em all bluffed—but one," he added with a scornful laugh.

"What you waitin' on?" he demanded of Shorty.

"Here's his clothes," replied Shorty, indicating Lem with a jerk of his head. Last Time scathed him with a withering look.

"Say, I had a trained cockroach once that could learn things quicker than you—you get dumber and dumber day by day. This man is on the court side—he keeps his own clothes. Take them things back to the dud-cubboard, and put 'em back where you got 'em from. Let's see—you're Lutts, ain't you?" he broke off, producing from his pocket the pink slip Lem had seen the guard have when he was first brought into the cell house.

"Yes—I air ole Cap Lutts' boy o' Moon mountain."

The convict shot a curious look at Lem.

CHAPTER XI

A FRIEND IN NEED

“SURE—that’s right,” he assented. “Well, Lutts, come with me now. You have to take a bath—everybody that comes in here has to take a bath, the first dash out the box. You ain’t never been in a place like this before, have you? A blind man can see that,” he conjectured, gnawing a chew off a very black prison plug. “Have a chew?”

“I never hankered fo’ t’baccy,” declined Lem, smilingly, with a gesture which he meant for a polite curtsy in lieu of thanks.

As they proceeded across the graveled prison yard, toward the bath house, Lem’s keen inherent sense of penetration had analyzed the man beside him as accurately as Last Time had read the artless, simple soul of the big mountain boy, and notwithstanding that Lem knew instinctively that this bull-necked, scar-faced fellow was a bad and desperate character, he at the same time felt a warm feeling springing up within him toward this man. He felt that he had a friend in Last Time, who was the first and only one to give him a kind look or word since his arrest, and a sympathetic look or a cheering word coming from any quarter was indeed a welcome offering to a person in Lem’s unfortunate and distressing position.

As they walked, the convict talked along in a friendly way, and noting Lem's roving eyes, he proceeded to tell the boy about the various buildings scattered about the great lot.

"That's the Chapel over there," he said. "That's where you will go to church on Sunday, if you want to. If you don't, you'll stay locked in your cell. There's the dining-hall back there by the left wing of the cell-house. That long shed over there open on all sides is where the shop men stop to wash up. There's three hundred men over there now at work. They make brushes and wire fences and shoes and a lot of other things, but you won't work there—cause you're held for Court—but I'd a damn sight rather work than stay locked up all day—night's bad enough.

"I hope you don't come back here after your trial. Any man with as much intellect as an oyster can see that you don't belong here. And there's a few more like you here, that don't deserve bein' in a place like this—a waller for the scum of the earth. Don't look at me, Lutts—that don't include me—I got off damn light. I was due for five spots in the pen. You see that little brick coop over there, Lutts—without any windows, and a solid iron door? That's Calcutta—the dungeon—they call it the 'hole.' That's where they put the bad actors. Inside, there's a solid sheet-iron cell, with an iron cot, and an iron bucket in it—that's all—not a crack of light. They chain 'em to the bed an' leave 'em—once a day they give 'em fresh water and toss in a piece of punk. When the men march in at night, you'll notice the Captain standing at the cell-house door making the count, and you'll

see a bull standing by him, pullin' men out of line. When you see a guy pulled out, it's Calcutta for him.

"I've been here nine months, and I've been in that 'hole' five times, 'cause I can't stand these fresh stiffes around here. The last time was for makin' hamburger out of Blinky. See them little wooden houses away 'cross there up on the wall? Them's for the lookouts. See, there goes one now, walking on the wall with his cannon in his hand.

"Here's where you get your bath, Lutts. Upstairs over here is the Hospital. That's where I sent Blinky and a couple more of his cowards."

Last Time's laugh predicated a deep, pleasurable reminiscence, as they entered the bath house. There was no one in the bath house at this time save the convict attendant. He handed Lem a towel which in dimensions resembled a large table napkin, and a piece of yellow soap which in size looked like a chewing-gum wafer. Here, Last Time reached out and took the mite of soap and the meagre towel out of Lem's hands.

"Hoggie, I'll look after him. You stay up at the door and watch the big-top. If you see the bull come out and pike over uneasy, you squeak. Wait, Lutts—I'll get you a decent piece of soap."

With this he climbed up on a box, and reaching up behind a series of steam pipes, he produced a half-bar of white soap and a towel of coarse fabric, but clean and ample. Lem then busied himself with the bath, which was sunken into the concrete floor. As this new-made friend talked along, trying to acquaint Lem with the rules of the prison, he noticed that the boy fumbled, and hesitated, and was plainly abashed when it came

to divesting himself of his clothes. Last Time thoughtfully left the mountaineer to himself, saying:

"I'll help Hoggie watch for old Caladadae—you can wash your hair if you want to—that soap is O. K."

Some fifteen minutes later, when Lem had concluded his hasty bath and joined his conductor at the door of the bath house, a high-keyed bell suddenly pealed out. It was the first familiar sound Lem had heard since he left the mountains.

"That's the recall," said Last Time. "Stay back in the door a minute and you'll see the file come out—they've stopped work now—it's four o'clock."

The celerity with which these convicts got out of the shops was remarkable. Hardly had the tower bell ceased when five long rows of stripes stood ready to march. The guards each blew a mouth-whistle in turn, and the columns moved across the plaza toward the wash-shed like a great dragon with hundreds of legs. Then out of the wash-shed the columns crawled, bent around the dungeon-house, and marched into the big dining hall, with the scraping rise and fall of the lock-step—a peculiar, sinister sound.

Lem had peeped out at the bath-house door upon this spectacle with awesome eyes. He stood in open-mouthed wonder, and was aroused only when Last Time spoke and touched his arm.

"The night bull 'll come on now, and he'll be hol-lerin' for me—we better git along," he said. "You won't eat with them men. You'll git yours in the dining hall inside."

Upon reaching the cell-house, Last Time conducted Lem to the tables at the front end of the basement

corridor where the Court prisoners were already at supper, and then left him. A soup-bowl, filled with a substance that at least resembled coffee; a plate of beans, and a thick piece of bread were placed in front of Lem by a convict waiter.

Lem felt at the moment that he never again would want to eat anything. Not only was his appetite wholly gone, but the mere sight of this food was nauseating, although he had not tasted anything since he had eaten breakfast at home the day before.

While he sat looking about him with lugubrious eyes, the man next to him—an uncouth individual indeed—whispered surreptitiously:

“Ain’t ye goin’ to eat your punk?”

Lem shook his head.

“Kin I have it?”

Lem pushed the whole fare over to him gladly. Presently a gong rasped out two harsh, reverberating notes. At this the men, some forty in number, rose, fell into line and straggled up the basement steps to the main corridor. At the head of the steps Lem met Last Time, who was apparently waiting for him.

“I’ll show you your cell now. You’re 420—right next to me on the first tier.”

Here a great commotion of hurrying feet sounded below and overhead on the tiers above, mingled with the metallic ring of keys and the cold clanking of steel doors and the rattle of iron. And from far up the dim corridor Lem heard a sound that, somehow, filled him with a strange dread. It was the rising and falling of a scraping, tide-like rhythm—the muffled rhapsody of a hundred-legged lockstep. The last column of con-

victs was marching into the cell-house from the dining hall on the plaza.

It was the on-coming of a grisly, striped, argus-eyed multiped, with fifty heads. This ugly sound reverberated soft and stealthful at first; like the padded feet of some fabulous, carnivorous monster sneaking into this cavernous mortuary to gloat over the dead souls it had cached here. Then again, beneath the nearer tumult, this natant, ill rhythm died down to a measured, sinister moan, echoing through the stone corridors in soughing jabs, like sounds marking the visitation of some maimed Hydra.

The denotation of this eery evil tread of ruined lives grated terribly on Lem's highly tensioned nerves. And oddly enough, he did not seek to shut it out—this revolting, dreadful scrape, that nothing can ever imitate. On the contrary, he strained his ears for it, impelled by the same indefinable, weird influence that charms one to turn again and look back upon a horror that has fascinated the eyes. Thus was Lem fascinated by this hateful noise. Enthralled in this that had dominated his senses for the moment, he had unconsciously ascended the skeleton iron stairs.

When he aroused himself, Last Time was pointing into the cell allotted him, and looking at him pityingly. Lem shot one swift look into this dark hole, then withdrew his startled eyes and fastened them upon the convict's scarred visage. The boy's eyes were freighted with the igneous luster of some unnamable terror that seemed to stultify his senses, leaving his manly instincts in the grip of some perverted agency that he did not know was there.

If Lem Lutts had possessed a pistol, he would have killed himself in that instant. Quaking perceptibly, he hung back from the cell door. His hand trembled as he held to the railing of the iron porch. His lips moved, and he tried to tell the convict something. The world seemed to be falling about his ears, carrying his soul down into the fumes of hades. Of all the subtle, dormant influences that awake, and invade the scheme of human life to sway the impulses of men, there is none so bewildering as this phase of psychological prompting which holds its profound mystery intact, and baffles solution.

Where is the abode, and what is the origin of this plenipotent conjurer? Certainly Lem Lutts trembled at the threshold of this stone cell. Last Time could see that. What sweeping, pillaging power was this that assaulted Lem's will, causing him to quake thus like an aspen. Surely it was an abstruse form of fear.

Verily, it could not have been the stigma of cowardice. Lem Lutts had never known fear. From the very cradle his life had been enveloped in danger. Deeds stood out boldly to refute this suspicion of weakness. Scores of times in Lem Lutts' life he had looked into the grim teeth of on-coming death unflinchingly and unafraid, with a self-forgetfulness that spells sublime courage. But here he stood now, on the brink of a moment that was in some strange, exaggerated way, awful to him. He stood, pale and shaken, in front of this black jail-cell, undeniably fear-stricken.

Perhaps this was the same quality of fear that caused Napoleon to dismount, cursing his horse, pale, sick, and unsteady for an hour, because his steed had

crushed a camp cat with its hoofs. Possibly it was the same subtle thing that inspired the late C. K. Hamilton, the most daring of all aviators, to rush in panic from a dental chair. It may have been the same brand of unknown dread that impelled one of the greatest war conquerors in American history to shun a graveyard after night-fall. Some time or other this strange power lays hold of the bravest hearts. It had Lem Lutts now, and he was backing away and trying to get down the stairs. Last Time spoke to him gently, as he took his arm and urged him slowly into 420.

"Hurry up, Lutts—don't you hear 'em? They're lockin' up now, and I've got to run the tier for the bull—there now—I know just how you feel—I've forgot all the other times, but I've never forgot the first—and God knows I never will. You can't tell me—but you'll be all right—I'll come and talk to you after a while. They don't lock me up until eleven o'clock."

Lem had stepped inside gingerly, as if he expected the floor to collapse and engulf him. There was a dull rolling, a click, and the iron-barred door was closed upon him.

"Stand up at your door until the bull makes the count," imparted Last Time, as he hurried along the tier looking into each cell. Then he came back, and pulling a great lever at the end of the tier, locked all the doors automatically. Now he started back, again calling into the cells as he passed.

"Stand up—stand up—stand up!"

A big guard followed close behind the convict, with a gliding tread that did not give forth the slightest sound. He dashed a cold, penetrating stare in at the

faces that hovered at the bars. When the guards had made the count for the night, a babble of conversation began between the prisoners all over the place. They called to each other by the cell numbers, or nicknames; and the talk waxed to an incoherent, mixed medley that tangled itself into nothing intelligible. Though strange to record, this did not seem to bother or confuse those talking.

The door of Lem's cell seemed to be as sensitive to every sound as a telephone receiver. A voice at the farthest end of the corridor trailed into Lem's cell as distinctly as a voice two cells away. Thus, a sound two cells away might be interpreted as emanating from the remotest cell in the place. Lem, sad, dejected, and with a weight of gloom at his heart that submerged his spirit and held him in a lethargy, still stood at the door with his fingers twined around the chill bars. His eyes, starry with the emotions that swept over him, were fixed upon the only thing he could see—the blank stone wall opposite, laced with a series of steam pipes, and the high windows blotted with a skein of iron.

CHAPTER XII

THE STIGMA

HE was in jail now—he, Lem Lutts,—old Cap Lutts' boy—was gunless to-night; hanging on to the bars of a jail door. His father, seventy-six when he fell in the Church on Hellsfork, had never been in a jail. Crowding up amidst other lamentations, and superseding them for the moment, Lem felt keenly the stigma and sting of this scandal. It was a disgrace on the whole Lutts faction that he, their leader, now should stand behind the iron bars of a jail door. The irony of it was deeply excruciating—that he, their chieftain, should succumb to a revenuer.

Moreover, was it not unspeakably shameful that this revenuer who took him was the man who had invaded his home and killed his mother? He had waited a little and killed his father. Then he tore him away from his domain and his people; and caged him where he stood to-night—gunless, in an iron and concrete hole, with the cold, unyielding bars between him and his free, wide, high Cumberland Kingdom.

Lem probed his conscience for the hundredth time in quest of the crime he had committed to bring him to this hell. And when a small voice answered back from out its castle of inherent chauvinism, and told him that he sinned against no man—then it was that

the smouldering, dormant hate, sleeping in his heart, stirred and welled up into a mighty tide, effacing all other kindred emotions that had traversed his being upon being jailed. This new force aroused him to action, and somehow he felt better.

How strange are the workings of that mystically mated pair—the human heart and brain! How appallingly strange that a phase of hate should assuage the pain in any heart. But this was a truism that for the time inspired Lem to action and forgetfulness of his environments, for now his previously dull eyes were afire, as he turned back into his cell for the first time. He felt his way to the limits of the wall. The distance was a mere three steps for him. Then he turned and took the three steps back to the door. Then back again he went. And thus he took up this three-step march, the while the ugly visage of the revenuer projected itself against the gloom, and he saw Burton's dog-grin. He saw him smear the sweat off his leering face, and fancied he heard his vaunting words of triumph to the commissioner, gloating over the killing of Lem's father, and the taking of himself.

And here, while Lem paced to and fro, he forgot all else save his thirst for revenge. And through these walls he heard dim voices from two graves in the hills urging him onward, and he invoked God to give him strength to endure. He vowed that he would be patient and endure, even to the crack of doom, that he might stand face to face with this man-brute, when he, Lem Lutts, would hold the upper hand, in that great day, over this wanton blood-lover who had done these things.

Lem's life was linked to this Nemesis by an inexorable blood-debt. He was bonded to the revenuer, with the rigid, unmalleable nexus of hate that naught but annihilation of one or the other could sever. Thus, with these hurtful thoughts whirling through his brain, Lem forgot in a measure, which mitigated the dejection and chagrin imposed by his terrible predicament.

Wherefore, he continued to follow these stormy thoughts as from door to wall he paced—three steps backward, then three strides to the bars, walking, turning, walking and turning again—until presently he stopped, transfixed, startled, and blinking. A flood of brilliant light had dashed into his cell. The boy had heard of this wonderful invention, but he had never before seen an electric globe. This magic effulgence that rushed in and drove the darkness from his cell was a most welcome visitation, but it added to his strange, uncanny surroundings, and perplexed him deeply. He stood rigid for a long minute gazing intently at the incandescent globe that stuck out from the wall, irradiating its brightness in so mystifying a manner. He approached this bottle-like device, and examined the wall around it minutely. He raised one hand cautiously and with a forefinger touched the globe gingerly, as if he feared it might burn him. While he was thus engaged pondering upon the necromancy of this light which smacked so strongly of witchcraft, and upon the avenue that conveyed it hither and the puzzling power that sustained it, he heard a slight sound at the door. Whereupon, he wheeled quickly and met Last Time's scarred face grinning through the bars at him pleasantly, and obviously amused. Know-

ing that the fellow had been watching his antics around the electric globe, and acutely conscious of his own crudeness, Lem stepped to the door with an abashed smile.

"How are you now?" inquired the convict.

"I ain't powerful happy," returned Lem lugubriously. "This air the all-fired'st cave I ever been into. I 'low I'll never git used t' hit—least-ways I air glad thet yo'-all come round t' talk. I ain't much on th' talk myse'f—I never could talk much, someways,—th' folks up my ways air all putty much thetaway—they don't any of 'em spill over with talkin'—'pears like they got so much to think about thet hit keeps their tongues stalled all th' time, most—but ef I can't say much—I air glad yo'-all come round, 'cause I like to heer yo' talk. Gawd'll Moughty! hit's powerful lonesome-like in heah."

"Sure," sympathized the convict. "It's lonesome'em hell; but it ain't that altogether thet hurts a first-timer, Lutts—it's the gang of old-timers he's bound to meet inside every jail."

Lem smiled wearily, in a mirthless way, and delivered his short, eloquent gesture, implying acquiescence and approval, as he watched the convict's face with interest. Silently, Last Time produced a small tin box containing a bit of woolen rag and a tiny piece of flint, together with a button through which two cords passed through separate holes. Standing, he lifted his knee, placed the box thereon, and with dextrous skill started the button like an improvised buzz-saw against the flint. The spark flew and ignited the woolen rag. He then lighted his cigarette, replacing the box, and lean-

ing his big shoulder against the bars, forced the smoke through his nostrils reflectively.

“I don’t know what brought you here, Lutts—I ain’t askin’ you—it’s none of my business—but I hope you don’t come back here after your trial—it’s the old-timers, like me, that the cul meets in jail that makes the criminals of this country. Just listen to that talk now—that ain’t up-liftin’, is it?—Sure not. Just hark to that swearing and them rabby songs—sure, that’s all against the rules of the prison, but what can they do to stop it? Nothin’. They’d have to keep a bull at each door. The men are allowed to talk a little while to each other from their cells before the lights go out. They can’t speak during the day—they got to let them talk some time or other in a place like this—if they didn’t, they’d all go crazy—then where would the politicians and the prison contractors be?

“Then when these guys start in to talk, what do you hear? But there ain’t much of that stuff comin’ from the first-timers, Lutts—they’re too thoughtful to-night—they ain’t hard enough yet—but wait till they come back—very soon. If they do, they won’t get any jobs when they get out, believe me—it’s me that knows. What happens when a guard starts out to catch some of these cursers? A bull’s got to be almost in front of his cell to be sure. And you take three hundred convicts with two-thirds of them cussin’ all at the same time, and the echoes all jumbled up—he might as well try to take the ocean up in his arms—they get them—sometimes. When a bull slips up and starts along the tier, he don’t no more than get started, when the guys that he’s already passed gives out the signal and

you won't hear a peep until the bull's gone down again—then they'll all give him the merry ha-ha and cuss him for sneaking up. It's the people you meet here that makes the criminals, Lutts. I hope you don't come back here. If you do, you're gone—not that you want to be gone, but the world 'll sizzle you to a frazzle—they will want none of you—it's me that knows."

Lem was profoundly attentive. He pressed against the door and listened to the convict's words with growing interest. Last Time rolled another cigarette, manipulated the tinder-box, lighted up, and continued:

"It makes my gizzard ache," he said, "every time I see a first-timer. Their stories are all the same. If you'll listen, Lutts, I'll tear off nine rods of my own life, right at the spot, where I first got in jail.

"Once I had one of them good mothers—like everybody has or had. My daddy was killed in a mine, and my mother died three months later. They sent my little sister to an orphan asylum, and I went to work for a dairyman for my board and clothes. I sure did sling the work—from four in the mornin' to eight at night, sometimes later. He fed me good enough, but the old stiff wouldn't give me a cent to spend—only two jits on Sunday to toss to the preacher. Course he didn't agree to give me any money, but if he had just a slipped me two bits on Saturday he could have squared my feelin'. I didn't kick out loud, and wouldn't a felt so bad at that if he had let me see my little sister once in a while. I begged him every month, but he turned me down cold.

"Well, I got to wantin' to see my sister so damn bad after a year that I swiped a set of single harness from

the old guy. I kept them hid for two weeks, then I dug them up, sold them, and skated. I left a note tellin' ole Storman that I had gone West to make my fortune, like they say in books. Well, I see now that I hadn't ought to a stole the harness—I hadn't ought to a throwed that trick. Anyhow, them two months was the happiest I've seen since.

“When I left I meant to work for some one near the asylum who would pay me till I got money enough to pay for the harness and go back, as the old man had promised to pay me wages when I was eighteen, but I struck such luck that I forgot to go back; but I paid him for the harness—like a dub—and what did I get for it?

“I was a husky lad and knew the dairy business. I got a job near the asylum—saw my sister every day—and got twenty-five bucks a month. The harness was my first bad break, and it worried me. The second month, I sent old Storman a postal order for twenty dollars and told him I took the harness and was sorry. He cashed the order and had me pinched the next day. They tried me and slammed me into the booby-hatch for six months; so I was on my way.

“Lutts, I'll never forget that first night—not me. When I got out I went back to my last job and got the throw-down. He said it was good for me to confess and pay for the harness, but that every one knew I had been in jail, and he couldn't have me around. Then I went back to my own town like a fool—everybody gave me the go-by—even the church that I had carried money to every Sunday wouldn't have me. I saw then I was a dead one. I hiked out then. Every time I'd

get a good grip on a job, long would come that convict-hunch, and I'd have to make my by-by. I ain't tellin' you how hard I tried for a year, Lutts—but I'm tellin' you now that I ain't tryin' any more, and don't mean to. I quit tryin' and hunted up a guy I met in jail, and when I found him in St. Louis I was hungry and ragged and ugly as a wet dog.

"He was the whitest guy I ever met. He staked me and I stuck to him, and worked with him until he got shot dead the night I got this scar you see. Believe me, Kid, Morgan was the smoothest blower that ever lifted the front off a safe—and I want to tell you, Lutts, when I'm outside I ain't ragged and hungry any more—not me—and I don't mix with tin-horn trash like Blinky and this gang in here. I live right, Lutts, when I'm out. I got twenty-three hundred bucks planted right this minute, where no one will get it but me—at that, Lutts, I'd go back and work for five dollars a week if I could, but I know I can't—there's no turning back for an old-timer—he's gone.

"I know as well as I know I'm talkin' now, that in the end they'll plant me in the potter's field, and the chances are that I won't die natural—they wouldn't even let a guy like me into a decent grave-yard—the life has big draw-backs—and when you get out, Lutts, you remember the advice from a party that knows—you side-step anything that looks crooked—even if you do see ready money—you blow it—it's a boomerang—I'd rather die a beggar than a rich thief—blow it, Lutts—it ain't too late for you—if you don't come back. Say, Lutts, you must be hungry—I know you didn't eat anything downstairs—wait a minute——"

Last Time broke off abruptly, and slipped into his cell. He returned with a paper sack which he thrust through the bars to Lem.

“Here’s some crackers and cream cheese—the bull gave it to me—you eat it all—I got all I want. Hello—there goes the quarter—the lights ’ll go out in fifteen minutes. ‘Creepin’ Jesus’ ’ll wake up now. I got to bring the night bull’s lunch from the kitchen and take the towels over to the Hospital, and turn the hot water off at the bath house, and a string of other old-woman stunts before they lock me up—so-long.”

CHAPTER XIII

RUBRIC DROPS

LEM ate the cheese and crackers thrust upon him by the generous convict, more to assuage the acute pangs of hunger that now assailed him than to indulge his palate, the while he pondered over the convict's story.

Suddenly the electric lights went out and left his cell in darkness save a glimmer across the corridor. The scores of obstreperous, profane tongues that had scathed the fetid atmosphere now subsided, and Lem sank on the side of his cot and gazed with empty eyes between the bars at the dim light across the stone hall, and the full force of his unlucky predicament rushed upon him again.

This gas jet, which burned all night, was some fifteen feet from the corridor floor, bringing it up to a level with the tier porch. The jet flung a faint, orange-hued ray obliquely toward Lem's cell door. Although he was mentally worn out and weary of body, still he could not bring himself to lie down. Finally, he took the straw pillow from his cot, placed it on the cement floor close to the door, and sat down with his mind astray and his unseeing eyes fixed blankly upon the gas light.

At this instant, he was suddenly blinded, as "Creep-

ing Jesus" flashed his lamp in his face, turned a cold stare on him, and glided on like a ghost. Lem clutched the bars and tried to look after the apparition that seemed to be borne along on air. While he was pressing against the door, a sudden medley of noises disrupted the quiet. As it came nearer, it gathered volume, and the somber stillness was quickened with the discord of voices, and the shuffling of padded feet, accompanied by the baser scrape of a heavier tread. Seemingly, this confusion stopped and centralized directly over his cell, but what tier it was on he could form no conjecture.

In a momentary lull came the rasping of a key; then the subtle roll of a cell door, followed instantly by a frightened voice that rang through the dead corridors with a jumble of protesting, begging utterances that rended the solemnity of the place.

"Oh, no, no! Not in there! Not there! I—I——"

"Shut up—you'll wake every dog in the place—get in."

"I won't go in there! I won't! I can't go in there!"

"Will you get in there? You get in there—you damn fool!"

"Don't put me in there—don't—don't! I won't run away—how can I? I'll stay right here—but please don't put me in there."

"Take hold of him, Sam—throw him in—get hold of his leg."

"Wait—wait—wait—please listen just a minute—I'm not a criminal—don't put me in—my parents don't know where I am—let me stay out here—my father is rich—he will send for me—he will pay you—he will

come for me—please don't put me in that place—I——”

“Say, Kid—you're the limit! For the last time—are you goin' to get in there? If you don't—we'll throw you in.”

“I won't!—I can't!—I'll smother in there. I'll die there and my mother will never know—oh—oh—you're choking me—stop—you're chok—cho—ch——”

For a scant minute there came the panting hiss of labored breaths, heaved through clinched teeth; a combat of footsteps, mingled with the sound of ripping garments. Then came a dull thud overhead, a slight rumble, the click of a cell door, followed by an agonizing groan, ending with the pang of a sob that impinged cruelly upon the awesome, dead solitude.

While these hateful sounds still lingered hurtfully in Lem's ears, two feet and a pair of striped legs confronted him. He looked up from his position on the floor. It was Last Time.

“Ain't you asleep yet, Lutts?” he whispered, then went on, “Did you hear them slam that first-timer in? He's right over you in 520. God, but he hated to go in there—but he went in. He's no mongrel—he's a swell looker—only a kid—the poor devil. It's eleven o'clock—there's the bull lookin' now—night.”

The convict stepped into his cell and slammed his door noisily as a signal to notify the guard, who stood waiting at the end of the tier, that he had closed the door tight. Then the big lever ground back into position, and Lem sat motionless with a horde of curious thoughts trailing across his benumbed brain. It seemed like an age that he sat there, throughout the

pitiless hours like a distorted image; the deserted habitat of a soul with its tenant gone. He was only aroused momentarily when hour after hour "Creeping Jesus" hung at his door for an instant, like a great nocturnal humming-bird, then darted away like a winged phantom.

The boy had the comforting, though fatuous notion, that the nearer to the door he managed to get, the nearer to freedom was he. Under an apathetic spell his thoughts fled back to the hills. With quick, wistful breaths, each a cry from a stifling soul, and his hot forehead pressed against the iron, he crouched there on the floor by the cell door. His body was imprisoned between these grim, impassable walls; but his soul was yet uncaged. For in spirit he was once again back amidst the beauteous wild hills of the Cumberland with the feel of his rifle, hunting and hunted in turn, but with the pungent aroma of odoriferous blossoms in his nostrils; the purl of crystal waters in his ears; and the illimitable arch of opalescent sky over him, and the free fraternal rocks beneath his feet.

And in his vision, framed in blissful hours, his retrospection conjured a seraphic face—a luring, misty vision, with a bowed red spot for a mouth, and great black-fringed eyes—eyes tinted like robins' eggs—eyes that held an unworldly baby look; and curls—a riotous billow of satiny curls. Ah, even as he crouched here, he could see the little pale scar that crossed the part in her curls—his scar—his scar to kiss,—that little scarab-like mark that fascinated his lips.

The longer he stared at the rufus halo that encircled the gas light, the wider it expanded; and as it grew,

its burning gamut embraced a multiplicity of changing scenes representing hours of his life. Like cinematographic pictures, it held a stirring pantomime boldly up to his intent gaze.

As he looked again, a beautiful nascent wraith slowly developed and occupied the nimbus of the buff light. Her meaning lips were slightly parted, her eyes saw him, and there was a specific message therein. He knew that if some sorceristic agency could put her down by him now in this black midnight hour, that she would put her hands in to him and would give her lips between these unbreakable iron bars. The price of her kiss to-night would be one look at his haggard, haunted face.

In fancy, he took her in his arms and fled, galloping across the clouds to the Cumberlands, racing with the shadows that traversed the valleys like eagle wings. Once again his eyes were gladdened with the vast colored panorama that crowded in one limitless circle around Eagle Crown. Now the cascade in Hellsfork was beating in his ears, the soothing rhyme of its endless monotone, a cadence he loved so well. And now the sun had followed a shower, and he was sitting with Belle-Ann under the big magnolia tree on the spot that was ever dry, and they were holding out their hands and catching the crystal raindrops that rolled off the leaves overhead.

Half consciously, he now thrust his hand out toward this scene his own imagery held before him. And even now the warm drops came down from overhead—dripping, dripping, dripping. He could feel them splash and burst now on the back of his outstretched

hand, just as they did in the joysome days agone when the drops tickled their palms, and he could hear the music of the girl's dulcet laughter. Again he caught more of these drops.

Suddenly and rudely, Lem was jerked out of this beatific reverie by the fearful howls of some convict, night-mare ridden. These hideous screeches aroused Lem's senses, and he blinked and rubbed his hands. His hands were wet. Instinctively he looked up and discerned the crack in the tier porch overhead from whence these warm drops trickled down and splashed in front of his cell. Wherefore, a shock of suspicion jerked him out of his rambling thoughts. He leaned close and stared at the back of his hand, getting to his feet at the same time. It was smeared with red. Even in the semi-darkness, Lem knew that the stain on the back of his hand was blood.

In an under-tone he called repeatedly to Last Time in the adjoining cell, but the convict slept on and did not respond. Lem searched for something with which to knock on the wall to wake him. Failing in this, he backed up against the wall and hammered with the heel of his heavy boot. Presently, Last Time's voice awoke sleepily and from afar.

"What's the matter—is that you, '20?"

"Yes," returned Lem in a whisper. "Yo'-all come t' th' door."

"What's the matter, Lutts?"

"They's blood a comin' down overhaid."

"Blood!"

"Yes—hit's a drippin' down heah."

"You sure it's blood?"

"Yes," reassured Lem. "Hit's sho' blood—'cause I got some on my han'."

"Wait a minute."

Lem heard him rummaging around in his cell. The convict made a long, rigid roll out of a newspaper and thrusting this out and around at arm's length he said:

"Here, Lutts, get the end of this—stick it in the blood and hand it back."

Lem manipulated the paper. Reaching as far out as he could, he rubbed one end in the dark pool in front of his cell, and handed it back to the convict. Lem heard Last Time exclaim:

"The hell—I thought that guy'd do something."

The next minute the convict was scraping a tin cup across the bars of his door, a performance that sent metallic echoes from end to end of the corridor. A guard responded with surprising alacrity.

"What's the rumpus here, Last Time?" he demanded.

"That cul up in 520's croaked himself—pipe the blood in front of next door."

The guard turned his reflector upon the pool, then hastily unlocked Last Time's cell.

"Come along," he ordered.

He then ran to the end of the tier, and pulled the lever to allow Last Time to open his door and follow. After that, Lem heard nothing overhead save subdued whispers, cautious steps, and guarded movements. He did not hear Last Time return to his cell.

When the first gray light of dawn filtered through the high arched windows of the cell-house, and drove the gas light pallid, it found Lem still awake. With-

out, the English sparrows set up their garrulous chirpings, and like a draught of some blessed elixir, a faint breath of early morning, dew-damp air was wafted through the outer bars into the sodden cells. The bell on the prison tower rang, and there was a great stirring of convicts, mingled with a multitude of harsh jail noises.

While the keys were grating on the tiers above, Last Time hustled up to Lem's cell with a bucket of water and a mop, and in silence washed every vestige of the blood-stain away. As he took up the bucket to go, he turned to Lem.

"He's over in the dead-room now. Ain't it hell, though?—and him only a kid at that. He had a fine face, too,—he cut his throat with a broken pocket mirror. There comes the bull for the count—so-long."

As the cracksman went, Lem saw a film of moisture glisten in his eyes.

CHAPTER XIV

"THE ONLYEST LUTTS"

UP on Eagle Crown, dim crest of his benighted world, Buddy Lutts' small shape made a vague shadow, fusing with the dawn-mists that dipped and lifted and swathed the peaks like a nun's veil. The boy crawled far out on this majestic point that divided night from day. On one side the sun had poised its jewelled lance against the east. On the other, the vanquished morning moon was hiding his pallid face amidst the naked peaks.

Buddy crawled farther along the dew-chilled brink of the ledge like a young, lean catamount whelp. Here he sprawled at full length upon his stomach with his thin face propped up between his hands. Here, alone on the sanctum-rock of Eagle Crown, he lay, his moody eyes gazing beneath and across the limitless expanse of purple fog.

There was a great ache in his heart, and he was lonelier than any boy could well be and live. By and by he discerned the top of the church belfry floating on the sea of fog like a buoy, and the mere sight of this replenished the fires of vengeance that had reduced his puerile being to a hard cinder of hate.

No human foot had ventured across the door block

of that death place since that serene Sabbath morning, more than a year since, when they had lifted the dead body of his father off the virgin altar and laid him on the pyramid of flowers built up in the clearing by the hundreds who had come to witness the dedication of the church. Although this deed stood foremost and fresh and even more vivid now in his memory, still, the calendar day of its enactment, seemingly, held a grim unforgettable spot on the apex of a grievous avalanche of immeasurable vengeance.

The boy wearily withdrew his truculent gaze and his eyes softened with an unutterable sadness as he fixed them on the tops of the apple trees, behind the log barn, grouped about the two sodden graves of his father and mother—both dead at the hands of the despised law. His heart was dead to all else save one hope—to avenge the death of his parents and his brother Lem, whom he now believed to have been murdered by Sap McGill. He would not count his young life amiss with all its hardships and heart-aches, if only he could see the dawn of this triumphant day for which he lived. He was hoping and waiting and watching—waiting evermore.

It seemed that the torturous days, weeks and months that he wandered through the hills furtively and alone, waiting and watching since his father's killing and since Lem and Belle-Ann had slipped away and out of his life, was time enough to make a decrepit, aged man. An insufferable loneliness had wrapped its tentacles around his being, and had, like a cruel tourniquet, crushed all the joy out of his soul. At

times in retrospective indulgence he felt that his soul could not endure. Tears might have alleviated the misery within him, but Buddy's grievous repining and loneliness was of a tearless brand.

Buddy Lutts was a boy in size and in years only, for it was with an adult stoicism that he valiantly fought this creeping madness. In his weaker moments this brooding would seize him and drag him back to the brink of utter hopelessness and despair; but always his purpose would fly to his rescue and beckon a renewed promise, and he would awake out of these lethargies armed with a buoyant sense of patience and inspired with a mighty will to wait and watch.

In these periodical relapses it was his wont to humor his fevered fancy with lurid and extravagant sequences to his protracted term of espionage. Among these vagaries was a pet dream representing the revenuer and Sap McGill creeping upon him in single file; whereupon, he fired and his single ball tore both their hearts out and made him dance and clap his hands with sheer joy, and he was merrier than any orphan had ever been before him. His conscience acquitted him blithely, and his spirits soared skyward.

Deprived of these monopolistic creations of reprisal to alleviate the tension of his hate, the bonds of his perverse reason would have burst asunder and left him bereft.

But now again, there arose a cheering prophecy in the advent of spring. Since Lem Lutts had dropped out of the mountain so mysteriously, the bitter nights and days had rolled into weary months. And the brooding months had waxed into riotous winter tem-

pests and had dragged in endless, eternal deluges of ice and snow, adding cold agony to Buddy's already misanthropic heart. But finally the crows rode up on the soft winds out of the South, and a benign sun broke the grip of these frost-bound hills, and gradually emptied their pockets of snow. The ridges and coves, and the emerald hulks of the mountains smiled gratefully back. And through this expanse of tangled scenic splendor, the rhododendrons and laurels wove a banner of multicolored tones. The sassafras and poplar and dogwood bloomed and the cascade sang a new ode. The calling of the lark came up from the lowland, mingled with the blatant scream of jay-birds in the orchard. And the warble of the blue-birds filled the odoriferous somnolent air.

Buddy lay motionless out on the crag with his thoughts, and watched the sun unveil the spurs below him. Then he divided his gaze between the distant splash of water that marked Boon's Ford, shining back like the glint of a sun-perch, and the yellow length of trail across Hellsfork that marked the path to Sap McGill's stronghold. Then he twisted his head around unconsciously, and his eyes caressed the rifle that rested behind him--his father's rifle. And an inarticulate muttering answered the reiterated avowal in his heart, inspired each time he looked at this, his father's rifle--a sacred relic bequeathed to him and vested with a stupendous responsibility. He reasoned that now as he was the last of the Luttses, he was rightfully the Captain of the faction. In view of this heritage he argued that he should at least have a voice in the counsel of the clan.

But Johnse Hatfield had a smooth, persuasive mien with him, and while he and all the men facetiously recognized young Buddy as their "Captain," they had, through Johnse, kept Buddy artfully in the background. The disgruntled boy did not relish this lack of due recognition and these periods of inaction. He did not favor postponements. Time and again he had appealed to Johnse Hatfield to issue a call and muster every man and boy in the Moon mountains range, and cross Hellsfork and storm the McGills, win or lose. Ultimately, Johnse always twisted this sanguine project away from him, through flattery and cajolery; making amendments bit by bit, until Buddy's pet scheme had petered down to another postponement to which he readily acquiesced at the time. But always his truant acumen told him later that Johnse Hatfield did not consider him "fitten."

This morning Buddy crawfished backward away from the brink of the overhanging rock. He threw the rifle-strap over his shoulder, and as he made the dangerous descent, there was etched on his grim little face the outlines of some new, inexorable resolution.

The type of man who now stood as dictator and leader by proxy, of the Lutts' faction in the Moon mountain range, was an individual possessing a peculiarly complex and many-sided nature. In stature Johnse Hatfield was of medium height. He was deep-chested and thick of neck, but his legs were straight and incongruously slender in comparison with his shoulders. His face was a mask of black, close-cropped hair, save the complete exposure of the mouth.

The hair growth halted below the lower lip and,

from constant biting or use of the shears, the hair on his upper lip held aloof; hence, the mouth, thick-lipped and wide and tilted upward at the corners, bore the aspect of one perpetual smile. But, oddly enough, the eyes were a total and surprising antonym of this smiling mouth. They were markedly small, close set, and of a singular amber hue, glinting like needle points and carrying the fire of direct and instant demand. Thus, these closely coupled, unwinking eyes contradicted and specifically denied the smiling, placatory, diplomatic mouth so prominent across his black visage.

It was said of Johnse Hatfield that at the moment marking his advent into the world he had interrupted his mother who was working a pump-gun from behind a grind-stone, in her will to help the men-folks repulse an attack upon their home cabin. She claimed that she “sho’ wud a fetched thet ’onery Tod McCoy,” whose head she was angling for behind a turnip mound, “ef little Johnsie hed a waited an’ hadn’t bin so all-fired anxious t’ git hisse’f into th’ rumpus.”

As a lad Johnse had carried arms with his notorious father and brothers against the McCoy’s. Then he had drifted up Hazard way and had, through blood relationship, become entangled in the French-Eversole war. Eight years since he had come up to Moon mountain to visit “Maw” Lutts, who was a blood cousin, and he never went back.

While his life had been practically one prolonged fight, there was, nevertheless, a commiserating, gentle side to his nature. This incorruptible fealty and trustworthiness was an element that had attracted old

Cap Lutts, and in time Johnse Hatfield had become the old man's first lieutenant. He had since served gallantly through many fierce sorties with the McGills and the revenuers.

Johnse's friends pretended that he was a source of deep anxiety to them when near the water, because if he unfortunately fell in, there was enough lead in him to take him to the very bottom and keep him there.

Hatfield had a smattering of education, and was reputed as upstanding as a mountain fighter could well be. Certainly, Johnse did not stand up and invite hot pellets of lead. He did not scorn a rock or a tree any more than did his opposing belligerents. But throughout his life the value of his given word was equal to a fulfillment. Those who bargained for this man's word felt that on the spot where Johnse defaulted they would find his dead body.

When Lem Lutts had disappeared so inexplicably from the mountains, Hatfield had, after a hasty search, hied himself out and visited every calaboose and county jail in the surrounding country. He knew the cunning of Burton, the revenuer, well enough, but little did he anticipate such a flagrant irregularity as the transfer of a "moonshiner" to the capital of the State, with a dozen counties separating the place of offense. Such a procedure was depriving a defendant of all constitutional rights, and an effrontery to county jurisprudence, the enormity of which Hatfield could not ascribe to the power of even the wily, murderous revenuer.

CHAPTER XV

BUDDY FORCES AN ISSUE

AFTER getting authentic information from the offices of the six Federal commissioners in the eastern district, and finding, to his deep chagrin, absolutely no trace of Lem Lutts, Johnse returned, and calling fifty men, he instituted a search that lasted for weeks. He beat every mountain side up to its crest. He scoured every cave and cove, and creek bottom. There was not a square yard of rock or earth or tangled brush that had escaped his search for Lem. But they did not find Lem's bones, and finally, Hatfield had resumed the regular routine amidst daily conjectures and prophecies, and dire maledictions from the men, directed toward the McGills.

While Johnse made no outward preparations for hostilities, his mind was busy. This disappearance of Lem Lutts was not a closed incident to be relegated to forgetfulness. On the contrary, as the months passed, the temper of the Lutts' faction waxed to such a stage of suppressed fury that Hatfield knew it was only a matter of time, and a brief time at that, before he would be compelled to head a massacre over in Southpaw. It was while Johnse was making preparations after careful deliberations, to force a fight with

the McGills and square for the supposed annihilation of Lem Lutts, that an unlooked-for incident occurred which hastened the conflict, but changed the site of battle.

Prior to the death of old Cap Lutts, he had moved his distillery to a new site. Some fifty yards distant from the blind mouth of a cave he drilled a hole downward through forty feet of rock and earth and into a cave. Then he ran a channel pipe up through this hole and directly over the outlet he built a two-room cabin. This pipe was merged into the structure behind the fireplace in the cabin and continued upward some feet to where it opened out into the chimney proper; wherefore all the pungent odors and smoke from the distillery in the cave beneath the cabin followed this pipe and issued into the atmosphere through the chimney in a most natural manner.

Nothing short of destruction of the cabin could have disclosed the presence of this ingenious device. Moreover, in the improbable event that prying eyes had been permitted to scrutinize these premises, it is highly doubtful that the mouth to the cave would have been discovered after the most minute and careful search. Because the entrance to this underground region was barely spacious enough to admit one man on his hands and knees.

Furthermore, this entrance would be wholly and snugly closed by a huge boulder several tons in weight, or more than twenty men could displace. This great rock had the innocent appearance of a hundred other rocks all about it, and was so trussed up and balanced that one man could knock the prop out with a single

blow, thereby releasing it and allowing it to drop back with its concave side fitting over the mouth of the cave in a manner that defied detection. When this precaution was resorted to, it required the labor of thirty men and two steers to truss it up again.

It was here in this cabin that Johnse Hatfield kept "bachelor's hall" and maintained a "residence."

When Buddy Lutts climbed down from his solitary reverie on Eagle Crown, he made for Johnse Hatfield's cabin as straight as crooked trails that "back tracked" themselves could take him.

When he arrived at the "still," the "night force" was just crawling out of the cave to repair to their respective shacks. Buddy stepped within the cabin and cast about for Johnse. He stepped toward the adjoining room, but halted inquiringly, when he saw Hatfield's broad back and the profile of a man he did not know.

Johnse looked behind him, got to his feet, and as he closed the door between, tossed a meaning gesture to Buddy, who rolled into a split-bottom chair to wait, opposite a row of ten Winchester rifles along the wall.

The men from the cave now pushed into the cabin. They all wore holsters with twin Colts, but had stepped in to get their rifles. As they lagged about, got their guns, and straggled out again, they all in turn had an indulgent look or a playful nudge or respectful pleasantry for "little Cap Lutts." Their manner, however, made it plain that they did not expect any effervescent response from Buddy.

Bud was known to be not a voluble lad. Some had

ventured that "little Cap wus jest a pinch tuck in th' haid," but down in their rough hearts they pitied and loved him, for who knew better than they the train of barb-tipped circumstances that had crushed down upon this boy to harrow his young life with their eating misery?

Hatfield soon appeared, followed by the strange man, who continued out the door without words. Johnse faced Buddy.

"Howdy, little Cap—how's pickin's?"

Buddy sat speechless with the newcomer in his mind, and questioning eyes upon Johnse's face, but Hatfield volunteered no enlightenment, and his hairy mask with its naked, smiling lips and frowning eyes was unreadable.

"Foller me in, Buddy—I'm aimin' to kick up some breakfast 'bout now—maybe yo'll have a snack, eh?"

Bud did not open his mouth, but his pale eyes followed Johnse as he began hacking at a raw shoulder of pork. Buddy knew Johnse, and Johnse knew Buddy, and the boy knew that there was something particular in Johnse's mind. And Hatfield knew just as well what Buddy would say as if the boy had already condescended to speak. After a minute's unbroken silence, Johnse said:

"What ded yo' say, Buddy, eh? Ded yo' say yo'd have a hank o' corn bread, an' a slab o' po'k, eh?"

"Naw," answered the boy sullenly.

With the knife poised Johnse cast a covert look at Bud. Then he laid the knife down gently, threw his wide hat down on the red oil-cloth table cover, and sprawled down on a chair in front of the boy.

With one hand he reached out and squeezed Buddy's shoulder solicitously, and pretending not to know what was coming, he inquired in his inimitable soft, smooth voice:

"What ails yo', little Cap—hain't yo' feelin' peert like thes nice mornin', eh?"

Buddy's lips were tightly compressed and his eyes, which had not wandered from Johnse's face, were now eloquent with reproach. Johnse waited.

"I 'low yo' haint a treatin' me right, Johnse Hatfield."

The man simulated a profound density.

"Whut—whut—hain't a treatin' yo' right?—Why now, Buddy—now—come now." Johnse forced a soft placatory laugh. "Come now, little chap—whut hev I done t' yo'—eh?"

Bud straightened up with a jerk and his mouth began to twitch with the heat of some vehement words that stood just behind his lips, but Hatfield quickly forestalled him as he intended to do.

"Now—now—don't git riled, little Cap—why, haint I tuk th' best care uv yo' as I know how—an' every month after I've paid th' men, don't I bring yo'-all half o' whuts leftin'—every month since Lem's bin gone I han' over yore part reg'ler—an' last month wus better 'n any—why, I give yo' fifty-one dollars last month, Buddy—whut yo' got to pester yo'—eh?"

At Hatfield's first words, the boy had settled back in his chair, plainly disgusted.

"Whut do ail yo' anyways, Buddy—eh?"

When Buddy straightened up again, Johnse relaxed in his seat and expressed a willingness to listen by

plucking his beard with two fingers and a glint of amusement in his small eyes.

"Johnse Hatfield," began the boy vigorously, "ef yo'-all wusn't honest, I 'low we-uns wouldn't a hed yo' heah—thet ain't whut I'm aimin' at—hit hain't—yo' alers treated me like pap ded—yo' alers ac'ed like a dad t' me—only one thing, Johnse Hatfield—jest one thing—I air a tellin' yo'."

He had slid out of his chair and was now holding an admonitory finger up to Hatfield's face.

"Only one thing, Johnse Hatfield—an' yo' done me pesky on thet, yo' ded."

Hatfield regarded the end of Buddy's finger for a moment—then softly inquired:

"How ded I do yo' pesky, Buddy?"

"Hain't I th' onlyest Lutts?" he fairly yelled, falling back a step, with head tilted backward, and an unmistakable note of pride trembling through his piping voice.

"Shore."

"Warn't ole Cap Lutts my dad?" he demanded.

"Shore."

"Then who air leader by rights—who air th' head o' th' people—who air Cap'in heah in Moon?"

While Johnse was gathering response with slow deliberation, the boy held his ground with unswerving eyes, the while tapping his own little thin chest with his finger tips, and with an emphasis that boded no denial.

Hatfield perceived that to argue with him now would be like taking a bone from a starved dog.



William Oberhardt del.

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"Who air th' head o' th' people—who air Cap'in heah in Moon?"

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"Why, Buddy!" placated Johnse, "ded I ever 'low yo' warn't?"

"But yo' don't think I'm fittin'—yo' don't—yo' don't think I'm fittin'!" he shouted hotly.

Mentally Johnse told himself that it was time to launch what he held in reserve and end Buddy's turbulent tirade, which was carrying the boy to the verge of distress. Hatfield's attachment to old Cap Lutts had been fused with a ligature of fealty little short of blind idolization, and it did his soul good to watch this outburst of virility and aggression that flamed up in the boy, reflecting the blood and stamina of the old man. And Hatfield loved this little human tiger that had come to-day to arraign him with the iron gusto of a born ruler and all the plenipotent fire of a vice king and despot.

"I hain't fittin'—I hain't fittin'—be I?" he reiterated vociferously.

"Shore, yo're fittin', Buddy. Course yo're a little feller yet—shore yo're fittin'—ef ary hillbilly says yo' hain't—why, I'll turn his face down out o' these mountains, I will—yo' never heard me say yo' wusn't fittin', Buddy, eh?"

"Naw, but leastways yo' ac' hit Johnse Hatfield—yo' ac' hit—yo' do. You won't listen t' me."

"I alers listen t' yo', boy," contradicted Johnse quickly.

"Well, yo' listen, but yo' don't heed—yo' don't," he stormed.

"Whut do yo'-all want me to do?" petitioned Johnse naïvely.

"Tear em up—tear em up—tear em up!" he cried,

with an arm stretched toward the south. "Hain't I begged yo' t' tear em up—hain't I begged yo' fo' a yeer t' tear em up—hain't I prayed t' yo' t' wade in an' make em pay fer killin' Lem? Gawd'll Mighty——"

Here the boy's fury broke all bounds of self-restraint and he tore up and down and across the puncheon floor, bandishing his two fists, distraught and choked with an avalanche of impassioned, inarticulate words. After a minute he went on.

"Th' men won't foller me 'cause I air a boy—an' I hev begged yo' t' git em fo' killin' pore Lem. Don't I know they kilt Lem—don't I know they kilt Lem an' tuk em across Hellsfork an' made a hole fo' em in Southpaw? Efen yo' was afeered I'd know whut t' do—but yo' hain't askeert, yo' hain't. Ef th' ole Scratch was t' cum in thet door now t' git yo', Johnse Hatfield, yo'd smack em over and wring his neck—yo' hain't askeert—yo' got some tuther reason ahidin' out—yo' air—an' I don't 'low t' swoller hit no longer! Whut ud my pore daid pap say—an' maw—an' pore Lem, whut Sap McGill kilt an' hid away?—we cyan't keech th' revenure—he's gone—but we kin keech Sap—Johnse Hatfield—efen yo' don't heed me now—so he'p me Gawd—I'll fire yo'—I'll fire yo'—karnsarn yo', I will—I'm a tellin' yo'—I hates t' do hit,—but I'll pay yo' anything I owes yo'—an' I'll fire yo' shor'n hell."

The boy pulled his eyes slowly off Johnse's face and, sagging with passion, backed against the wall and turned his quivering face to the logs. Hatfield stood up and pulling his Colt gun twirled it lovingly and laughed like a man who had won something.

Buddy started and twisted a look over his shoulder.

Then he turned about and fairly crept back upon the man, and looked searchingly up into his face. There was a timbre in Johnse's laugh that told the boy something. There was a note in that laugh that mated with a solitary hope in his own heart. It sounded like a knock for which he had been listening for ages.

"Whut—Johnse—whut?" The boy's whisper trembled and he laid two pleading hands on Johnse's sleeves and peered eagerly up into the man's eyes.

Hatfield grabbed Buddy's wrist and dragged him outside the cabin. Still holding him, he pointed the gun down across Hellsfork and over to where the balmy, warm sunshine made soft, dreamful pictures in black and white amid the tinted spurs and ridges of Southpaw.

"Buddy," he said, with profound, succinct accents, "yo' 'lowed I wus layin' back—but I wusn't, little Cap—I bin busy all th' time—an' now I got th' gates o' hell open fo' em—an' Tuesday when co't meets down at th' Junction, we'll drive em in with th' ole Scratch."

Overwhelmed, Buddy stared open-mouthed at Johnse, but he could not mistake. He knew that Johnse spoke true, and not waiting for further details, he broke loose and capered in a circle. He tossed his hat up in an abandonment of joy and kicked it about when it came down. He grasped a big rock in his exuberance, and tossed it several feet, astounding Johnse with his strength, and he rung Johnse's hand, too overjoyed for words.

Johnse returned to the kitchen, lighted a fire, and while the corn bread was warming he busied himself slicing the pork.

"Ded yo' say yo'd hev a pinch o' breakfast, Buddy?" he invited.

"Shore," answered Buddy. "I didn't 'low I was so hungry—lemme he'p yo' git th' snack, Johnse—I cud eat a bilt owl."

When the corn bread and the cane-molasses and the pork and black coffee were all on the table, the two sat down to the repast together, and Johnse proceeded to take Buddy into his confidence.

"Yo' hain't t' open yore haid, Buddy—nary a word, yo' heah?"

With his mouth full, Bud nodded understandingly. "Yo' seed thet feller whut went out o' heah? Thet's Plunkett—he's bin a spyin' down at th' Junction fo' me, goin' on fo' months now. I brought em up from Hazard jest fo' thet purpose. I tol' em to git a job at Hank Eversole's store ef he hed to work fo' nothin'. Well—Eversole doddled along with em fo' two weeks—then th' old sore-eyed dog offered Plunkett twenty dollars a month an' Plunkett tuk hit, yo' bet—he'd a tuk ten dollars, 'cause I bin a payin' em twenty-five a month out o' my proceeds from thes works, Buddy. I'm a goin' t' tell yo' all frum th' start, an' 'fore I finish yo'll be surprised. Yo' see, Bud—I alers knowed thet some skunk traitor led th' revenure on to yore pap, an' I alers hed a mind who hit wus, but I never said nothin'. I wus so shore I wus right thet three times I hed my gun on em—then somethin' told me maybe I wus mistaken—an' I let em go—but I learnt this mornin' thet I'm right——"

Buddy gulped, dropped his tin cup of coffee, and strained forward over the table.

"Who—who, Johnse—who?" he blurted, straining his ears as though a river separated him from the answer.

"Jest yo' set down an' eat yo' meal—yo' jest wait til I git to thet—I'm aimin' t' tell hit all as hit comes along—eat yo' breakfast—I learnt thes mornin' thet I wus right," Johnse went on evenly. "Thet was Plunkett heah thes mornin'—I saved his life down at Hazard one night ten years ago, an' Plunkett 'ud take a message to hell fo' me an' git an answer—besides, I pay em—an' I don't want yo' to shoot em—he air apt to slip up here any time now, day or night—I give em the countersign and to' th' men to let em up—an' I want yo' to look sharp 'fore yo' go t' pullin'—yo' mought slide th' pork thes way, Buddy. Plunkett air worth all I pay em, an' more too—an' I'd starve myse'f fo' ten years jes t' git th' information he's brung me."

Buddy had suspended eating, and, conscious that he dare not interrupt Hatfield now, he sat tight-lipped and listened like an image, with one hand gripping the other and holding it down under the table.

Johnse proceeded with his recital with a deliberation that grated insufferably on the boy's nerves and made him shiver with impatience and excitement.

"Maybe yo' rec'lect, Buddy, when Don Perry wus laywayed on Pigeon Creek two months arter yo' pap wus kilt? Sap McGill an' Pete an' Stump Allen done thet job. An' now we cum t' th' main louse, Buddy. It was Jutt Orlick that led th' revenue t' th' church when yo' dad wus kilt, an' last night down at th' Junction, jest as Mart Harper started home, Sap McGill stepped out o' old Eversole's store an' Jutt Or-

lick out o' th' blacksmith shop opposite an' fired on Mart an' kilt him 'fore he could wink two eyes. An' down at old Eversole's Post-office ther's a passell of letters writ to Lem—old Eversole an' Sap an' Orlick tore th' letters open an' read 'em, an' Orlick hid 'em in th' store. Thet's bin mor'n three months ago. Plunkett learned that fo' sho', but hain't never heard one word 'bout Lem. Maybe McGill didn't git Lem, maybe Orlick done hit—but we'll charge 'em with hit, anyway; besides, hits more'n time to collect fo' their other divilment. Now yo' jest keep yo' haid shut—don't even peep, Buddy, 'cause ef th' men heer all thes news they won't wait—they'll bust out an' spile my plans. Jest keep quiet an' leave hit t' me, an' Mistah Hatfield 'll show yo', Buddy, whut cums o' laywayers an' traitors—an' yo'll hev a chanct t' see with yore own eyes how sich sinners crowds up t' git their crimes washed away with their own blood. I never kilt a man in my life lessen hit wus t' save my own life er some tuther body's life—I kilt 'em a fighten'—I never laywayed—thet's 'bout all I got t' say on th' subject—damn nigh enough, hain't hit?"

Johnse pushed his tin plate away, settled back and wiped his mouth on the corner of a blue handkerchief he had knotted around his neck. He lifted his eyes to Buddy's chair, but the boy had left the table. Johnse looked around and beheld a solemn pantomime that he well understood and which he did not interrupt. Buddy had slipped noiselessly into the adjoining room, where he occupied the center of the floor. He stood there swaying, his lips moving mutely, and his two invoking hands lifted upward.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MURDER PARTNERS

A BIRD'S-EYE view of Junction City would inspire even a jaded wayfarer to continue on and forfeit what measure of scruffy, uncouth hospitality its lazy, primitive confines might hold for him. On high, it looked, physically, like a monstrous spoiled egg, dropped from a great height, and halted in its desolation and turned back by a narrow, swift river that wrapped itself half around the town like a horseshoe. Its ill complexion was clay-yellow, and its adornments were pitted and streaked with a somber, sickly, worm-eaten gray. The very atmosphere that permeated this hole between the hills was at once forbidding, repellent and sinister. And up from the mad throat of the river, choked against the boulders in midstream, there issued a warning which never died.

From eminences of the hills that crowded this town into a mere ragged plot, the most prominent institutions observable were the Courthouse and the graveyard, with the second look favoring the latter.

One marvelled at the population of this habitat of the dead, sprawling on the side of a hill. Their countless pale hands thrust up out of the ground,

seemed to have frightened the river, for here it turned sharply and dodged away between the mountains.

The Courthouse was in the upper end of the town. It was framed and roofed with clapboards. In front, a crude attempt of hypostyle was visible in the two huge pillars of poplar logs that supported a balcony. The structure bellied out at the sides and oddly, at each corner of the roof, two mansard windows projected like ears, while above all a pigmy dome arose covered with unpainted tin. Withal, from afar the Courthouse looked like a decrepit bull dog squatting amidst a scattered litter of pups. The dome of this temple of justice looked up askew at the sun with the bluish-yellow glaze of a blind eye.

Topographically, young Sap McGill and old Hank Eversole owned this town. Morally and spiritually they were paupers, and their souls were as pitted and yellow and gray as the town looked to be. Moreover, the McGills "said" they owned five thousand acres in the Southpaw range abutting Hellsfork, where they lived. Their verbal deed to these acres was sustained by a cavalcade of rifle men and a squad of wary, creeping bush-whackers.

Old McGill and old Eversole had fought the Lutts faction for twenty years, but old Lutts had ever proved a most formidable antagonist, and when he brought the fearful Johnse Hatfield up to Moon mountain as aide, there was both renewed caution and consternation in the McGill camp. Then, when old Cap Lutts finally killed the elder Sap McGill on Hellsfork, one Sunday morning, they foresaw an eclipse that would bedim their day of power and their impotent chagrin

and rage was unbounded. Where his father had left off, young Sap then took up the feud with a re-enforced vengeance.

Then one day when the tidings came down to Junction City that the old King of Moon mountain had been killed by a revenuer, the exultation of the McGill faction was unconfined. Following closely upon this, a traitor sneaked down from Hellsfork and whispered to old Eversole the news of the arrest and spiriting away of Lem Lutts. The accrued glee of Eversole and young Sap with this opportune turn of affairs reached a stage that demanded expression. Wherefore, they celebrated with a public barbecue on the Courthouse lawn, and great rejoicing was mingled with sanguine prophecies, and the drunker Sap became the louder his avowals to annihilate the Lutts faction.

Eversole and young Sap plotted, then, to waylay Lem Lutts as soon as he was released from prison, and during the interval they killed three of the Lutts' sympathizers, and took Jutt Orlick into the fold. But throughout this apparent upperhand in the war, Sap and Eversole had an apprehension that grew day by day, and of which they exchanged serious comments.

The very silence of Hatfield, the man who now marshalled the Lutts faction, was significant and alarming. If old Cap Lutts' war-name was an awesome enunciation, the name of Johnse Hatfield was equally fearful. His name was scoffed at in public, but secretly he was a haunting bugbear to these murder partners.

In one respect, Hatfield was unlike old Cap Lutts. Lutts would fight so long as the enemy was in sight and then quit. All the old man wanted was to be

left alone and unmolested. But not so with this Hatfield. He had the reputation of following his enemy up, and he did it with a confidence and deliberation that was little short of uncanny. He had been literally shot to pieces in other family wars, but always survived and always followed. It was the shadow of this relentless Nemesis that filled Sap and Eversole with a nervous unrest. These two conspirators not only owned practically all the realty in Junction City, but they, moreover, owned and controlled the Judge of the Court, the County prosecutor, and the Sheriff, and through Sap McGill old Eversole was the dictator supreme in Junction City.

He was postmaster and the post-office occupied one corner of his merchandise store. In the event that any citizen appeared lax or half-hearted in his partisanship, Eversole would accost him with a leering, soft-spoken reminder, which mild petition sounded more like the pungent echo of a gun-crack than a voice, and the delinquent always heeded.

In a sense, old Hank Eversole was a philanthropist of no mean generosity. Anybody could get a tombstone out of old Hank. These ornaments were a sort of hobby of his. If the deceased's relatives could not pay cash, he procured one and took a mortgage on the stone. If they rejected all overtures on the pay plan, he furnished one and placed it at his own expense, and gave it gratis. He maintained that plain boards were a disgrace to a well-ordered graveyard, and not meant for Junction City.

It was the second Tuesday in May, and the sun shone brightly and the air was scented with the min-

gled odors of spring. Junction City had taken on a sudden new life. The May term of circuit court was in session and the activity and life astir here was more animated than that which attended a court term for many a year, for the reason that there was a murder trial in progress.

In this festering crime-stained town, where hired assassination brewed under contract by day, and was returnable at night with its toll of blood, a murder was not a sensational episode, but a real murder trial was. Here the chief conspirators, who had made the Judge and the Prosecutor and the Sheriff, had the law by the throat; and they dumped the offal of their deeds into subservient arms of the law, and burdened and shackled it with collusions it dare not drop. Wherefore, the law winked and connived with these murder lords in brazen malfeasance inflicted upon the commonwealth, and trials assumed all the aspects of a hurried laugh-provoking comedy, despite the grim fact that its elements involved human life. The swearing out of warrants had long since fallen obsolete. In times past, charges had been made and warrants issued, but when the day of trial arrived, there were no witnesses at hand, and the prosecuting witness was usually the farthest distant.

Thus, it transpired that the trial which opened the circuit court at Junction City on this May day was to the denizens a memorable one. Although the trial itself, which was never finished, was not a factor in what followed, still, this trial was remembered as having opened a day that ended with a scrambled, tragic event which ground the McGill-Eversole combination

to a pulp, and marked an era of new political and social ethics in Junction City.

Three months since a young German named Daum, and hailing from below, made his optimistic appearance in the town. After alighting upon a four-room shack that seemingly suited his wife, he cast about to locate the landlord. As there was only one landlord in Junction City, Daum found his way into old Hank Eversole's store. Daum was even more than loquacious—he was effervescent, and in no time old Hank had pumped him dry. Daum claimed that he would receive ten thousand dollars from Germany six months hence,—that he wished to fish and hunt and live as cheaply as possible until his money arrived.

Old Eversole finally decided that the newcomer was simply a harmless, dumb Dutchman, and before Daum left the store, old Hank had given him a receipt for six months' rent paid in advance. The German paid cash for his groceries at Eversole's store, and hunted and fished to his heart's content, while his young, round-faced wife made baby clothes on the porch.

Withal, Daum was not an undesirable citizen until the end of the first month, when apparently tiring of fishing and looking at the hills and in response to his native thrift, he took to himself a quick notion to make some money. A week after this economic inspiration the energetic German had converted the front room of his shack into a general store.

Notwithstanding that the display he scattered on his porch was a melancholy exhibit compared to that of old Eversole, it was sufficiently competitive to lead old Hank's footsteps directly to Daum's establishment.

Old Eversole was not as irate as his temperament might suggest. He was, in truth, stirred with a deep amusement as he wended his way Daumward and pictured how this presuming German would leave the town in haste after this first interview.

When Daum understood the purport of this unneighborly call, he explained that he had never intended to remain in Junction City a day after he obtained his money from Germany, but protested that, insomuch as he had paid his rent for six months and being in a free land, he would do business until that time.

The interview opened mildly enough, but ended with a mandate from old Hank, commanding Daum to close up his store within the limit of six hours. Whereupon Daum grew very angry, and as old Eversole swaggered out, Daum hurled his determination and sentiments after old Hank in a few wrathful, terse words.

“Mit you I vont nuddings—I standt py mine piziness—to hell mit you also—ulch!”

At daybreak the following morning Daum's wife was in her garden with a sprinkling can when she espied one Steve Barlow, a loafer around Eversole's store, sneaking out of her woodshed and slipping away along the picket fence hemming the potato patch. She pondered curiously upon the man's actions and, her suspicions giving way to fear, she returned to the house, but Daum had already gone after his usual morning fry of fish. The wife, then impelled by an apprehension that grew momentarily, followed after

him; and found her husband stark dead at the end of the street.

After the burial, the widow departed from Junction City, fully bent upon devoting her forthcoming estate to the trailing down of her husband's slayer. The day she left old Eversole sent word by Plunkett, his "clerk," that he would erect a tombstone for her husband, and that she could pay for it later or not, just as she chose. Ten days later, the widow Daum appeared in Junction City accompanied by a lawyer named Logan. Logan was a man with a state-wide reputation as a criminal practitioner, and old Hank Eversole pricked up both his ears.

Logan proceeded to the Sheriff's office with his client and swore a warrant for Steve Barlow. The warrant was issued with reluctance; the entire court personnel being loud in their defense of Barlow. But there was a grim directness and aggression about this Blue-grass lawyer, that with his inconceivable temerity and a reputation which awed even their callow senses, they pretended at last to agree to catch and try Barlow.

Logan visited the Courthouse the next day and found the Eversole-McGill faction had done just what he thought they would do, and precisely what he wanted them to do. Logan's youth had been spent in the hills, and he knew the proclivities of these mountain men. They had hedged Barlow with a formidable and insurmountable alibi.

Logan then made a concession, and stated that while he meant to try the case, he would suggest that Barlow, if he be apprehended, be admitted to bail. He said that he realized that this procedure was a trifle

irregular in such cases, but that if the townspeople were so morally certain that the alibi would stand, he did not wish to impose the hardship of several weeks in jail upon the defendant.

To this generous proposition they agreed with pleasure and alacrity. And the next day Steve Barlow was "apprehended" and quickly released, pending trial the second Tuesday in May. Then the astute Logan took to hunting, and incidentally watching for a chance to catch Barlow alone. He had acquainted himself with Barlow's history and felt that he could wean him over. Barlow was an ignorant vagabond with no permanent home, living from hand to mouth, and a crinkling tool in the hands of old Eversole.

After four days' prowling around the adjacent hills, Logan surprised Barlow in a by-path across the river. The lawyer opened the interview by handing Barlow a new twenty-dollar gold certificate, which the lout took eagerly with an idiotic grin, before he even inquired what it was for, and Logan knew he had him.

At the end of an hour's persuasion Barlow confessed and agreed to make a clean breast of the affair in court. Logan in turn promised to give him one hundred dollars in money, and help him out of town.

Barlow said that old Hank Eversole gave him ten dollars for killing Daum, and promised him a month's board beside. That night Logan left town and took Barlow with him. Just what became of Steve Barlow was a matter of divided conjecture to the idlers around Eversole's store. Some 'lowed that Steve had just "mosied" off and would be on hand trial day. Others ventured that he had "done leapt his bail."

CHAPTER XVII

CIRCUIT COURT

HOWEVER, Barlow's disappearance was a matter of small concern to old Hank. If Steve did not show up, Hank knew that he would never pay the bond and would be a month's board in to boot. If he did show up, he would "cum cl'ar" with the alibi concocted for him.

In the meantime, rumors of the determined stand taken in this case by the noted Blue-grass lawyer, Logan, had spread throughout the hills, and added to the usual interest of court days a morbid impetus that brought the people down to Junction City in droves. And be it said, that among these mountain folk, there were not a few who would hail with joy and secret plaudits any visitation of reprisal that would put a dent in the tyrannical reign of the Eversole-McGill combine, under which they had suffered and been coerced beneath an iron heel.

The dent was delivered on this May day when the sun was bright and made pictures against the mountain sides, traced in pigments of emerald and white and carmine. And the buoyant air was charged with the stirring odors of spring and rife with rapturous bird voices. The town was agog with armed mountaineers of every age. They all arrived early and dur-

ing the hours preceding the opening of court they swapped news that had accrued since last court week, while their dogs fought the hostile canines of Junction City, mingling snarls and yelps with the braying of mules and the neighing of horses.

Old Hank Eversole was resplendent in a new pair of light store trousers and a maroon shirt, and his rubicund face was illuminated as he divided his smirks between the groups outside and the high festivities back in his noisome bar where Sap McGill and Jutt Orlick were the star, hilarious spirits.

When the sheriff leaned out the Courthouse window and rang a blatant bell, all within earshot made for the Courthouse. In a remarkably short time the court room was filled to overflowing, leaving scores who had been less sprightly on the outside, unable to find standing room. Before anybody could get fairly settled the Court announced that Logan had sent word that he could not be in court until four o'clock, and that they would proceed with the minor business on docket and hold court until five o'clock.

Whereupon the jury and more than half the eager spectators, who crowded the court room, having no interest other than the murder trial of Barlow, now straggled outside, disgruntled and thirsty. In the interval that followed many wagers were laid and hinged upon the appearance or non-appearance of Steve Barlow. The odds favored Barlow's absence, but promptly at four o'clock there was a great stir among this motley, impatient throng.

A two-horse rockaway hove in sight, drew up and stopped at the outer limits of the Courthouse yard.

The curtains of the vehicle were closely drawn and Logan, who was riding outside with the driver, alighted and opened the carriage door, whereupon three men climbed out, leaving a fourth man inside. Two were newspaper men from Frankfort, one from Lexington, and the fourth man was Steve Barlow.

Logan exchanged a few brief words with Barlow, who sat back smoking a stogie as unconcerned as if he were simply waiting to kill somebody. His animal brain was of too low an order to know fear, or his senses too dull to impress him with the danger that imperiled his life in the forthcoming hour.

The advent of Logan and the strangers was quickly passed around, followed by a wild pell-mell rush for the court room. When the Court rapped for order and the shuffling of feet and mumble of voices died down, the prosecutor directed the sheriff to call Steve Barlow, out on bail, and all the witnesses in the case, and in turning about, stole a covert, triumphant look at old Eversole, who stood near the Judge's bench with Sap McGill and Jutt Orlick at his elbow. Here some of the jurymen exchanged meaning looks. When the sheriff's jocular utterances failed to produce Barlow, the prosecutor arose and, turning to Logan, said:

"I'm sorry, Mr. Logan, that you got all your witnesses here for nuthin'—but I reckon Steve Barlow has done leapt his bail."

Logan rose up with a slow, deliberate movement, and as he addressed the Court, his eyes were upon old Eversole.

"I have little need for witnesses in this case," he began, "moreover, the man who is charged with the

commission of this deed has not forfeited his bond, and I mean to show by his sworn confession that, while it was by his hand that Daum was deprived of his life, it was through bribery and threats imposed upon him by another man—a man whose deeds are black and numerous—that prompted him to do this murder. I mean to lay the burden of this crime upon this instigator who prevailed upon an illiterate, half-witted unfortunate, who had no grievance, to sneak out and do an inoffensive man to death—a wanton act from which his own coward's hands shrunk. Mr. Somber, bring Steve Barlow into the court room.”

The quiet of the next few moments was not unlike the stillness of a tomb. As the reporter started to crowd his way out in compliance with Logan's request to bring Barlow in, his footsteps echoed like a great noise. Old Eversole's face had lost its flush and he stared open-mouthed over the heads of the astonished jury, and the people, toward the front door. Jutt Orlick and Sap McGill then whispered to each other with scowling faces, which precipitated a general babble throughout the room. Midway to the door Plunkett, Eversole's "clerk," thrust a note into the reporter's hand, and the latter immediately turned back and handed the paper to Logan.

The attorney glanced over the sheet, then stood up and addressed the Court, who was too dazed to rap for order. But at the sound of Logan's voice there was instant quiet.

“I have just been handed a message, and while it is not addressed to me personally, it appears to concern all present. If the Court pleases, I will read it aloud.”

The judge, who had been gazing inanely about the room, nodded his acquiescence. Then Logan proceeded to read the note in loud, resonant tones:

“I hereby warn all men who don’t ’low to fight fer the McGills to clear out of town within five minutes—I hev arrive. Johnse Hatfield.”

Fire or an earthquake could not have precipitated greater confusion and consternation than ensued at the name of Johnse Hatfield. The McGill partisans shrank away from the windows with exclamations and curses, while scores of non-combatants fought to get out of the rear door.

Old Eversole’s face now was the hue of gray moss. The unprecedented nerve of Hatfield in sending a warning into a house of armed enemies was significant, and indicated that he held a strong hand. Above the disorder McGill was shouting some incoherent commands. Jutt Orlick forced his way to the end of the long room and thrust his head cautiously out of a side window. Then he jumped out the window and started on a run for Eversole’s store. Before he had gone ten feet, there was a rifle crack and Orlick dashed back to the shelter of the Courthouse with his palm full of blood, streaming from his left ear. With the tail of his eye, he caught sight of Buddy Lutts in the door of the blacksmith’s shop, jerking his rifle up for another shot. A hand reached out and jerked Buddy back out of the door just as a dozen shots fired from the Courthouse windows pierced the boards of the shop. Then Johnse Hatfield’s face showed for the fraction of a second as he yelled across:

“Cum on out—yo’ wild hawgs!”

This sally was answered by another volley from the Courthouse. Hatfield had knocked every sixth board off the north side of the old shop, which afforded ample firing space. No one dared reach out and close the shutters of the Courthouse, and he could now see them piling benches up on their ends in front of the windows.

The blacksmith shop, being diagonally across, commanded both front and side view of the Courthouse. Before he sent his terse warning into the court room, Hatfield had detailed a dozen men to go around and get a position corresponding with that of the blacksmith shop, which would command the rear and north side of the building. But there had been delay in working their way to this position unseen. Suspecting this move, the McGills were cautious about showing themselves, but as time passed and as the attack came only from the south side and front, they decided to venture an attempt at flanking the shop that held their foes.

It was at this juncture, when a handful of men had dropped out the north windows of the Courthouse, that the Hatfields gained a lumber pile a hundred yards distant and greeted the maneuvering enemy with a volley of lead. Two of the McGills dropped into the grass, and the remainder limped and scrambled back into the Courthouse, while those inside instantly sent fifty or more shots toward the lumber pile, killing one of the Hatfields.

For three hours the McGills were bottled up in the Courthouse, save those who had not gained entrance and were on the outside when the attack began.

Some of these were trying their hand at sharp-shooting now, while others disappeared with the non-combatants. The women of the town had dragged their children inside and fastened the shutters and barred the doors of their houses. From some of these houses a towel or white rag appeared hanging at the end of a stick thrust out the window.

For the past hour the shots from the surrounded Courthouse had dwindled down to spasmodic outbursts and Hatfield knew that the McGills were saving their ammunition, as they had not anticipated a siege. But Johnse Hatfield had come into this fight with the forethought of a trained military man. Every Hatfield man had an extra bag tied to his belt crammed full of cartridges. Moreover, Hatfield had stationed two mule wagons just beyond the hill. One of these wagons was to transport his dead and the other the wounded. Furthermore, with these wagons there awaited, with all his paraphernalia, a surgeon whom Hatfield had brought up from Hazard.

As night came on and a brief half-moon illuminated the South road, the crucial hour for which Hatfield had waited was at hand. He dispatched a messenger around to the detachment behind the lumber in the rear of the Courthouse, telling them to leave three men there and for the others to work their way back to the South road. And the envoy Hatfield chose to deliver this important message was none other than Buddy Lutts.

Although the air-line distance through to the lumber pile from the shop was less than five hundred yards, it was a full hour before Buddy crept back between

the old wagons in the yard and told Hatfield that the men were waiting. Then Hatfield left three men in the shop and with the others joined the waiting squad. Lining these men up, he now marched them openly up the moonlit road toward the Courthouse. When they came into view, they fired a volley simultaneously into the Courthouse, and Hatfield yelled out derisively:

“I reckon yo’ got enough—yo’ pack o’ laywayin’ wild-hawgs!”

Then he retreated down the road at a brisk trot, followed by his sixteen men, Buddy Lutts galloping at his heels. There was a great stir within the Courthouse now. They had plainly heard Hatfield’s jeering words above the patter and echoes of his last string of shots, and had espied his men turn and start down the road on a run. There was a noisy scramble and commotion now, as the McGills made haste to avail themselves of this apparent chance to get outside and pursue and fight their enemy, but with due precaution they waited until several volunteers had slipped out and made a hasty reconnoiter of the lumber pile and the blacksmith shop.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GRAVEYARD MASSACRE

THE three Hatfield men had crawled back into a dense dewberry patch, while the three in the shop had crawled into the loft and hidden among the miscellaneous rubbish. As there was no more shooting, and as the Hatfields could be seen in the moonshine fleeing down the white road, the McGills decided to overtake them and wipe them from the earth, and the Courthouse now quickly disgorged its mob of eager, infuriated militants.

Regardless of ownership, men unhitched and mounted the first horse or mule they came upon. Old Eversole dashed across the street and banged on his store door for admittance. His women folks having barred and bolted the doors, he called loudly for his clerk, but Plunkett had disappeared. Presently a woman admitted him at the saloon door. He rushed into the bar and gulped down a glass of liquor—then, gathering all the cartridges he had in the place, he ran out and distributed them among the men.

Sap McGill and Orlick were astride their own mounts, and McGill was crying for the men to make greater haste. McGill rode a light dun animal, and Orlick a powerful dappled gray with a bobbed tail. With thirty-odd horsemen and twoscore or more rifle

men afoot, they now dashed after their fleeing opponents, who made a dark splotch in the moonlit road far ahead.

This road ran straight until it reached the graveyard, where it made a short, sharp turn to the left, looping around the base of a hill that jutted outward. This abrupt turn in the road was directly opposite, and midway of the front length of the graveyard, which was elevated some fifteen feet above the road-bed and occupied the slope. Hatfield's horses were hitched just around the bend in the road. When the sixteen men were mounted, he ordered them back along the rail fence for a distance of fifty yards.

Buddy Lutts, clinging to his ready rifle, was eternally at Hatfield's heels. Johnse had ordered him back three times; now he took him by the collar and fairly dragged the protesting boy back and told the men to keep him there. Buddy's peaked face was flushed with a look that partially expressed the wild exultation that obsessed him. Hatfield mounted his piebald mare and, advancing, drew in close to the clay bank that jutted into the road, and here he waited, tense and rigid.

When he heard the clattering hoofbeats thundering down toward the graveyard, he urged his horse a few yards nearer the point, then with a Colt gun in either hand, his habitually smiling lips broke into a brutal grin, and his little reddish eyes snapped murderously.

The stillness was quickened again, on the brink of this Waterloo, with the stuttering wail of a screech-owl watching from the dead yard. Always wary, the Mc-

Gill cavalcade drew up short at the bend and waited for their panting horde behind. Then they pushed boldly around the bend.

It was just then that the indescribable, tragic scene took place that stamped its grim memory ineffaceably in these mountains, and made a crimson stain on feudal history, known ever afterward, as the "graveyard massacre."

When Johnse Hatfield saw the noses of the McGill horses, he uttered a wild yell of triumph that pierced the far-reaching hills, and called up an invocation to the mute tombs above.

"Now drive 'em in, boys—drive th' wild hawgs in with th' old Scratch!" he yelled.

And in a trice, Hatfield had turned that hillside graveyard into a seething crucible, whose moulten maw opened and sucked the living in with the impotent smothered dead. Seemingly, every soul tethered in the confines of that silent dead-plot came to quick ghostly life, and pushed up out of the ground into the moonlight, wielding a lance of darting, destructive lightning. Up from a hundred sodden graves, a hundred human forms sprang, and the tombstones belched out liquid death. And the May night was ruptured with a deluge of gun-shots, and harried with a chaos of curses, and death-groans, and the frenzied squealing of horses. And the air was rife with a pungent odor, not unlike brimstone, as over this seething disaster the powder vapor lifted and arose against the moon mist, studded and starred with spurting tongues of alternate flame, and twisted an ephemeral arch that, seemingly, framed the gates of hell.

The McGills afoot had some show at seeking cover and retreat, but not so the horsemen. They became inextricably jammed into the narrow turn in the road, and the harder they struggled to turn about, or go forward, the more entangled they became. To jump from their mounts in this instant of turmoil and surprise meant sure death.

Into this struggling, tangled mass of plunging, besmeared horses, and fighting, snarling, bleeding men, Johnse Hatfield had plunged his own horse, followed by his ferocious riders, now blind-mad with the lust of battle. And all the while the lead rained down from the graveyard without cessation.

Hatfield had only one object in view now. He knew that the old coward, Eversole, was not there. He had seen the sheriff go down, and knew that he was under the horses. In the rise and fall of the conflict, he could not locate Sap McGill, but he did see Orlick, and Orlick saw him at the same time, and tried vainly and frantically to force his horse out of the *mêlée*.

As Hatfield forged his way nearer and nearer, Orlick raised his pistol and fired at him. But at that instant a horse reared between them, and the animal received the ball in the head and fell back against Johnse's mount, knocking it to its knees. When Hatfield saw Orlick again, he was on the outer edge of the combat, and would have been away had not a man seized Orlick's bridle and held on. Johnse saw him fire in the man's face, and saw the man's head disappear.

Free at last, Orlick turned and drove his horse up the road toward town like the wind. Hatfield now stabbed

his horse cruelly, and forced it up, over and through the fighting mass, and followed Orlick, leaving the battle behind. But Orlick's horse was a swift and powerful animal, and Hatfield lost ground.

All this while Buddy Lutts had been busy. He had climbed to the top of a clay bank, forty feet above, and was sharp-shooting with telling effect. Looking down in the moon mist upon the struggle, it was hard for him to distinguish the enemy from his own people, but every time he saw a man break away and run back toward the town, he knew it to be a McGill and he fired with careful aim.

It was while thus engaged that the boy discerned Orlick's big gray leap out and gallop toward town. Buddy raised his rifle and pulled the trigger, but there was no report. His gun was empty. While he was fumbling nervously in his haste to re-load, he saw the piebald break out and dash up the road and he knew that Johnse was after Orlick. When Buddy had loaded the rifle, he crept along the brow of the hill and started to run after Hatfield. He had not gone far when he came unexpectedly upon four men. The boy, startled, jerked his rifle to his shoulder, when the men in his path threw up their hands, one holding a white handkerchief above his head and calling upon the boy not to shoot.

Ignoring their friendly overtures, Buddy circled around them and ran onward at top speed toward town. The men were Logan and the three newspaper reporters, following the progress of the fight at the risk of their lives. Johnse Hatfield already had five bullets in his body and was bleeding profusely, but

he spurred ahead unmindful of his wounds, keeping the fleeing gray in sight.

When Orlick turned the corner and vanished, Johnse called upon his mare for all the speed that was in her. As he made the corner and swerved to the right past Eversole's store, old Hank jumped out and fired upon him. The ball broke Johnse's left arm and his pistol slipped from a nerveless hand to the ground.

Undaunted, and without slacking his pace, Hatfield wheeled in the saddle and fired two quick shots with his right. He saw old Eversole pitch headlong into the horse-trough. Because of a line of trees that cast a black shadow along the main street, he could not now see Orlick's gray, but he could hear the tattoo of the horse's hoofs. Determined to overtake this traitor, Hatfield urged his mare to her utmost. In a few seconds the big gray came out into the moonlight again, and Hatfield saw that Orlick was headed for the river.

As Hatfield divined Orlick's intentions, a savage joy stirred within him and mitigated the torture of a shattered arm and other bodily wounds. He knew that if Orlick attempted to ford that swift, roaring river that he (Hatfield) would get the shot for which he thirsted and, as he spurred his horse after Orlick and felt his strength fast failing him, he fought this weakness off with a mighty will, buoyed up with the thought of how he would at last take toll from this traitor for his part in the killing of old Captain Lutts.

As Johnse flew along, he saw the gray disappear down the river bank. The next minute he was surprised to see the horse plunging back up into sight.

Then the horse pivoted and went down again. Then back up the bank he lunged a second time, and Hatfield could hear Orlick cursing the animal, and he knew that for some reason the horse had balked and would not take to the water.

A shock of delight instilled new strength into Hatfield, whose blood had been ebbing away for the past three-quarters of an hour. At this particular spot on the river bank there were no trees, and the rim of the river was destitute of rocks sufficiently large to offer protection for a man's form. But, standing back from the road and some four hundred feet distant from the river bank, there was a deserted old shack with sagging porch and dismantled windows. And just outside the broken picket fence at the near corner of the yard there stood a huge chestnut tree with a thick body.

While Orlick was wrangling with his refractory horse, his actions made it plain to Hatfield that he had marked that tree. Then, evidently despairing of controlling the stubborn animal, he slid to the ground, obviously bent upon making the shelter of the chestnut. Hatfield now bore down upon him, swerving to the right of the road to thwart Orlick's attempt to reach the tree. Whereupon Orlick ran back and along the bank, and dropped in the high weeds.

Hatfield, weak and totally exhausted from pain and loss of blood, now stopped his horse and fell out of the saddle. He gripped his Colt and tottered toward the spot where he had last seen Orlick, but he knew that Orlick would not be on that exact spot. He knew that the man was bellying away like a snake

through the grass somewhere. Knowing that he would not last much longer, and desperate in his eagerness to flush Orlick, he stumbled recklessly about through high weeds with his gun out before him and his eyes darting here and there.

Suddenly Orlick jumped up fifty feet to the right in the direction of the chestnut tree and fired. Hatfield also fired at the same time. The two reports seemed to consolidate and make a single echo that quivered across the river. Hatfield pulled the trigger again, but it only clicked emptily and did not respond. Orlick was still upright, but motionless. Hatfield wondered why he did not shoot. Orlick's shot had struck him in the arm that already hung useless and limp at his side. He stood watching him curiously. Then he saw Orlick thrust his gun in its holster and sit down on the ground, as if to rest. He held this position for several seconds—then lay back slowly, flat on his back.

Hatfield suspected Orlick of treachery and hastily proceeded to break his gun with his good hand. This he contrived to do, and while he was fumbling for cartridges, of which he had a countless number, a blinding faintness seized him and, thinking that he was falling backward into the river, he threw up his good arm suddenly to catch his balance. The gun flew out of his grasp and rolled down the embankment.

The next instant he fell forward and lay still on his face in the weeds.

CHAPTER XIX

HATFIELD OVERTAKES THE TRAITOR

BY and by, Hatfield opened his eyes to find that his horse was nosing his face with his warm, rough lips as if bent on waking him up. Johnse lifted his aching eyes toward the moon.

He calculated that he had lain there fully an hour or more. His left arm held him in an agony of torture. His whole body was racked with shooting pains traversing from his head down and back again. His smiling lips were now cracked and bloodless. Gladly he would have exchanged the life left in him for a cup of water. All the events of this night filtered back into his consciousness. He felt instinctively for his guns; then recalled what had become of them.

Remembering where he had seen Orlick lie down in the weeds, he wondered if he was still there. Impelled by a consuming curiosity to know what had become of this hated enemy, he struggled up and, dragging his dead, limp arm along, he hobbled on his knees and one hand toward the chestnut trees. At the end of a few tortuous minutes, which seemed hours of suffering, he saw the bottom of Orlick's feet.

Orlick must have heard this ominous, heavy breathing, for suddenly he raised on his elbow and looked.

“Aw—hell!” gasped Hatfield. “I ’lowed yo’ wus daid—yo’ wild hawg.”

His voice carried a volume of reproach and disgust.

“Where yo’-all bin—hain’t I got ez much right to cum back ez yo’ hev?” snarled his weak, wounded foe.

“Naw, yo’ hain’t—yo’ hain’t never had no right on earth,” growled Hatfield in tones that dwindled feebly to a malevolent hiss. “Traitors like yo’ hain’t hardly fittin’ fo’ hell—yo he’pt kill Cap Lutts, didn’t yo’—eh?—didn’t yo’—eh? An’ yo’ he’pt kill Mart Harper, didn’t yo’—eh? An’ yo’ spied fer Sap and them fellers thet kilt Don Perry, didn’t yo’—eh? An’ thet hain’t all, yo’ bin a traitin’ up Moonway fo’ five year—I’m goin’ t’ finish yo’ now—I’ll finish yo’—jest wait til I git my breath an’ I’ll settle yo’, shor’n hell.”

Hatfield’s head dropped down in the grass and he lay panting.

Orlick then struggled to his knees, impelled by some cryptic terror that imparted to him a measure of astounding vitality, and crawled away toward the deserted shack like a turtle. Hatfield, determined not to lose sight of him, crawled along tenaciously ten feet in the rear.

The ground under the chestnut tree and along the picket fence of the old shack had been stamped and worn bare by roving stock. When Orlick reached this bare spot, he tumbled flat and inert. In a few minutes more Hatfield came up, spent and heaving and unable to go another foot. He fell prone with his good arm stretched out and his clutching fingers within twelve inches of Orlick’s throat. Orlick’s body was in the shadow of the chestnut tree, but his head and

neck were plainly visible in the moonlight. He turned his face and looked wearily at the impotent hand that was reaching for him—then his dull eyes followed the arm down to the dark visage with its smiling marble-white lips, and he wagged his head indifferently. Hatfield spoke again between teeth that gritted down upon the agony of his wounds:

“Coward—what yo’ a runnin’ fo’?”

He got no response.

“Wait ’til I rest a minute, an’ I’ll finish yo’, shore—leastways, I plugged yo’ gud—eh?”

Orlick’s bloodless lips moved now.

“Yo’ don’t look so damn peert,” he groaned back.

“Yo’ didn’t do hit—by Gad—yo’ hit me in th’ arm, an’ hit was already busted—ha!—ha!—I didn’t feel what yo’ done,” Hatfield laughed weakly, but derisively. “Leastways, yo’ won’t be a traitin’ up in Moon again so soon. I plugged yo’ gud, eh?” he ended jeeringly, venting a sound that in health would have mounted to a loud laugh, but which was only a faint gurgle in his throat.

“An’ yo’ ’lowed yo’d git Belle-Ann, eh? Yo’ mouse-dog—yo’ ’lowed Belle-Ann ’ud parley with sich as yo’—eh? Ef I wusn’t so tired I’d laugh ’til I’d bust—say, skunk—yo’ ’lowed I didn’t know—but I knowed all ’long—I had my eye on yo’—yo’ karnsarned wild hawg. I was a watchin’ yo’—say—yo’ ’member when yo’ grabbed Belle-Ann in th’ yard thet time—I was ahind th’ corn crib, an’ I hed a bead on yo’—I’d a kilt yo’ then pint-blank ef Belle-Ann hadn’t bin so clost—I started after yo’, an’ when yo’ let her loose I got ahind the wagon-bed an’ waited. Say—Belle-

Ann give yo' the run, didn't she—eh? Didn't she run yo'—eh? Say, louse—Belle-Ann wouldn't spit on yo', she wouldn't—not her. Did she run yo'—eh? Gawd'll Moughty!—I wish I could laugh gud an' plenty—I'm aimin' to finish yo' in a minute—when I rest—then yo' he'pt kill her pap—an' I reckon yo' he'pt kill Lem—eh?"

Orlick now seemed to be beyond all fear of the hand with its menacing fingers that wriggled toward him, and the malicious dying face below. A half grin touched Orlick's pallid lips and curled into the symbol of a pleasing memory as he said:

"I—I—'low — peaches'll be 'round — 'fore Lem air——"

This amazing insult threw Johnse into a fit of rage. He mumbled curses, but could not budge. The fingers within a foot of Orlick's neck worked convulsively and rigorously. A siege of coughing choked his maledictions and blood issued from his mouth. His fingers clawed into the soil and closed and, with a mighty effort, he tossed the dirt into Orlick's face. Presently he again found breath and words.

"I'm a cummin' after yo' now—now, I'm a cummin'—I'll guzzle yo' now——" but he did not move.

"Why don't yo' shoot?" inquired Orlick, with no show of concern.

"Why don't yo' shoot—skunk—coward?" wheezed Hatfield through clinched teeth.

"Lend me a cart'age an' I'll shore 'commodate yo'," returned Orlick.

"Yo' shove thet gun down an' I'll shore help yo' 'long a pinch," suggested Johnse, struggling vainly

to drag his body just a foot that his hand might close upon Orlick's throat.

The facilities for wreaking final vengeance upon each other was a disjunctive irony divided equally between them. Neither had sufficient strength or vitality left for bodily combat, and Orlick possessed the gun, while Hatfield had the cartridges. Had fate favored one, at that instant, with the possession of both, he could not have possibly missed, with their faces less than four feet apart.

"Say—skunk—we'll draw fo' em both—heer me?" suggested Hatfield. "I got th' cart'ages—we'll draw—I know yore a traitor—but I got t' take a chanct on yo'—we'll draw—heer me? Ef I win, yo' shove me the gun—ef yo' win, I'll shove yo' a cart'age—damn yo'——"

"Damn yo'—I'll take yo' up," agreed Orlick thickly.

While these two helpless belligerents lay in the moonlight, slowly bleeding to death and scowling at each other, Johnse, at length, laid his fingers on a twig which he broke into two parts, attended with infinite pain. Then where his hand lay he clawed up more dirt into a minute mound. Into this he stuck the long stick and beside it the short one. Then he pulled them out again and hissed a scathing reprimand at Orlick.

"Yore a lookin'—traitor——!"

Orlick slowly averted his face.

A brief silence ensued, broken only by the roar of the river and the wheezing of their breaths. Again Johnse stammered:

“Now draw—draw now, coward—take yore pick—heer me?—draw——”

Over in the road a roving hound squatted his gaunt shape, and lifting his muzzle up to the moon, howled long and piteously.

In the meantime Buddy Lutts had dodged along, avoiding the road until he reached a narrow plot of underbrush that separated him from the first row of frame houses. Here he lay and watched for a chance to proceed along the road. He could not see the road directly beneath him, but through an aperture he held a diagonal view of the highway for a distance of some fifty yards.

Like projections of a cinematograph, he saw the forms of men flitting past this moonlit gap, running toward town. But he could not distinguish the pursued from the pursuers. He also saw some horses gallop past with empty saddles. One of these derelicts stopped short, framed in the light of the gap, and turned to cropping at the roadside with reins dragging about his hoofs. Far behind him the noise of the conflict echoed back in desultory, straggling shots. These reports emanated also from a remote quarter of the tobacco field opposite where Buddy lay, and from the direction of the Courthouse.

The boy instinctively knew that the real battle was over; he knew that his people had crushed and annihilated the main body of the McGill forces in less than ten minutes, at the gate of the fated graveyard. He furthermore knew that the tail of this fight was backing toward the town, where it would quiver and stir, and would not die until sunrise. It had dwin-

dled down to a "bush-whacking" contest. It was now a nocturnal game of hide-and-seek, with death lurking in the shadows and behind every object that offered refuge.

As the boy lay concealed, watching and listening with his rifle beside him, his untaught soul was profoundly exercised with the triumph of this victory. In truth, he would have been almost happy had he not been assailed with a sudden, acute apprehension concerning Hatfield. He had seen Johnse's horse tear up the road after Orlick, but he had not, as yet, seen any signs of Hatfield's returning. At the rate the two were going, he deemed it time for Johnse to be on his way back.

Buddy debated as to whether he should continue on beneath the shadows of the trees which skirted the rear gardens and outbuildings of the frame houses just ahead. He was now deeply perturbed about Hatfield. After a minute's deliberation, he quickly arrived at a determination to face the dangers presented at every turn and push onward and look for Johnse.

With this quest firmly in mind, he reasoned that to pass behind the houses was, on that hand, taking a great risk. He knew that every house in Junction City was in darkness, barred and bolted, with shutters closed and blinds drawn, the inmates not daring so much as to peep out. But he did not know what these back yards held for him.

In hours of strife, mountaineers can never be found in their houses with the women, but they are often found near their homes, hiding out. Besides, Buddy knew that he could not mislead the sagacious senses

of the ever-present hounds. Growing more anxious momentarily, he at length decided that it was less perilous to take the open road, where he could at least see around him, and rely upon the wayside shadows for protection.

To this end, the boy crept out of his concealment, making his way noiselessly down the slope through the brush tangle and saplings. He crept down to the corner of a house which had no enclosed front yard, and looked furtively up and down the street. The road was apparently clear now, save the vague outlines of a few wandering horses. Buddy slipped across the highway, to the vista of sable shadows that followed the rail fence and then, in a half-stooping posture, ran toward the main street as fast as his legs could propel him.

As he hastened along with his eyes furtively ahead, a sow jumped out from the thistles in a fence corner and gave Buddy an awful fright. He finally reached the Courthouse square, and hiding behind a wagon, cast his eyes around in every direction. The Courthouse doors and windows were open, and the building was plainly deserted. A sepulchral stillness pervaded the square, and there was no visible sign of the conflict which, the boy knew, was still smouldering, for the night wind still carried the muffled sounds of rifle-shots from the South, and from the distant end of the street westward.

CHAPTER XX

IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY

BUDDY knew that Hatfield would be compelled to return southward by the same route he had gone. But here the boy was confronted with the problem of the route Orlick had led his pursuer, when the two had reached the square. It was gravely essential that he decide quickly upon some action, for the boy realized fully that his life was in jeopardy every moment he lingered here in the midst of the enemy.

While he hoped vainly to catch sight of some of his own people, and appealed to his judgment to point out to him the direction Hatfield had taken, he suddenly discerned two men trotting down the middle of the road, running close together with rifles at ready position. Buddy fell down flat on the ground and watched through the spokes of the wagon wheels.

The men halted at Eversole's store, and looked up at the windows overhead. Then they whistled softly. Then they went around to the front of the store, and Buddy heard them knock several times on the closed door. Evidently getting no response, they turned about, and the next instant Buddy heard a loud, profane exclamation and saw them pulling something out

of the horse-trough. At this distance, in the semi-darkness, Buddy could not distinguish what the object was they labored over, and did not then know it was the dead body of old Eversole.

As the boy was straining his eyes, now for the moment half forgetful of his perilous whereabouts, he was suddenly electrified by voices behind him. He shrank close to the ground, and casting a look in the rear, observed the forms of three men approaching along the South road. Now acutely alive to his danger, Buddy's eyes swept the shadows to the left, the only avenue open for retreat. His searching eyes lit upon a rockaway carriage, with the tongue propped up, standing at the roadside some two hundred feet distant. He crawfished cautiously toward this lone vehicle, dragging his rifle after him through the dust of the road. When the three men had advanced and were on a direct line ahead, bringing the wagon in between, and thereby screening him, the boy darted safely to the shadow of the carriage and peered out at the men, who now quickened their pace toward the two at the horse-trough.

Thinking that the carriage would afford a reasonably safe hiding place for the moment, Buddy decided to climb inside, where he could peep out at the five men in front of Eversole's store, and at the same time watch the highway for Johnse Hatfield. The boy knew that, if he could remain unseen long enough, it was only a question of time ere some of his own faction would come upon the scene, affording him protection and assistance in seeking Hatfield.

Now bent upon secreting himself inside the car-

riage until the way was clear, and, in the meantime, determine what was the most likely route Orlick had taken to escape Hatfield's vengeance, Buddy opened the carriage door, but fell back, amazed and startled, as the limp body of a dead man tumbled out upon him. Recovering quickly from this surprise, Buddy took a look at the face. The body lolled half out of the vehicle, one arm and the head hanging down between the wheels. Although the face was outward, it was at the same time downward past the step of the vehicle, and in this inverted position the boy could not have recognized his best friend in the wan moonlight.

He shot a swift look around him and across toward Eversole's store—then laying his rifle on the ground, he lifted the dead man's head up and scrutinized it closely. As Buddy had never known Steve Barlow, the face was strange to him, and he was in the act of easing his gruesome burden down, when soft sounds like muffled footsteps startled him. They were close to him, seemingly coming from the opposite side of the carriage.

Without waiting an instant or even looking a second time, Buddy jerked his hands free, grabbed his gun, and made a headlong dive across the plank-walk and sprawled against the picket fence, at bay, but with gun pointed toward the carriage and ready to die fighting and take a toll for his own life.

His little heart beat wildly for the next few seconds. Affrighted, he had dropped his burden so suddenly that its weight had jerked the other arm outside, and now the inverted dead face swung to and fro, and

gesticulated between the wheels in the moonlight. Then under and behind this grim pantomime, the boy could discern the vague outlines of legs in the dense shadow cast by the carriage.

Buddy did not court shots from the front, but he had always dreaded a shot in the back, and he knew that the McGills would show no quarter, not even to a boy, much less a Lutts boy. In reality, it was less than fifteen seconds that Buddy lay with finger in the trigger-guard, staring at that veiled, menacing shadow stirring near at hand, but it seemed very much longer to the boy. He could not endure the suspense, and just as he began to crawl stealthily along the fence, a riderless, unshod horse stepped leisurely from the gloom and walked noiselessly through the thick dust.

Buddy heaved a long breath and leaned back against the fence. The horse was a light dun, with black mane and tail. He wore a saddle and the reins dragged. The animal stopped and pricked up his ears in Buddy's direction, then strolled over in the Courthouse yard, champing his bit noisily, a preface which Buddy thought the horse had previously omitted with mischievous intent.

In an instant Buddy was all action. He slipped across to a tree and peered toward the store. The five men appeared to be carrying something, as nearly as Buddy could make out, into Eversole's side gate. Now was his time to leave this spot. Here he committed a very boyish and extremely indiscreet act. The dun horse stood idly by, waiting for some one to ride him. The empty saddle invited Buddy to mount, with

an insistence that the boy could not resist, in the stress of the moment, and his earnest desire to get away quickly. The animal being unshod and the dust being dense, his chances of escape looked favorable, while the men were in Eversole's yard.

Without another moment's deliberation, Buddy succumbed to this sudden impulse. Wherefore, he pulled his gun strap over his head and thrust his arms through, making the weapon fit snugly at his back, and in a jiffy he was in the saddle.

He reached up to an overhanging bough and possessed himself of a keen switch and, wheeling the dun horse, was ready for a dash down the road. As a precaution, he urged the horse up close into the shadow of the Courthouse to make sure the men had disappeared. The horse, eager to be away, was prancing now and rattling his bit noisily. As Buddy leaned out from the saddle, with his eyes fixed intently on the store, a shot echoed up from the distant river, and oddly enough, Buddy determined in that instant to take toward the river, instead of the north road. But in that same instant a disastrous thing happened which sent Buddy afoot down that river road faster than he had intended to go, and sorely worsted.

When he turned his head, a man was standing at the horse's head with a firm hold on the bridle. Without a word, the man led the horse out of the shadows into the moonlight. This man was hatless, and his head was swathed about with bandages, and his right arm was trussed up in a sling. When he lifted his face and scowled up at Buddy, a shiver traversed the

boy's spine and made the perspiration start in his hair.

Buddy could not mistake. It was the evil, murderous visage of Sap McGill. The boy was in the hands of the enemy at last. The hand that held the rein also clutched a pistol. Dropping the rein, McGill pulled Buddy off the horse.

"So besides bein' a Lutts—yore a hoss thief t' boot, air ye?—well—by-damn!"

Sap cursed Buddy eloquently and long. Buddy said not a word. He felt that his time had come. He only gazed fixedly at the ugly face over him, convulsed and working with passion. McGill jerked the boy around and called out loudly toward the store:

"Hey—Stump—yo', Stump—cum out!"

After calling several times, two men appeared in response, at the side gate, back of the store.

"Cum on over, Stump—I keetched this fuzzy little Lutts runt a stealin' my hoss—hain't thet th' all-firedest beatenst nerve ye ever heerd tell on—cum git thes hoss while I ring thes little cuss's neck."

Sap's left hand clutching Buddy's shoulder, also retained the pistol which encumbered his grip, and as the two men advanced, Buddy threw all his strength into a sudden twist, breaking loose, and fled down the road toward the river with all the might that was in his skinny legs.

In his flight he stooped, and straightened, and ran zigzag; performing every trick known to him calculated to dodge a bullet. Buddy did artfully dodge two balls which Sap sent after him, but the third bullet tripped between his arm and his body, burning a fur-

row on both sides, and the fourth pinched a piece out of his shoulder. But these sensations only lent wings to Buddy's feet, and handicapped as he was, with his rifle double hitched over his shoulders, he fairly sailed.

When he reached the black shadows of the line of trees that reached out toward the river, he ventured a look over his shoulder. Sap had stopped, but the other two men were in hot pursuit. Buddy could not possibly travel any faster than he was going then, but his pace soon distanced his pursuers. When the boy observed that they were losing ground, he darted across a vacant plot between the shacks and continued on, stumbling now along the darkened, unfamiliar paths back of the houses, leading toward the river. Finally he paused and stood panting and listening. Amid these shades it was too dark for him to see more than fifty feet distant. He could hear nothing but the barking of hounds and the beating of his own heart. The men who had started out after him had evidently given up the chase. But wishing to place a safe distance between himself and these prowling enemies, the boy ran onward, and did not stop until he was a quarter of a mile past the last house.

CHAPTER XXI

“DRAW—NOW—COWARD!”

HERE he slackened to a walk and, turning over, crossed into the road. He felt of his shoulder gingerly. It did not appear to be bleeding much, but the wound under his arm stung and burned and he could feel the warm blood trickling down his side, and along his arm, also.

As he stood in the road extricating himself from the unusual manner in which he had harnessed his rifle to his shoulders, he was startled by the rapid hoof-beats of an approaching horse. Believing that the McGills were coming after him again, Buddy ran across the road, then hurried toward the river under cover of the wayside brush. He came suddenly upon a broken-down shack, and as the sounds of the galloping hoofs grew more distinct, Buddy dropped to his knees and crawled through a rent in the dilapidated fence and lay down in the weeds with his face toward the road, and waited for a few seconds.

Then he thrust his head between the broken pickets, and looked up the road. A horse was coming onward at a fearful, breakneck pace, and behind him followed three or four other horsemen. In the moonlight, Buddy could plainly see the white cloths around the foremost rider's head. It was Sap McGill on the dun

horse. Judging from the terrific rate at which the lead horse was leaping over the road, Buddy felt sure that they would pass him by. The boy drew his head in and waited, breathlessly. Then Sap McGill dashed past, and just as he did so two shots rang out, and McGill tumbled out of the saddle and sprawled in the middle of the road, where he lay still, while his horse continued on.

At this unexpected turn, a great light broke in upon Buddy, and his heart went apatter with joy. He knew now that the men following McGill were his own people. He scurried through the aperture in the fence, but the men had wheeled about and were galloping back as swiftly as they had come.

Buddy hallooed at the top of his lungs, but the noise of their horses' feet drowned his voice and they raced on and away. As Buddy reached back through the fence and pulled his rifle to him, preparatory to running after the men, he was arrested by the sound of a human voice. He stood puzzled and mystified. He could see nothing, but the voice was uncannily near; seemingly at his very feet.

Buddy cast an awesome look toward the battered, deserted shack with its yawning, sinister windows, and a grave suspicion stole upon him, and mounted to a fear that embraced his soul, and set his knees atremble. The house was haunted!

Buddy shrank away from the fence, moved by a fear that nothing else could inspire, and which has no kindred terror, but he only made two steps. The same voice held him rooted to the spot. This time there was a timbre in the inarticulate utterance that

was strangely familiar to Buddy. Then the mysterious voice formed words that were clearly intelligible:

“Now draw—draw now—coward—take yore pick—hear me?—draw——”

Buddy knew that voice too well to question it further. He hurried around the corner of the fence, and out under the chestnut tree, where he stopped short for the space of a moment, spellbound and dismayed, mutely gazing at the two prostrate forms stretched eerily before him in the gleam of the moon. The next instant Buddy was on his knees beside Hatfield.

“Johnse—Johnse—air yo’ kilt—air yo’ hurted bad——?”

“Air thet yo’—little Cap?” inquired Johnse feebly.

“Sho’—I bin a huntin’ yo’—air yo’ hit bad, Johnse?”

“I’m scratched up some, boy; twixt us two, I don’t feel as skeetish as I ded ’bout sun-down. Say, Buddy, th’ coward won’t draw—I knowed he wouldn’t—I jest knowed he’d throw in some ornery trick. Say, Buddy, give me yore rifle-gun down heah—an’ fix th’ muzzle in his ear fo’ me—I lost my Colts—hurry long—han’ yore gun down, Buddy——”

The boy had been making a hasty examination of the familiar form that lay inert beside Hatfield. He now leaned over Johnse again.

“Orlick’s daid,” announced the boy.

“Oh, air he?” said Johnse. “I ’low I’ll scuse em then fo’ not drawin’—I knowed I hit em hard—but I didn’t think he ’lowed to die—th’ way he jest naturally hung on—he air so karnsarned tricky. Say, Buddy—how is hit a goin’—air th’ fellers at em yit?”

"Sho'—we'uns licked 'em bully, Johnse—they's jest a playin' tag now up in town—Sap plugged me twict up by ole Hank's store, as I cum by—Johnse, I got t' rack out now an' git th' men to tote yo' to th' wagons—I reckon th' doc-man kin peert yo' up a pinch—does yo' hurt bad, Johnse?"

"Ded Sap plug yo', Buddy?"

"Yep—hit don't hurt powerful bad though—an' our men jest plugged Sap, jest now—didn't yo'-all heer th' shoots?"

"I mought hev, Buddy,—but I wus powerful busy arguing with Orlick—yo' sho' they got Sap?"

"Sho," reassured Buddy. "He air a layin' up on th' road yonder now—I got t' rack out an' git yo' away from heah now."

"An' I got ole Hank—Gawd'll Moughty!—hain't we'uns in luck?"

Hatfield's voice sunk now to a thin, lingering whisper.

"Buddy," he muttered wearily, "'fore yo' go—kin yo' fetch me a speck o' water—jest a mouthful o' water somehow——"

The boy hurried behind the old shack in quest of something that would hold water. He found an old tomato can, but there was a rent in its bottom. Presently, he caught sight of a rusty tin bucket hanging by a wire, against a rotting porch post. He dumped the earth and dried roots out of this and held the bucket up to the moon. Then he ran toward the river. When he returned a few minutes later with the water, he was trailing Hatfield's piebald mare after him. The wounded man gulped the water greedily and

Buddy unknotted the handkerchief about his neck and bathed his head.

“I air goin’ now, Johnse,” said Buddy. “Yo’ jest lay easy like, an’ I’ll be back with somebuddy ’fore a goat kin wig his tail.”

Whereupon, Buddy mounted the mare and galloped toward the courthouse, unafraid. In less than half an hour, Buddy galloped back, accompanied by six horsemen. They lifted the maimed, unconscious Hatfield and bore him away. As the cortége moved slowly up the moonlit road bearing their wounded leader, little Buddy turned the mare back, and cantered down toward the river to the spot where he had seen Sap McGill tumble out of the saddle when the Lutts’ had fired upon him. But the boy was acutely disappointed. McGill was gone. And three bony, starved dogs with ravenous, wolfish eyes that gleamed in the moonlight, were licking at a pool of blood in the road.

The immeasurable canopy above the hills was clear and pearly, save a narrow reef of low clouds that anchored over the serried peaks of Southpaw. Clouds frowning against the sun, grim and somber and splotched with a sable film that seemingly reflected a stratum of despair and gloom that tides of time could not erase.

Down upon the Moon mountain range, the sun smiled with an affiliating mellowness that found grateful response in the hearts of the denizens, despite the fact that the coves were scarred with new-made mounds, and their cabins were not without the wounded.

And dividing these two mighty ranges of victory

and defeat, the frenzied waters of Hellsfork dinned a neutral warning, reiterating an idiom that boomed like the omen of a tom-tom.

For the past three weeks the Lutts' cabin had been utilized as an improvised hospital. Three of the men who had lingered there had departed to their respective homes, leaving Johnse Hatfield propped up in the "four-poster" alone.

Buddy Lutts' hurts, while painful and stubborn, were flesh wounds, and the boy had spurned the bed. Slab, the negro, was a willing and deft helper. And Buddy attended Johnse with the devotion born of idolization. In Buddy's boyish appreciation Johnse Hatfield was now a hero, seconded only by his dead father's memory. One bullet had gone entirely through Hatfield, leaving six lodged therein. The surgeon from Hazard had extracted every other one, leaving three inside of Johnse. The doctor did not advance any prophecies direct, because he was not interrogated, but he told the "Ridin' parson" who had been up to the Lutts' house, that in two weeks more Johnse would be up and out, a little heavier, but sound as a grindstone.

Just at dawn each day, Johnse would open his eyes, yawn and vent an observation he had repeated regularly for three weeks:

"Well—I 'low I'll go up t' th' still long 'bout noon-time, Buddy—air yo' a goin' long?—little Cap?"

Whereupon, Buddy would bring in the breakfast which old Slab had ready for him. Then Buddy would go to the "what-not" and get the treasured newspaper, and without protest, Johnse would read it all over to

the boy, just as he had done each day since the paper had arrived. Logan, the audacious lawyer from the Blue-Grass, who had bearded the McGill faction in their own courthouse, had, thoughtfully, sent Johnse Hatfield a Frankfort newspaper, as a significant token of some sort of respect. The front side of this daily bore a picture, gotten up from description, of Johnse Hatfield. And under this spurious representation were three full-length columns presenting a graphic description of the “Bloodiest Clash in the History of Feudal Warfare,” followed by details of the “Graveyard Massacre” by an eye-witness.

According to these reporters, out of some eighty-eight men, who dashed down the road on that fateful night to slaughter the Lutts clan, forty-two of them never got away alive from the graveyard façade.

To Buddy Lutts’ keen appreciation, the only flaw in this wholesome narrative was the printed rumor that Sap McGill had escaped and was slowly recuperating over in Southpaw.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MISSION SCHOOL

'**T**WAS some days ere Belle-Ann fitted her mood to her strange environments. The Mission School at Proctor was a beautiful place—a great rambling structure on the apex of a hill overlooking the picturesque Kentucky River. The building was girded with a continuous, spacious porch, and hemmed about with flowers, the identity of which was unknown to her. The grounds behind were unstinting, and reached half a mile back to the mountain abutting it.

Flanking the building proper, on the verdant esplanade, stood a superb statue of Daniel Boone, embellished with a gurgling fountain which the State had recently reared on this spot where Boone had built his historic fortress.

Belle-Ann was allotted a cozy little room with white enamel furniture, and pretty curtains, and quaint Japanese matting, the like of which had never met her admiring eyes.

Withal, Belle-Ann was deeply pleased with her new surroundings—with the other scholars and with the teachers. But so much had been crowded into her young life of late, coupled with the pang of parting

from her home, that it was days before her mood aroused itself to the necessity of application.

When she did begin her lessons, it was with an assiduous energy and receptive aptitude that not only attracted the teachers, but the other pupils likewise. From the outset, she developed an inordinate thirst for grammar. Indeed, a great part of the time out of study hours, she carried her grammar about with her, peeping into it anon, spelling, repeating, and pondering over its phrases—never tiring of its dawning mysteries and vast possibilities.

The Mission School, familiarly designated as the Chapel, was not an academic institution of classics and national renown, but it was of State-wide repute and an oasis of preparatory learning amidst the barren lives of mountain youth, hitherto isolated and deprived of the advantages of his more fortunate Blue-Grass cousins.

Miss Virginia Worth, in charge of the Chapel, was as agreeably impressed with Belle-Ann as the girl was pleased with the charming teacher. Miss Worth was a woman of thirty-seven, with an abundance of perfectly white hair and the fresh, smooth face of a girl of twenty. Upon this benign, wholesome countenance there dwelt an ever-present sympathy and love for mankind. In her gray eyes was a look of succor that beckoned suffering to her. Oddly enough, a woman of private wealth, she had made the uplift of the mountain folk her life work.

Moreover, Miss Worth was a woman of deep and unerring penetration,—of careful and soothing diplomacy—she had made a life study of the ways of the

human heart. With true divinity, she had stepped out into the world, smiling, amidst the trivialities and dissensions, and weaknesses that assail and tempt and twist and scar the lives of humanity.

In the fountain of her spontaneous Christian soul, she had a lotion for them all. From the first, it was this benevolent woman's smile that drew Belle-Ann to her—a look that reminded the girl keenly of Maw Lutts' perennial smile, and spread an aftermath that carried her back to days of utter happiness.

Ill things of the soul are oft concealed through the measures of a life-time. Thus, when its tenancy is predestined,—but when a spirit is unmated to evil, its odious residue gravitates like cork to the surface and speedily floats in the eyes.

From the beginning there was an indefinable underlying something permeating this sweet-faced girl that had come to her from out of the wilderness—a something that sorely puzzled the good Miss Worth. It was like a single elusive carbon spot hidden away in the core of an otherwise perfect diamond—a spot that reflected through the eyes in fleeting transitory glints—a mote-flash that could not be located—baffling discernment only under powerful, expert analysis.

Miss Worth loved the girl. She loved her straightway from the minute that she had held her small, shapely hand, and listened to the timbre of that shy, dulcet voice. She had never seen eyes tinted like these. She marvelled at her curls. Her perfect delicate, Grecian features filled Miss Worth with a lasting wonder.

Through the Reverend Peterson she heard the tragic

history of the girl's comely mother, but she could not conceive a heredity sufficiently generous to give the beauty made adorably manifest in this girl of the hills. In every movement her natural artless grace was as a rhythm of poetry.

Miss Worth then recognized an extraordinary character—the fibre of a beautiful, wonderful, lovable womanhood—a girl who could, with the embellishments of education and adornments of fashion, go into the sphere of any secular circle of society in any municipality and create a furore. She was quick to foresee an interesting future for her new protégée, if she could only discover the elusive defect that she could not name, but which was palpably present to her keen senses, versed in thought reading and the pathology of organic character ailments.

Very many times, as the days slipped by, she observed flashes of that sober, mystifying light in Belle-Ann's eyes—a sudden quick, almost vindictive dropping of the sweet lips that showed, otherwise, a dimpled upturn. It followed that Miss Worth devoted extra care to Belle-Ann's tutorage—all the while bent upon deftly angling for that alien, shifting thing that a casual observer would have passed unnoticed.

The second Sunday following Belle-Ann's arrival at the school, Miss Worth presented to her an elderly gentleman of distinguished mien and marked personality, and of whom the girl was destined to see much thereafter. This engaging personage was Colonel Amos Tennytown, who resided down Blue-Grass way, and who visited the school, sometimes during the week, but most generally on a Sunday.

Belle-Ann ever remembered her first meeting with this man, whose deferential manner was rich with little original courtesies which were innate manifestations of gentility that were born with the man. And his voice, in particular, carried a charm that was soothing and totally irresistible.

All this appealed to a certain latent delicacy that wove its hereditary fibre through this untaught mountain girl's being and stirred a response which had hitherto been dormant. She had known true hearts, honest and courageous, but she had never known polished mannerisms in men.

She recalled the radiant face and the suppressed tremor in Miss Worth's voice when that lady glided into Belle-Ann's room and announced that she wished to introduce her to a gentleman friend. Belle-Ann remembered her poignant embarrassment as she stood before him on the porch, shyly and acutely conscious of her own glaring deficiencies and simple gown, and of her determination at that first instant to excuse herself quickly and slip away—and of the manner in which she was instantly reassured.

Later, she recalled the keen interest he took in her at this first meeting, and how her case of blues vanished temporarily as she listened to his pleasing voice and was distracted by his courtly, cheery, easy manner. Her shyness forsook her straightway and she experienced a sense of having always known him. He came, ostensibly, to see Miss Worth, they being friends of long standing, and Belle-Ann remembered how he had gallantly bowed to Miss Worth, on leaving that first

day, when he laughingly removed the nosegay from his lapel and stuck it into Belle-Ann's curls.

She remembered that she was sorry when he departed, and stood on the porch with Miss Worth's arm around her, and helped her tutoress watch the tall, commanding figure of the Colonel receding down the sinuous path toward the ferry.

Many months had elapsed since that day, and it had come to pass that now Belle-Ann looked forward to Colonel Tennytown's coming with an eagerness that rendered her almost wistful. This had grown upon her in a subtle way, and in these days he was seemingly a vital connecting link between herself and some indefinable but palpable mystery that hung over her life, veiled by the opaque future.

Tom-John Benson had always, in his rough way, been thoughtful of his only child. Of late years, through necessity, he had been compelled to be away from her, working for a paltry wage. The Kentucky spirit, ever ready to give, is slow to take and, though sorely pressed, stands aloof from charity.

Long since, the good Reverend Peterson of the Diocese of Lexington had volunteered to give Tom-John Benson a free scholarship for his girl—an offer influenced mainly by the Christian spirit of his true missionary heart, and partially because he was sympathetically familiar with the pathos that enveloped the life of Belle-Ann's beautiful mother, who had deserted a luxurious home in Lexington and immured herself in the cloister of the Cumberland, never to emerge. But free scholarship did not appeal to Benson. His pride was less crude than his exterior. He bided his

time, and by dint of saving from his meagre wage, paid in full for Belle-Ann's schooling.

The fruits of Belle-Ann's close application to her studies were now made manifest in a way little short of marvelous. It was plain from the outset that she possessed a natural aptitude for the tasks set before her. She developed a love for books that grew into such ceaseless, indefatigable zeal that Miss Worth and Miss Ackerman, her under teacher, were often obliged to remonstrate with her. While the other girls were at tennis or some other diversion after hours, Belle-Ann was poring over her books with as deep absorption as if it were play. Very many times in the night Miss Worth, knowing her propensity for night study, would slip into her room and implore her to retire. She was fast winnowing out her mountain dialect, but there were some words that clung to her tongue tenaciously, despite her efforts to eliminate them.

She was the recipient of a letter each month from her father, always containing a small sum of money, calculated to maintain her simple wardrobe. Then one day she was delighted to receive a postal order for fifty dollars from her father, who stated that the company for whom he worked had given him entire charge of the mill at Catletsburg, and had advanced his pay. He stated, furthermore, that he wished her to buy some nice clothes with the money accompanying the letter.

Miss Worth, having three other schools to supervise in different sections of the county, was unable to spend more than two or three days at a time at Proctor. She being absent now, Miss Ackerman accompanied Belle-Ann across the river to Beattyville, where they pur-

chased two very neat and becoming dresses for Belle-Ann, together with various other needful articles. And now being able to write an intelligent and commendably legible letter, Belle-Ann indited an epistle to her father which abounded with original expressions of love, and wherein she expressed her gratitude to him, describing at length the things she had purchased with the money he had so thoughtfully allowed her.

CHAPTER XXIII

BELLE-ANN VISITS LEXINGTON

ONE evening after class hours, Belle-Ann was in her room engrossed in the pages of her grammar when Miss Worth entered. As the girl leaned over her book, her black curls tumbled about her face, she did not look up until Miss Worth spoke.

“Belle-Ann,” said Miss Worth, with a twinkle in her clear eyes. “I see I shall be obliged to lock all your books up in the closet.”

“And I shan’t complain if you-all allow me to carry the key,” returned Belle-Ann.

“But I would guard the key, dear,” declared her teacher, pushing the grammar aside and drawing Belle-Ann over to a sofa.

“But I can whittle—Lem taught me to whittle—I can make lots of funny things—and I would make a key with my pencil knife and open the door.”

“Then I would take away your wooden key and lock you, together with your books, in the closet.”

“Then I would pull the shortest hair from my crown and blow on both ends and make a wish and turn into an elf—no, a gnome,—no, that isn’t it either—anyhow, I would turn into something very thin and flat and slide out under the door.”

"But you couldn't get your books out, dear—and it would be too lonesome and dark to study in the closet."

"But I would catch some fire-flies out thah and slide back under the door—then I would have a light, and when I study I don't get lonesome."

"Then a sad thing would happen, my dear—I would be compelled to switch you——"

Belle-Ann vented a peal of pent-up glee and pulled the prematurely white head toward her.

"Then I would kiss you thah and thah and thah—I would do what you always tell me—I would give good for evil—and I would not switch you back, and would only squeeze you hard—like this——"

The woman in turn touched the dimpled, mischievous face fondly and kissed the red mouth, so temptingly close to her. Miss Worth the while had held a free hand behind her and in this hand she secreted something.

"I really didn't come in to frolic, Belle-Ann," she said. "I came to tell you something—rather to ask you to do something for us."

"Who's us, Miss Virginia?" quizzed Belle-Ann, her roguish, child-like curiosity superseding her levity.

"I mean for me—of course, I have talked this matter over with Colonel Tennytown—in fact, we have had it in mind a long time. As you already know, I have private means and an income that accumulates until I hardly know at times where to place it."

Miss Worth toyed with the ringlets of silky jet that crossed the girl's low brow.

"I love all my pupils," she went on, "but your little self has taken a hold upon my affections in a way that

no other pupil has ever done—and we feel—I feel that you have gifts and natural aptitudes that should not be neglected—and cultivation costs money, Belle-Ann, and I want you to borrow some money from me.”

Belle-Ann’s round violet eyes had grown wider with wonder, as she studied the youthful countenance of the woman with the white hair.

“But am I not at school heah?” she observed. “Besides, I don’t need money—deah daddy sent me fifty dollars last month and I have lots of that left, and heah it is near the end of the month and he will send more, too. I thank you-all so much, Miss Virginia—but——”

The teacher placed her hand over the ravishing mouth and left only the eloquent eyes protesting.

“You don’t seem to catch the import of my suggestion clearly, Belle-Ann,” admonished Miss Worth. “Your kind father is not in a position to afford you the kind of training and education that your energy and latent talents warrant. At the rate of your present progress, you will soon outstrip the advantages which a school like this can offer you. In less than another year, you will know all that we have here. I well know that you are not the girl to grow vain—but your voice has always stirred me like a miracle. I should accuse my own conscience if your voice went amiss for want of culture. You plainly possess musical instincts that are suffering now. We think that you should go, very shortly now, down to Lexington to the Seminary, where the facilities for your musical training are sufficiently good for the beginning—and event-

ually you can go abroad—to Germany—and the means will be forthcoming!”

“You mean—mean across the ocean?” cried Belle-Ann in amazement.

“Yes.”

“Alone—by myself?” she ejaculated.

“Well, we can’t tell—I may go with you,” predicted Miss Worth with an amused smile.

As the import of Miss Worth’s proposition filtered into her comprehension, an efflux of joy and gratitude bubbled up from the girl’s heart and tinged her dimples with carmine and overspread her cheeks. She sat for a minute beyond words. Her eyes strayed to the open window, and her gaze continued on over the pine tops, as though fixed intently upon a tiny mote that had bobbed about and gesticulated on the horizon of her child-dreams, but which was now resolved out of mythical vagueness into a poignant reality that was growing and speeding toward her with her own humble life for a goal, and with a pageantry of opportunity that dazzled and overwhelmed her senses.

Slowly, very slowly, she turned her flushed face and fixed her eyes, now moist and brimming with love, gratitude and homage upon Miss Worth. Her bosom lifted as she looked mutely into the face that smiled down upon her. Then Belle-Ann’s round chin lowered and her curls were on the woman’s breast and her arms crept up and around and locked about the neck of her benefactress. Miss Worth patted her shoulder, and whispered words through her curls, and presently Belle-Ann whispered back to her.

“But can I be worth it—could I ever—ever—be

worth it? Besides, I could never, never, pay you-all back," she deplored tremulously.

"Surely you can, sometime—you will have money of your own—that is, you may become a great prima-donna," she ended optimistically. Belle-Ann sat up straight.

"Prima-donna," she repeated uncertainly.

"Yes—you know, Belle-Ann, even in your simple old-timey song, 'Kitty Wells,' I have wondered at the volume and peculiar quality of your voice, and have compared the strength of that peculiar cadence to that of great singers I have heard. I believe that your voice holds all the fundamental requisites of an operatic singer. Anyhow, we are going to have your voice cultivated to its highest perfection—and who can tell—you may in time become a prima-donna."

Belle-Ann hung upon Miss Worth's utterances with an intentness that lent to her an attitude of listening to some seductive melody coming from afar.

"Prima-donna—prima-donna," she murmured softly and wonderingly. "Prima-donna—but don't tell me—let me find it, Miss Worth—I am not sure of its meaning." Whereupon, she skipped across the room and returning with her dictionary, flurried over its pages eagerly and swiftly.

"P-r—p-r-i—prima—prima-donna—heah, I have it," she said. "'Prima-donna—the principal female singer in an opera;'—and do they make lots of money?" she inquired quickly.

"They surely do," responded Miss Worth with growing amusement. Belle-Ann reflected for a moment.

"Maybe—fifty dollars a month?" she ventured timidly.

"That sum wouldn't interest a prima-donna, Belle-Ann. It is said that some of them enjoy salaries of one thousand dollars per week and more."

"One thousand dollars!" she cried, aghast.

"Yes."

Belle-Ann slowly closed her dictionary and a look of deep disappointment touched her pretty oval features.

"Oh, no, Miss Virginia," she sighed, clasping her little hands hopelessly. "I could never make one thousand dollars in one week—I just know I couldn't."

Miss Worth laughed outright—then kissed her twice.

"Let's talk about what we are to do to-morrow," suggested Miss Worth cheerily. "I have another pleasant surprise for you, dearest." Belle-Ann showed her winsome dimples and waited expectantly.

"It is very necessary that you have some nice clothes and have them immediately. I mean some stylish apparel suitable to appear in city society, because you have some friends in Lexington who are anxious to have us visit them shortly, so to-morrow morning you and I are going to the city and I will take you to a modiste and have some pretty gowns made up for you. Here is the money." At this juncture, Miss Worth dropped five one hundred dollar bills into Belle-Ann's lap. The girl was utterly stupefied with a surging joy, and her exclamations of delight were varied and many as she tossed her curls in sheer exultation and rapture.

The mere anticipation and the purpose of this in-

tended sojourn filled Belle-Ann's untutored, pleasure-starved heart with ecstasy.

She talked volubly along, her cheeks aflush, in a transport at the prospect of possessing herself of an assortment of pretty modern dresses for which her girl-heart now yearned,—particularly since she came to the school and observed the dainty, modish clothes of some of the girls who came over from Beattyville on Sunday to visit Miss Worth and Miss Ackerman.

And thus it was that a new and alluring vista of probabilities opened up before her imagination that set her blood a-tingle and made her eyes sparkle with anticipation. The elusive dimples came and went, and she was very beautiful in this sudden, new happiness. Belle-Ann never forgot the joys of that shopping sojourn to Lexington.

That night her mind teemed with processions of fantastic imaginings that, strive as she would, she could not dispel. Notwithstanding that her slumber had been scant, she arose earlier than usual fresh and bright and charged with an enthusiasm profuse and spontaneous. At eight-thirty the following morning, Belle-Ann and Miss Worth crossed the ferry to Beattyville. Here they took the train for Lexington and Belle-Ann had her first ride in a Pullman car.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE GUEST OF A GRANDEE

ARRIVING at Lexington, the girl was confronted with her first sight of a city. Belle-Ann was agreeably surprised to meet Colonel Tennytown, who had been awaiting their arrival at the station. The Colonel was plainly as pleased as was Belle-Ann, and helped the two into his big limousine with many courtesies and a radiant countenance. And here the girl whose head was a-whirl with child-like rapture, was treated to her first automobile ride.

The Colonel's first thoughtful act was to present Miss Worth and Belle-Ann with a great cluster of roses he had in the car for them. He then directed the liveried chauffeur to drive out to his homestead, but in this he was artfully thwarted by Miss Worth, who hastily and firmly protested with a meaning look, declaring that their time was limited and that by complying with his kind invitation, the shopping would suffer. In lieu of that pleasure, the persistent Colonel, not to be denied, took the ladies to a big hotel where they had luncheon and spent an enlivened hour in his company, after which, Colonel Tennytown went his way, sending the ladies onward in his car to do their shopping.

The wonder and mysteries of the big shops inspired Belle-Ann with amazement and delight unbounded, and her spontaneous and original comments and profuse inquiries concerning these sights kept her companion's face in one perpetual wreath of amused and happy smiles.

After purchasing a number of suitable fabrics, Miss Worth took Belle-Ann to a modiste where they were detained for more than two hours. By the time they had completed their shopping, it was dusk and their automobile dashed up to the station barely in time to make the train. Colonel Tennytown was there to see them off, and had only time to bid them a hurried good-by.

Miss Worth had arranged for all her minor purchases to be delivered to the school the same day that the gowns were sent. In the meantime, Belle-Ann had made three hurried trips with Miss Worth to the modiste in Lexington for fittings. Then, one memorable day, a horde of boxes arrived at the school for Belle-Ann. There were four exquisite dresses cut in the latest fashion. There were three beautiful imported hats. There were delicate veils and gloves and shoes and three dainty pairs of pumps embellished with oddly carved silver buckles. There were lingerie of the finest texture and stockings of many hues, so soft and fine that Belle-Ann marvelled at their resiliency. Also, there was a great brass-bound trunk, with compartments, with Belle-Ann's name stamped thereon, and a smart buff-leather traveling bag.

There was everything calculated to inspire a girl-heart to the heights of inexpressible happiness,—par-

ticularly a girl who had never before known a luxurious life. Miss Worth and Belle-Ann spent half the night in the girl's room amid a deluge of tissue paper and boxes.

The following Tuesday Miss Worth and Belle-Ann went to Lexington to visit Colonel Tennytown and his sister. The girl's figure had rounded and she had grown a head taller during the past winter. Her appearance in a city in her simple mountain garb would have challenged attention,—not because of the quaintness of the garb, but by merit of her natural grace and fresh, startling beauty. But to-day this wealth of beauty was enhanced a hundred fold. When she alighted at the station in Lexington, she presented a vision of loveliness that arrested the admiring eyes of people who had become inured to the sight of pretty girls, from the nearby newsboys, up to a group of loquacious old ladies who wore suffragist badges.

Belle-Ann wore a dark blue creation that fell in clinging, Parisian grace about her supple form. The yoke and sleeves were trimmed with pleated lace of exquisite richness, and a jabot of lace fell down the front from the yoke midway to the waistline. On her feet were dark blue pumps with silver buckles and hose to match. She wore a large Panama hat caught up at one side, drooping at the other side and back and girded with a wide Persian ribbon knotted at the back and ending in a silk fringe that trailed toward the hair. Her mass of black, lustrous curls were caught up in the back in the embrace of a large Oriental clasp of unique design.

In one hand she carried a beautiful Oriental purse

suspended by a dragon-skin thong, which was hemmed with a camel's-hair braid. In the other hand, she balanced a long-stemmed white silk parasol. The apparel might have been duplicated; but the oval face under the Panama hat had no replica. There was no vestige of powder or cosmetics on the girl's complexion, which was left in all the rich purity that nature decreed to her.

The chin was indescribably fascinating. A little mouth with curved carmine lips that turned upward at the corners flanked by dimples. A short, thin little nose, white like the soft white of a rose petal. Above that, a pair of round, wondrous eyes—eyes that harbored a depth of unfathomable eloquence—black-fringed, steadfast eyes, of a peculiar deep violet hue, merging into that matchless pigment that tones the blue of a robin's egg. Above that, were exquisitely penciled brows, and then the soft, shiny, raven-black ringlets that rippled beneath the hat.

It was this beautiful Grecian countenance that inspired even the well-bred people about her in the station to pause for a second covert look. They had waited several minutes in the station when Colonel Tennytown's tall figure appeared coming toward them. He apologized contritely for his tardiness, stating that his car had suffered a "blow-out" which had delayed him.

They were whirled along the shell road four miles outside of Lexington to the Colonel's magnificent homestead surrounded by acres of level pasturage and numerous modern out-buildings. As Belle-Ann learned afterward, this estate represented the highest type of

a modern stock farm and was one of international repute. Colonel Tennytown's pedigreed horses were periodically shipped abroad.

The Colonel was a gracious and fascinating host. He was a widower and had now in his household his maiden sister a few years his junior. There was no conceivable hospitality these two did not lavish upon their guests. Colonel Tennytown's proud prototype is met frequently throughout Kentucky.

He was tall and of commanding carriage and manner and attired immaculately. He was a polished man whose courtesy was effervescent. He wore the regulation broad-brimmed hat, white moustache and goatee, and while his thin face was florid, it was at once refined and intellectual. His hobby was horses bred in the purple, but there was an utter absence of horsey vulgarity about him, his very presence irradiating breeding and culture.

It was made convincingly clear, by every look and word and gesture, that the Colonel's stately maiden sister had fallen in love with Belle-Ann at first sight. The house was a great square structure and one could walk around its four sides on a broad, spacious porch. A wide hall ran through the center directly to the back. This roomy hall was appointed with massive, quaintly carved furniture of colonial design. The walls and ceilings throughout the house were paneled and frescoed in artistic and unique patterns and painted in harmonious tints that indicated taste of the highest order.

In the center of the hall, midway, was stationed a great fountain, some six feet in diameter, where the

crystal drops rained down upon myriad fishes and the moss and coral-built submarine castle. Magnificent paintings and various rare statuary subjects and huge palms and foreign plants and flowers abounded on every hand. And the sweet notes of an enraptured mocking-bird came from somewhere mingled with the silvery tinkling melody of unseen music.

Profusely scattered about were pieces of odd furniture, strange bric-a-brac, curious pottery and miniature idols, relics collected from every quarter of the globe. Big Turkish couches and willow rockers and cane sofas with red and green velvet pads, and little upholstered stools and bamboo tables were everywhere. Mammoth gilt-framed mirrors reached from the floor to the ceiling, and the wide doors and windows were draped in various-colored portières and curtains of silk and velvet in gold brocade.

The great dining room was a spot that awed Belle-Ann with its intrinsic resplendence. The mahogany and the dazzling array of silver and mirrors and prised chandeliers and greenery held this demure mountain girl entranced. She caught herself wondering what Lem would say, if he could look in upon her at this moment, and behold her dressed in "Blue-grass style," being entertained in this mystic realm of a grandee, the opulence of which even her own active fancy had never pictured.

After luncheon, the Colonel conducted his visitors to the stables where he pridefully exhibited a hundred or more blooded horses. Straggling groups of horses and colts were observable grazing in the rank pastures that stretched beyond as far as the eye could reach.

While en route through the stables, Belle-Ann thoughtlessly gave the party a scare. Colonel Tennytown had directed a hostler who followed the party to bring out a sorrel gelding of which he was especially proud. All of the compartments for the animals on one side were box-stalls. Before the man had time to bring forth the gelding, Belle-Ann noted an extra-high compartment built of heavy oak boards with an iron gate. Attracted by this, she stepped away from the others to see what this strong box-stall contained.

The girl beheld a most magnificent black stallion. An ardent lover of horses and naturally fearless, she was so delighted at sight of this proud, silken-coated animal, that she drew the iron pin and slipped inside with the horse. The animal stood for a moment as though deeply and curiously surprised at this effrontery. Then his fire-rimmed eyes flashed. His little ears lay flat to his head. With a snort, he started toward her. Belle-Ann advanced a step to meet him, and at sound of her voice the great beast paused and pricked up his ears. Talking to him the while, the girl walked unhesitatingly over to him and laid a hand gently upon his massive neck. The feel of his satiny body pulsing with salient power was a joy to Belle-Ann. The stallion nosed her clothing with mild little snorts. With soothing, coined horse-words, the girl ran her hand over him. She then lay one hand on his back and with the other slapped his side playfully. To this ticklish overture the horse responded instantly.

He reared on his hind legs. He clashed his bared teeth, he plunged, pawed the straw, and kicked and

squealed. Belle-Ann stood perfectly still and laughed outright at his antics. Then the animal threw his ears back and his fore feet in the air and lunged toward her, only to pluck at her sleeve with his rough lips and push her gently with his shoulder, taking care not to tread upon her feet.

The sorrel gelding had been brought out and the Colonel was deeply engrossed in rehearsing his pedigree to Miss Worth and did not at the moment notice Belle-Ann's absence. The girl had her arms about the stallion's head and was smilingly engaged in scratching his ears, when Colonel Tennytown's white face appeared at the iron gate of the box-stall, together with that of the scared, shaky hostler.

"Come out—come out!" importuned the Colonel in hoarse, unsteady tones. Through the thick boards Belle-Ann heard Miss Worth's appeal.

"Belle-Ann! Belle-Ann! come out of there, dear—this instant—do, please."

The horse, catching sight of the faces at the gate, jumped forward, wheeled like a flash, and lashed out with his heels, striking the gate a terrific whack with both feet. The gate, which opened inward, clashed against its iron sleeper with a frightful noise. The horse then returned to Belle-Ann's side and lowered his head for her to resume the scratching process.

"For God's sake, Miss Benson, I beg of you to come out," called the distressed Colonel. Then Belle-Ann stepped safely and serenely without.

Miss Worth, who knew the stallion's reputation, stood with hands gripping each other tensely and with averted, pallid face. The hostler was quaking

visibly, and the Colonel seized her arm as though rescuing a drowning person.

"Miss Benson," said the Colonel, "I implore you never to do that again,—please, never, never go near that gate."

"My dear," spoke up Miss Worth, "I shall have to hold you by the hand until I get you out of here. Whatever prompted you to go in with that vicious horse?"

The hostler mumbled to himself:

"I'll sho' slap er padlock on dat hoss 'fore sun-down."

"Why," said Belle-Ann laughingly, "you-all talk as though he were a big tiger instead of a big, beautiful horse—I love him."

"Ponce is the meanest horse I have ever owned," interjected the Colonel. "I would not dare go in to him. If it were not for his strain, I would have gotten rid of him long ago—he killed a hostler last summer. The men have to feed him through a trap door—the men could not be induced to go in to him as you did, Miss Benson. They have to rope him from both sides to lead him. He not only kicks, but he fights with his fore feet and bites like a dog. You have had a narrow escape. I assure you, dear Miss Benson. How happy I am that you were not hurt."

"Why, Colonel Tennytown," interrupted the girl, "he was only playing with me—why I can go in thah now and make him walk around on his hind legs."

"Tut-tut! No you can't, my dear," interposed the Colonel monitively, "not while we are here to watch you, I assure you."

"Oh, I would love to ride him—may I ride him some time, Colonel?" she persisted laughingly.

"It pains me deeply to refuse you any request—I have any number of others you may ride, but never Ponce," he declared emphatically.

After dinner it developed that there was plainly a conspiracy afoot to have Belle-Ann sing. Without the slightest demur or embarrassment the girl took her stand beside the piano while Miss Worth played the accompaniment. She sang an excerpt from *Il Trovatore* which Miss Worth had taught her with infinite care. The voice held the listeners spellbound.

When her last lingering notes had swelled and died away, the Colonel's sister hurried to her with profuse praises that were plainly sincere and kissed her cheek. The Colonel strode to her side and pressed her hand, and Miss Worth beamed upon her.

As dusk approached, the visitors climbed into the big limousine en route to the train, and rolled through the richest plateau in the world, flooded with the erubescence of a setting sun. At the station Colonel Tennytown carried the handbags into the Pullman, and here he lingered until he heard the hiss of the reservoir that released the car brakes. With his farewell, he lifted Belle-Ann's white soft hand, and slipped a ring on her finger. Concealing it under his own hand, he said:

"It is there with a wish which I hope will come true," and he hurried out and away. As the train pulled out, the lights were turned on in the car, and Belle-Ann was holding one hand up before two pairs of admiring eyes. It was a marquis ring with an oval turquoise

in the center, hemmed with eight rubies and bordered with ten beautifully cut diamonds. And as Belle-Ann gazed at this lovely present, her violet eyes emulated the sparkling lustre of the ring.

CHAPTER XXV

KNOW YE THE TRUTH

THAT night Belle-Ann indited a letter to her father, dwelling upon the kindness of Miss Worth, who had proposed to give her a higher education. She told of her delightful visit to Lexington and of the beautiful present Colonel Tenntown had given to her. She asked again, as she always did, if he had heard anything from Lem.

She also ventured another letter to Lem. During the past winter she had written several letters to him; as yet, she had received no answer to these. However, she supposed they were still uncalled for. She knew that Lem could write sufficiently legible for her to decipher it, but she also remembered the fact that the nearest post-office was thirty miles distant from Moon mountain. Moreover, she knew Lem was not accustomed to visiting Junction City, because he never received any mail, and because the denizens of Junction City were rank sympathizers with the McGill faction.

And always she yearned for sight of Lem's honest face. Not a day passed but what she cherished thoughts of home. When she was apparently in her gayest mood, Lem's tall shadow stood in the background waiting for her—always waiting. While occu-

pied in her tensest study hours, down in her subconsciousness lay a memory that stirred like a thing having life. And ever more overshadowing this dominating vision of Lem Lutts was the haunting presence of the revenuer. From her waking hours these thoughts trailed into the night to pollute her dreams and, not infrequently, pilfer her sleep away.

Oft times, in the presence of others, she would abruptly lower her book or suspend anything at hand, only to come out of an ill reverie, to find her eyes fixed blankly at nothing, and her lip in the grip of her upper teeth. These uncontrollable abstractions had caused her many embarrassments and had grown upon her, as the months slipped by, instead of diminishing.

Now that she stood on the threshold of a new life, a mystic, fascinating world, the vague dreams of which had gesticulated and beckoned to her childish fancy in the hills, foretelling its beautiful emoluments of which she now had dazzling, palpitating glimpses—she was dismayed at her own disquietude. She had made very many dear friends. She had an array of beautiful clothes. She was forgivably conscious, without vanity, that she was an unusually beautiful girl. The refinements of education for which she had an inbred craving were filtering into her brain with the mellow, rich residue of a rare wine. The whole atmosphere that enveloped her was charged with all the pedagogic influences and wholesome blithesomeness calculated to inspire a girl of her temperament to utter happiness.

But Belle-Ann was not happy. The fear that had eroded its path into her being stood over her young life to menace and alloy every new-born pleas-

ure. Her soul trembled now lest the revenuer had killed Lem instead. Then her life would not only be broken, but the revenuer would still live on to project his hated shadow across her heart, and her agony would go on and on with another and more potential impetus.

When the human heart throbs against the barbs of an eating agony through a measure of years, there comes a time when the soul staggers and cries out.

One night Miss Worth awoke and following a habit, she got up and slipped across the hall, bent on seeing if Belle-Ann were sitting up in bed with her books, as was her wont.

She opened the door softly. As there was no light in the girl's room, she was about to close the door and go to bed when she caught a sound that half startled her. Quickly and noiselessly she stepped over the threshold. A shaft of moonlight fell athwart the bed. It was empty. She cast a searching glance about the room. At the window-seat she saw a mass of black curls above the white of a night robe.

Crouching on the floor, her face buried in her arms, alone in this small hour, Belle-Ann was crying in the half gloom. Alone with some great grief that was undoing her. Her shoulders shook with its racking oncoming. Then again, its vortex of agony swept across her lips in piteous supplicatory sobs, vibrating in the stillness like the bleating of a dazed, lost creature enmeshed in the tentacles of some merciless destroyer.

Motionless, Miss Worth stood for a minute, her mind divided by two opposing conjectures. One, a

deplorable apprehension that this girl she had come to love so dearly was assailed by some new sudden visitation of suffering. The other, a keen, pungent joy that perhaps that for which she herself had striven and labored for months was coming to pass. Maybe after all the blighting soul-fistula she had so deftly and tirelessly probed for had burst and its poisonous feculence was now eddying away.

Until a month ago Belle-Ann had, with the natural reluctance and reserved suspicion of the mountain-born, withstood and parried all of Miss Worth's gentle approaches to discover her secret woe. The mountain spirit nurtures a bitter antipathy for revelations. Then a day came when this dear friend broke through the barrier, and Belle-Ann poured out her whole life to Miss Worth. There was no detail or memory that she did not vividly picture before Miss Worth's understanding. Then Miss Worth, knowing where to look, reached out with all the potent power of her subjugating diplomacy to extirpate the roots of this melancholy plant that grew and threatened to overrun a beautiful soul.

Miss Worth hurried across the room and spoke her name. With distress undisguised, Belle-Ann lifted her tear-wet face.

"Oh!—I can't—I cannot endure it longer," she declared between the tremulous sobs that convulsed her.

Miss Worth knelt beside the girl and with her arms around her, she talked in soothing undertones. For almost an hour the two sat clinging together. Not a minute had Miss Worth's voice ceased. As the girl

huddled, listening tensely, the tears ceased and dried on her distressed face. Presently, she arose and walked aimlessly around the room.

"But you-all don't believe as we do," she said. "Our people are shot down in their own yards, and when we call upon the law, the law only turns the assassin loose. Then the law itself comes to kill. Oh—Oh, dear Miss Worth—you can never understand—you can never know what this is. Only we up thah who suffer these things know its sting. Who could go on and live without redress and not strike back? If you had suffered this as I have—if you could see what I have—if you could see now—this minute—what I see—thah—thah——" she ended in stifling utterances, as she stared at a spot of moonlight that had strayed across the floor.

Now, totally oblivious to her whereabouts, and utterly unconscious of Miss Worth's presence, she fell to her knees on the floor, stretching her arms out over the pallid beam, in benediction, and lowered her hands to fondle the face that her fevered fancy held there; and to touch the still, immobile bosom with its bullet-spot. And again her grief broke loose beyond restraint and she sobbed aloud. A great lump had brought an ache into Miss Worth's throat, and she, too, was crying. She lifted the girl up and led her back to the window-seat. Here she whispered solace to her for a time.

Finally, Miss Worth arose and left Belle-Ann at the window. When she reached the door she turned back.

"Remember, dearest," she said, "Know ye the truth and the truth shall make ye free. I'll be waiting up for

you—I shall not retire until you come. If you see the light—come to me—I'll be waiting and praying, too.”

CHAPTER XXVI

BELLE-ANN HAS A VISION

AFTER a time Belle-Ann arose wearily to retire. Then she laid her troubled head on the pillow and closed her tear-wet eyes and finally dropped into a restive sleep. And in this furtive slumber a titanic, stirring dream came to her. The ethereal universe convulsed and burst asunder, and opened up to her startled vision a celestial theatre of glory that gripped her heart with its untold resplendence.

And roundabout, leagues high, gloss-buffed walls of amethyst, and gleaming pillars of pearl girded this splendor. And above this scintillating heavenly realm an amphitheatre of sinuous clouds circulated, charged with pigments and prised lustres; shot, lanced and plumed with a woof of multi-colors that no tongue could tell; and out from this spectacle of molten glory, a multitudinous horde emerged, trooping through its liquid opalescence.

And the angels reveled, flapping their wings in the starlight to the throbbing rhythm of ten thousand silver lutes. And out beneath the proscenium arch of this fantastic gilded dream, an archangel rode and a beloved face looked down upon the girl. It was a chaste,

smiling face; a sacrament of love, replete with amity and forgiveness.

And the knowing eyes were diademed with a specific message. And the vision bore straight down to earth upon her; and she lifted up her arms to meet it. And the whirl of its pinions awoke her. She slipped out of bed and stood erect, her bosom lifting and her eyes looking through the dark after this receding apparition.

And there as she stood alone in that small hour of the night, a great Presence came into the room and an unseen hand reached out and touched her soul.

Beside the little white bed Belle-Ann bent her knee and bowed down her head until the curls spread out on the coverlet. And lo! a sword of divine light dipped down and penetrated the cryptic catacomb hidden in her heart and pierced its gnawing, pillaging tenant, and killed her ill, uncouth creed; and drove her lingering sorrow out, purging her being free of the chaotic fires of revenge-thirst that was slowly but surely searing her soul.

And when she rose up, a plenipotent strength of understanding had lifted her crying spirit out and up to a sanctuary of truth; and she stood in the early hour of coming day, serene and triumphant, with the lustre of a conquering light in her purposeful eyes, and faced a new world.

It was dawn. Amid a theatre of opalescent clouds reefed in the east, the sun diffused its glory, and shaped rubescent coral columns, edging its façade with azure and gold. The air was rife with the musks of the blossomed mountain-sides, and a medley of bird-music

emanated from a hundred species, flitting and flapping their wet wings in the morning dew.

Belle-Ann tapped gently on Miss Worth's door. She stepped lightly into the room. Miss Worth was wide awake and paused, struck with the pure radiance of the girl's face.

"At last!" ejaculated Miss Worth triumphantly. She kissed and hugged Belle-Ann in the exuberance of her joy and enthusiasm. Belle-Ann's eyes were clear and wide with a new light. The mote that had floated in their depths was gone for all time. And Miss Worth saw before her the most charming character and perfect specimen of young girlhood that fortune had ever led her to. "At last—you understand now, Belle-Ann?" she said, drawing her over to the edge of her bed.

"Yes, I do understand, Miss Worth," answered the girl, her face dimpled with smiles that betokened the calm and serenity of a new-found peace and faith.

"I understand, dearest Miss Worth," she repeated, "but I don't understand how I understand—it is all so deeply mysterious—so wonderful—to think of these wasted years! Oh!—if I could only see Lem!"

"And now," observed Miss Worth, "is it right for Lem to kill the man?" pursued Miss Worth tentatively. Belle-Ann arose quickly from the bed, spurred by the thought that she now miraculously regarded as a two-edged wrong, and a direct offense against God.

"Oh!" she exclaimed regretfully, "how could I ever have thought it right—how could I? It's ignorance—it's downright ignorance—I see it all plainly now, my deah, sweet, true friend. I see it all just as you-all

promised me long ago that I would see it—instead of lightening Lem's sorrows I was adding to them—I was making his burden harder to endure—I was dragging him down to misery, not knowing any better—it's terrible, Miss Worth—it's pure blind ignorance—I can't believe now that I did that. I'm guilty—guilty—guilty—if Lem kills the revenuer, I, too, am guilty, for I will now tell you, Miss Worth, I not only asked Lem to kill the man, as I told you—all—but I demanded it against Lem's love for me—offered a prize—a reward for the revenuer's dead body. Lem begged to kiss me on parting—I wouldn't even kiss him good-by—he kissed my hair, not my lips—I can see him now standing up thah holding out his arms to me—I was mad for the sight of that officer, dead. If Lem kills him it will be I who helped to chain an anchor of crime to Lem's poor wretched life—to drag him down. I did nothing to uplift him,—nothing to incite him to look for bright things in the future—my whole heart was aflame with revenge. Oh! what a miserable thing it is! I was mad; weak-spirited; blind with ignorance—and to think that I boasted of it to you! As I stand heah now, I can't believe I did that monstrous thing. And Lem up thah, his eyes and thoughts fixed downward—down on the trail of revenge, a path that leads to eternal unhappiness. I can't wait, Miss Worth—I won't rest until I see Lem. I hope nothing has happened to him. I'll lead him out of it all. I'll show him the way to life as God meant us to live. I'll lead him out, just as you, my deahest, kindest friend—just as you have led me away from the pit around which I had beaten a path with all of my foolish years of life

—you led me away from a seething pit of misery, Miss Worth; a cauldron into which I would surely have tumbled, soul and all, in time. Now—now—it's different; now—it's all changed—life looks like a beautiful picture to me now. But, oh!—how I pity the benighted sufferers up thah in the mountains—if there was only a way to show them—to show them the emoluments of life with the misery of feudal hate eliminated.”

Too much overcome with sheer joy to speak, Miss Worth listened to Belle-Ann's earnest declarations and watched her smiling, confident, beautiful features with a sense of having, just here, achieved one of the greatest conquests of her missionary life.

Belle-Ann walked to the window, a new exquisite incarnation of girlhood. With a thankful, gracious heart, ready and primed for the wonders of which she now had a divine intuition, she gazed across to the mountain summits, touched with the iridescent vapors, figured by the rising sun. She watched the veil-like mist gradually rise over the river where it lingered like a film of bluish wood smoke. She listened to the clamorous carols of the birds, and there was a song in her heart and inwardly she was stirred with all the inspirations that accompany the placidity of a spirit untroubled and immaculate. The chapel chimes suddenly pealed out their morning anthems, and its music tinkled sweetly across the senses of the girl whose soul was throbbing in perfect attune.

From the sublimity of her momentary reverie, Miss Worth's gentle voice aroused Belle-Ann.

“Belle-Ann,” she said, “would a bit of news before breakfast be distasteful?”

The girl cast a quick, expectant look toward Miss Worth, whose face was symbolical of still another revelation.

“I can bear anything,” answered Belle-Ann. “I can now appreciate more than ever any glad news—life can hold no sorrow now that I cannot endure bravely—don’t hesitate to tell me—I am unafraid.”

“Well—it is not by any means fearful news, my dear; on the contrary, it’s the most delightful surprise imaginable—the only thing I fear is that you will not forgive us for what will doubtless present itself to your mind as a rank conspiracy.”

Belle-Ann laughed and squeezed the hand that crept into hers.

“When you are concerned, you are forgiven anything in advance—you-all couldn’t commit anything, Miss Worth, that I could hold against you a second,” she assured, laughingly.

The older woman fell pensive for a moment.

“Belle-Ann—I have known this for a long time—Colonel Tennytown asked me to acquaint you with this when I thought fit—I think the proper time is now at hand—Colonel Tennytown was your mother’s father, Belle-Ann.”

CHAPTER XXVII

A GRANDFATHER

“**O**H!—Miss Worth!” ejaculated the girl with a noticeable catch in her voice. “My grandfather—you-all can’t mean that Colonel Tennytown is my really grandfather?” she pressed hastily, overwhelmed by this unlooked-for surprise.

“Yes, truly—Colonel Tennytown is your own grandfather, Belle-Ann, and I am happy and proud that you have such a man for your grandfather—he is going to come and claim you, my dear, and you are not to rebel when he tells you about your legacy—you have an inheritance—it is rightfully yours by every moral and legal tenure—it was your mother’s—although her proud, relentless temperament spurned it while she lived. It now devolves upon you, Belle-Ann; you have been rich all along and did not know it—money matters need never trouble your dear little head. You recall that first visit to Lexington? Well, we took you out to the Colonel’s home purposely for his maiden sister to see you. You know they wanted to be sure of you, Belle-Ann,—they wanted to feel certain, dear, that they would like you. And dear old Miss Malinda was more than charmed with your beauty and personality—she confided to me afterwards that she begged the

Colonel to go directly and bring you there to live permanently. Belle-Ann, you look like you do not believe this good fortune," she ended abruptly.

Out of a daze the girl awoke, and impulsively threw her arms around Miss Worth and kissed her until she laughingly protested. As Belle-Ann dressed for breakfast, she pondered upon the ways of Providence and wondered what unseen happening would come next to take its place in her life. She moved about in a state of bewilderment. She struggled to compose herself; this great good luck thrust upon her so suddenly seemed visionary. She, whose life heretofore had been lonesome and isolated, and overshadowed with unhappiness.

This abrupt intervention of a kind fate bore the atmosphere of a fairy romance. It was difficult to comprehend off-hand, that all this was meant for her. So that it was only gradually that she gathered the grace of its realization, and then her fancy waxed busy. A glamorous vista of possibilities were opened up to her. She saw before her salient, new-born contemplation, scores of day-dreams that had invaded her girlhood, resolve themselves now into a semblance of approaching tangible realities.

With superb, delicate touches she added to these mental pictures with the prolific imagery and exquisite mastery that only a vivacious, high-spirited girl can conjure. And paramount above all these fantastic castles were the benefits set aside to be bestowed upon Lem and Buddy and her father and even poor old Slab—they who had been fellow-sufferers in a war of strife and aching misery that had seemed interminable.

With the tail of her eye, Belle-Ann caught a parting glimpse of her profile in the mirror. She noted with a little laugh that her lips were moving. All unconsciously she was repeating over and over the phrase that drifted to and fro through her half-incredulous mind:

“A grandfather—an inheritance—Belle-Ann Benson—with a legacy?”

Colonel Tennytown, who had been called to New York on business, had now returned to Lexington. To-day, when Miss Worth returned to the school she imparted to Belle-Ann that she had received a message from the Colonel stating that he would be up to see them in the evening. He had been absent for two weeks and Belle-Ann had not seen him since she had learned that he was her grandfather.

With a lingering, tender embrace, twilight untwined her nebulous arms from the sable-lustre mantle of night and parted with a promise.

The tryst place had been the dim, infinite dome of the world. Plenipotent, majestic night settled on the throne of the supernal cosmos, diademed with a million twinkling jewels to dazzle his mundane subjects. His ancient serfs, patrolling the heavens at his behest, all a-glitter, trembled in his presence. And between the limits of these fire-touched planets, the milky-high-road developed like a mystic wand leading across a vast ethereal universe, and trailing adown into immeasurable cyclopic spaces, fading away between the gigantic vapor-tombs and ghost biers of a thousand dead centuries.

And all the soul-stirring agencies of rapturous nature

pulsed and glowed down upon the night-world of mankind. A neutral moon whose fixed face, young yet, unsmiled and uncreased with the joys and woes upheld by the supplicant ages, seemed now to soften with mellow sympathy upon a girl-heart below. Could even a stoic moon look upon this girl unmoved? Belle-Ann leaned listlessly against the bronze rail that girded the fountain, gazing with expectant eyes, along the moonlit path leading to the seminary.

The Chapel bells chimed out their angelus across the fantasmal gloaming, tinkling through the girl's mood in utter harmony with the music of her soul, and the supernal smiles that lingered about her cupid lips. Beneath the enchanting rays of the moon, Belle-Ann's wraith-like, relaxed form looked even taller. Arrayed in a vision of delicate blue silk and lace, clinging to the pronounced curves of her subtle outlines, she presented an unforgettable picture; a rare hellenism of feminine beauty. A type to ravish the senses. The shimmering blackness of the girlish curls that crowded around her small features, contrasted adorably with her eburnean skin, natural as the purity of rose petals, soft and fine-textured, from which the mountain tan had long since vanished.

A bouquet of great roses was pinned at her bosom, and the musk of calcanthus was in her curls. Her lips parted and she hummed a soft ditty. The sweet dulcet timbre of her voice was a mellowed sound wafted straight from the realms of Dixie. Her whole palpable self irradiated and pulsed with the subtle witchery and glamour of the South.

As she stood in the half-shadow of the fountain gaz-

ing intently along the hedge-hemmed path, a sudden gladness stirred her as she discerned what her eyes had sought. Two vague forms descended from the porch, coupled perilously near together. Then, as they halted beneath the dappled shadows of the rose-tree, Belle-Ann fancied she saw a white sleeve against a sable shoulder. It may have been the trick of her imagination, but it seemed that the man stooped his head and lingered over the white-clad figure.

She knew it was Colonel Tennytown and Miss Worth who tarried there. Belle-Ann had known all evening that he would seek her out. She had not laid eyes on him since the Sunday preceding that memorable dawn when Miss Worth had revealed his relationship. But now with a heart full to the brim with gratitude she awaited his coming, and to acknowledge her grandfather.

Presently, the Colonel's tall figure emerged from the shadows and came toward her. With his broad hat in his hand he halted before her and smilingly bowed in courtly grace. As Belle-Ann looked straight into his eyes, her face was now all aflush with pleasure and the baffling dimples were at play.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A CONFESSION

“**B**ELLE-ANN,” Colonel Tennytown began gently, with a strange new exultation noticeable in his tones, “I have come to ask you to do me a favor—a very great kindness—do you deem me deserving of a kindness in view of my grim shortcomings?”

“Isn’t it singular, Colonel Tennytown,” interjected Belle-Ann laughingly, “that when I saw you coming down thah, I thought how happy I’d be if I had the power to do you-all some kindness?”

“Ah!” rejoined the Colonel, “now we have it—happily, you possess a naturally charitable spirit, Belle-Ann,” he said. He had never called her Belle-Ann before. His Southern chivalry had never permitted him to diverge from the prefix of Miss to her surname. “As you now know all, Belle-Ann,” he continued, “I wish you, henceforth and onward, to call me grandfather—I beg you to forgive me for my seeming tardiness in coming to the front to acknowledge my granddaughter—my approach has doubtless appeared to you masked in a form of deception, and now that I am here to inflict the brazen audacity of a complete confession, you can plainly see, Belle-Ann, that I am in need of your uttermost indulgence. The truth is, I

regret to say, that we never knew of your existence until you came here to school when my esteemed friend, Reverend Peterson, made me acquainted with the fact.

“Then, the moment I laid eyes on you my heart melted and my soul went out to you—I instantly saw in you purity and beauty—indeed you are even more beautiful than your mother was, Belle-Ann—your mother whose sole offense was her stubborn refusal to marry the man whom we thought best fitted for her; and then she ran away and married a mountaineer far beneath her station, doubtless a good man—but practically a stranger, and one to whom she gave her life, and her duty, but not her heart.

“We struggled for years to reconcile her, pledging absolute forgiveness, but her blood told, Belle-Ann—the blood of her father—her high-bred spirit met our pleadings with unbroken stoic silence. She lost herself completely—the grand young man who had just been elected to the state senate of Kentucky, and who loved her, declined from that day and died a broken man. The remorse that gnawed at my heart for years, Belle-Ann, has left its scars—is a skein of secret, silent woe, untold, my dear little girl—a blight across the old man’s life that no language is sufficiently adequate to reveal.

“Bah!—what an awful lesson I have had—and then I found you. You were sent by a kind Providence to assuage my great sorrow, Belle-Ann. You see—my daughter—we wished to be certain that you inherited your mother’s lovable traits. I did not wish to take a step which might, perforce, have to be retraced later; to be plain, we sought to make sure that we liked you,

and I can say to-night that we do like you, Belle-Ann—we do more than that, we all love you—we do more than love you; we idolize you; we worship you; we all adore you. Will you adopt us? Will you take me with all my arrant failings and use me as best you can for a grandfather?”

He dropped his hat on the grass and stood erect before her in the moonlight, the image of a southern nobleman, holding his hands out to her. All throughout his earnest words she had been deeply and happily moved. Her bosom rose and fell, riding the roses pinned over her heart. Her star-like eyes were misty, and there was pathos in her sweet treble utterance as she thrust her two hands into his waiting palms.

“Col—grandpa,” she corrected, “it is a proud distinction to claim you for my grandfather—I feel wholly unworthy. I feel almost like an interloper—I owe you so much—I shall struggle with all my heart to take and fill my mother’s place.”

The Colonel stooped and pressed his lips to her forehead and kissed the curls near the little wreath of flowers.

“Belle-Ann,” he went on, a new line of serious thought suggested to him, “you must promise me one more thing—in fact, if you don’t promise, it will disrupt my plan of years—it will—well—it will place me in a very unhappy position.”

“What is it, grandpa?” she quizzed through her smiles.

“Well—you see—that is—of course it’s a secret,” he ended lamely, with a furtive look toward a dim white figure beneath the trees. “As I said before—it’s like

this—— Oh!—plague-take it!—to-night I asked Miss Worth to marry me, and she said she would if she could; but that she couldn't unless you promised to come immediately with us to Lexington and make your home with us—so you see where the whole thing hinges. Will you do me this favor, Belle-Ann?" he pressed anxiously.

Belle-Ann could not restrain herself and laughed outright.

"Don't look so solemn, Grandpa—go tell Miss Worth I said to marry you by all means—I'll do my part."

There was a boyish ring in the Colonel's laugh as he picked his hat up off the grass and with Belle-Ann's arm through his, started toward the porch.

"But—Grandpa," protested Belle-Ann, as her lovely face suddenly sobered, and a grave note crept into her voice, "I must go up to Moon mountain before I think of anything else—some hearts up thah are beating against my return—but I'll promise to come back heah, in three days, Grandpa."

Colonel Tennytown stopped short on the path.

"Ah!—now we have it," he exclaimed. "I know all about those folks. Tell me, my dear, plainly—do you love that boy, Lem?"

Belle-Ann's cheeks turned visibly crimson in the moonlight as she looked up quickly upon this unexpected query.

"I might—might learn to—Grandpa," she murmured grudgingly.

"Now," said the Colonel decisively, "you shall start up there Monday morning—and you tell that Lem Lutts for me that I want a good, steady, dependable

man. I'll give him charge of my entire stock farm—seven hundred acres—and three hundred head of the best horse-blood on the face of the earth. I'll train Lem and make him manager. If he will, he can go to school and polish himself up first. And that little Buddy Lutts—you tell him I'll give him a pony all for his own, and keep him in clothes and spending money if he'll come down to Lexington and go to school once in awhile.

“Now, I want to ask you, Belle-Ann—about that old negro chap, Slab. Is the lobe of his left ear missing?”

“Oh, yes—yes!” exclaimed the mystified girl.

“And is he a very long, narrow gentleman?”

“Surely—he's quite tall——”

“Did you ever hear him sing ‘Kitty Wells’?”

Belle-Ann clapped her hands in childish glee.

“I've heard that song every night all my life, Grandpa; how did you-all know Slab, Grandpa?”

“Ah! now we have it—when Miss Worth mentioned him, telling me things about him as you had told her, I would always say that he is the same old Slab—and I'll bet the best horse I've got that he is the same. He belonged to my uncle who lived on the plantation adjoining my father's. Slab was asleep in the shade of a porch one day when I, a boy of seven years, meaning to startle him, slipped up and held a snapping turtle close to his face. When I started to arouse him with one hand, the turtle suddenly shot his neck out and grabbed old Slab by the ear. Then Slab woke up. You ask him about that; and you ask him if he remembers the time old Hickamohawk ran away with him—and you bring him down

here with you. Just tell him that Amos Tennytown wants him and he'll come—bring the whole family—there's room for us all, Belle-Ann."

She had listened to his warm-hearted suggestions with growing enthusiasm that sent her blood bounding, as she pictured the surprise and gladness the Colonel's message would inspire in those lonely, isolated hearts up on Hellsfork.

"Grandpa," observed the girl, out of her unutterable joy and gratitude, "God made your heart awful big."

"And God made you the gentlest and most beautiful of all granddaughters, my dear," he answered gallantly. "Monday I will have here the best single-foot saddle beast in this country for you to ride, and I will send a man to escort you, who will guarantee your safety."

"Oh, Grandpa! I don't wish him to go any further than Boon's Ford. He can turn back thah. I feel sure Lem and Buddy and Slab will come back with me."

"Just as you will, Belle-Ann," he agreed, and the two mingled their mutual, uncontrollable outbursts of ecstasy as they joined the figure lingering amid the mystic vacillating shadows of the rose-tree.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE RED DEBT

ALL through these wretched months, Lem Lutts had weltered in jail. During the first hideous weeks of his incarceration he thought his reason would not serve him longer. He felt that he would surely go mad. Night after night he stood with dull, hopeless eyes at his cell door, his fingers twined around the mercilessly cold iron bars, gazing across the dim corridor at the blank stone wall.

When "Creeping Jesus" glided up to his cell door like a phantom, and flashed his lantern upon Lem, he found him hour after hour wide awake, his eyes burning and starry with the unquenchable fire of a throbbing, wild, mad unrest. The keepers wondered how he kept alive, considering the amount of food he took and the sleep he had.

Belle-Ann's face was ever before him. Her beautiful vision floated evermore through the dark confines of his cell. Many times he had scribbled letters to Belle-Ann, with fond hopes that some word from her would come back to him, not knowing that these missives had never reached the outside of the jail.

He had lolled upon the iron cot through the soul-wrenching hours of countless nights, staring up through the black toward the concrete ceiling. His groping

mind saw no solution written in the dark. Merciless assumptions in default of proofs had opened the great loathsome cage whose maw had gulped his body.

True—he had helped his father work the “still” that his great-grandfather had worked with a free conscience. That was all—the “still” that the despised law had never yet unearthed. The aspect of the law conformed with the teachings of his father. It fitted unto the sights that his own eyes had beheld. Where was its equity? He had seen his own relation shot down in cold, cruel blood. This law had never come forward to punish the wrong and champion the right. This law only hovered like a python above its prey, and struck when it had advantage.

The law was a mangy, fanged reptile—a monster that bit the honest rights of the people out of their hearts; then clawed and rolled and mauled their bodies. He had heard that God inspired the wise men who made the law. Surely, the Almighty had not lent His seal to this curse. The God that Maw Lutts had told him about—He, who would some day make all things right in Kentucky—was not a party to this law that had finally taken the lives of his parents and had taken him. It was all the evil, godless work of men. It was the plot of a city faction. He was in the hands of a gang. In the last days of his jail life, the boy's philosophy had reduced the blame to a unit, until it fixed the whole responsibility upon a single man—“Big Pete” Burton—leader of the gang.

The boy, who had never in his life before been outside the limits of the Cumberland, had gone to jail, on that eventful day, innocent. He came out guilty.

The mountain tinge had long since deserted his cheek and left it jail-hued. The simple-souled eyes now shone with the flinty stare, the designing needle-glints, the relentless play from eye to eye that traverses the orbs of the jail-man. He came out guilty, not of that which he had knowingly already done, but guilty of the added thing now stored away in the core of his being that he meant to do.

The heart-breaking midnight loneliness and the nerve-stabbing "third degree" had not sucked the fire from his feudal veins. His religion now measured by his capacity for revenge, Lem Lutts came out of prison, his young heart and soul and strength obsessed by a sacred quest. His suspicions ratified in jail, he came out tarnished and arrayed against the world. In the centre of this flaming theatre of vengeance there ever stalked one leading figure, one solitary actor—a huge animal-headed man flaunting a frayed precept, called law—the monster law-man reaching for the rights and the blood of the people—he of the shadow-built body and the charmed life—that fearless ghost-spawn who never backed away from the mouth of a gun—he who always plunged toward the flame and the smoke and fought in the open—he whose skin was tattooed by the Winchester stencil of the mountaineer; but who still lived, and pursued, and fought on—the man who forged always onward with uncanny precision, ever stalking the hillman, ever reaching for his sanctum with merciless, untiring law-biting fury.

The vision of this supernatural man, who had killed his parents, stood in front of the boy's life and blocked his untamed spirit with taunts. Loyal to in-

herited instincts; guided by the influence of environment; handicapped by ignorance; fanatically brave in his peculiarly educated understanding of justice, and property rights—the boy saw only this man. This hated enemy had not deserted him in jail. “Big Pete” had visited him time and time again. He had coaxed, abused, threatened, cajoled. He had even “man-handled” Lem, but never an utterance had crossed the boy’s lips to betray. Finally, they had put him in the dungeon. When he emerged from the “black hole of Calcutta,” he was thinner, chalk-hued, and benumbed of brain, but unrelenting, and “Big Pete” knew there was a demerit across his record. He did not make an informer.

To-day they had released Lem Lutts in disgust. The revenuer, Burton, was on hand with that same despicable stare, and followed him from the warden’s office to the street.

“I’ll get you yet, Lutts,” predicted the detective. “I’ll bust that gang, and I’ll send you to Atlanta the next time. I’ll bust you, or I’ll get you like I did your—your——” his temerity broke. “I’ll get you all right—I’ll be on your trail in a week.” To this gentle benediction he added a gentle push as emphasis.

Slight as the push was, Lem lost his balance and went to his knees, his hat falling to the walk. When he gained his feet and faced about, the officer stared in dumb amazement at the savage figure before him. Lem’s stoicism had left him. His immobile features yielded to the volcanic hatred within. His light eyes glinted like full sockets of quicksilver. The froth fermented and bubbled off his twitching lip.

"Yes—yes—yo' houn' dog!—yo' kilt my pap, an' my maw—yo' did!" he shrieked out in a riot of rage. "Yore 'lowing t' git hain't a gittin', hit hain't—yo' kin 'low, an' 'low, an' 'low—thet hain't a gittin'—yore a pesky coward—yore a damn woman-killer—an' th' day'll cum when we'uns 'll run th' cow-brutes acrossin' yore snaky ole grave, we will! An' our'n hawgs'll root parsley offin' yore ole houn'-dawg grave, they will—yo' kilt my pap an' my maw, yo' did—an' hits we'uns what'll make a stinkin' hole fo' yore ole carcass,—what'll run the wild skunks out o' th' mountains—a hole what'll make th' buzzards puke.

"Yo' kilt my pap an' my maw—yo' he-skunk!—an' ef they's a God up in th' clouds, He'll see yore ole bones a-burnin' up in hell 'fore long—He will."

He bleated out his imprecations, his frothy, distraught utterances tumbling together and stifling his speech. His wrist-band became loosened, and he stretched a sleeveless, naked arm high over his bared head to solemnize an oath that had sealed itself in his tempestuous heart. The sullen officer scowled at him, speechless; then grimly, silently, turned his back upon the lava of this mountain boy's impotent frenzy.

Panting and dazed, Lem walked in a circle around his hat, which lay on the walk. Finally picking it up, he backed away from some curious eyes that had gathered, and ambled off toward the Kentucky river. Near two hundred miles from Moon mountain, forlorn, soul-sick, friendless, moneyless, but free, with one steadfast, consuming purpose fixed in his heart,—an organic purpose which he kept protected with prayer-

ful importunities to Providence that it might not go amiss!

When Lem got his bearings, he started cross-country afoot. At the end of the ninth day he found himself on the skirts of the Big Sandy country. With that tireless wolf-gait, he put the rugged miles behind him. All through the moonless night he tramped with eager eyes fixed toward the east where the hills piled higher and higher, and penciled a sable, ragged border against the paling, myriad stars.

At length the atmosphere grew heavy and a flume of languid clouds straggled up where they hung upon the distant mountain peaks, pregnant with pulsing heat lightning. When, in the loneliness of that weird hour, the darkest epoch between night and morning, Lem beheld, silhouetted against the incessant flashes of lightning, the sombre dome of Moon mountain—that sullen watch-dog of the Cumberland—he pushed ahead unmindful of fatigue, while out of the wreckage of his battered soul, and aggrieved senses, there rose up a semblance of his old self as he lessened the distance between him and his beloved home.

Before the sun was up, and while the transparent jewels still trembled on the damp face of the wilderness, Lem was on the last half of his climb. He forged onward, his head aflutter with a multiplicity of anticipation that precedes the sight of a long absent home. Presently he espied a thin column of smoke aloft, which he knew issued from his own cherished habitat. He pulsed with a savage delight. With the pungent odors of a horde of familiar, endeared growing things in his nostrils, he throbbed with the salient, rabid joy of an

escaped jungle animal back again to its own. In a vortex of ecstasy he viewed the wild, enchanting scenes developing through a film of early morning mist.

CHAPTER XXX

THE SHOOTING OF PETER BURTON

WHEN finally Lem reached the narrow twist where the trail jutted out and clung to the dew-damp breast of the mountain, he halted and dropping his torn shoes, which he had carried in his hand the past hour, he gazed along the ragged channel of a blind gulch that bit into the base of the mountain. The tree-fringed mouth of this gulch framed a picture below that entranced him. Upheld on the grass-grown palm of the distant clearing, he saw the squatty outlines of the meeting-house.

Like a blow from a bludgeon the tragic details of that unforgettable tragedy hissed and rankled anew in his brain;—that red, accursed half-hour amid the naked shadows of a lugubrious dusk, with death at his elbow; the cry of the panther in his ears, and a ghost that breathed and scowled and cursed over him.

Motionless, he looked at that wooden magnet below with a rapt, breathless stare. When he seized his damaged shoes and started onward, two stinging tears, hot with the acme of bitterness, fell off his chin, through his open shirt-front, and rolled across the white scars that dappled his breast.

When he made the next turn he was in full view of the cabin. He saw the blue-black martins, swirling

around and chattering over their box. He heard the crowing of the cocks, and the see-saw music of the guineas behind the log barn. He saw the red steers reluctant to leave their warm wallow in the be-dewed stable yard. He placed his fingers to his mouth and gave two shrill whistles. In an instant his father's spotted hound bounded from behind the cabin, followed by four other obstreperous dogs. While the dogs were yapping and mobbing him with their boisterous welcome, Slab appeared at the cabin door, followed by Bud half-dressed.

"Hallaluyah! hallaluyah! hallaluyah!" shouted the old negro, gesticulating joyously and shambling pell-mell down the descent.

On the backward path to the cabin there followed a noisy and gladsome reunion. Hanging to his brother's arm, Buddy kept crying crazily:

"Lem hain't daid—Lem hain't daid—air yo', Lem?"

While Lem ate his breakfast, he told his own sad story and, in turn, Bud and the negro poured into his ears the happenings of the past months. Nor did Buddy omit a single detail of these events. He began with the trapping of a brown bear, and ended with the rehearsal of that terrible fight at Junction City, as he exhibited the scars of that sanguine combat.

"I air ole Cap Lutts' boy—hain't I, Lem?" he ended pridefully, probing for his brother's commendation.

"Yo' sho' air, Buddy—an' I air powerful happy t' own yo' fo' my brother—yo' kin show pap's blood in yore veins any day—I 'low yo' kin hold th' mounting some day," lauded Lem, with an affectionate slap, "an' yore brother Lem'll git thet onery low-down Sap Mc-

Gill fo' shootin' a boy—fo' shootin' my brother. He'll answer—same's th' revenuer. I was thinkin' o' leavin' fo' a spell, Buddy, but I'll not leave heah, as long as God Almoughty holds th' clouds over these hills, an' my heart beats—I'll not leave til' I kill 'em both—I won't—I won't leave."

Worn and weary as he was, Lem did not wait to rest. He bathed his aching, swollen feet, and slipping on a pair of cow-hide moccasins, he hastened away with Buddy, to surprise Johnse Hatfield, and the faithful men at the still. And as he passed Eagle Crown, his eyes sought its lofty apex and his heart throbbed with a deep yearning. The vision of the absent girl who had gone out of his life and carried with her every fibre of joy that had hitherto woofed his existence—now stood before him with a vividness and insistency that eclipsed all previous visitations.

In a measure, the surprise was turned upon himself, for they heard a shot and came suddenly upon Johnse Hatfield on the trail, crouching behind a boulder, his rifle still smoking, and peering keenly over into the laurel thicket below. When he looked up and beheld Lem, back again alive and well, he almost collapsed. Then the wild joy of Johnse's greeting merged swiftly into a grimmer enthusiasm as he said:

"I plugged em at last, Lem."

"Who?"

"Th' revenuer—I jest plugged em," enlightened Johnse.

"Burton?" cried Lem, unwilling to believe the news.

"Shore," returned Johnse, "I stopped 'em thes time—I did."

"Air yo' sho' he's kilt?" eagerly, as the three crouched behind the boulder.

"He air," assured Johnse emphatically. "I kin tell the way a feller flops his wings when he air kilt an' when he air jest hurted—he war a snakin' round—an' I 'low he war a spyin' on yore house—he looked up an' seen me a watchin'—then he pulled on me—but I fired quicker'n him—I got em shore thes time, Lem."

"Gawd'll Moughty!" muttered Lem, under his breath, "air thet cuss back thes quick—a houndin' me agin, thes soon?—but he tol' me he'd do hit—he said he wouldn't parley any——"

"Who tol' yo'?"

"Burton."

"When—yo' hain't meanin' thet yo' talked to that devil?"

"I been in his jail all thes time."

For a moment Hatfield's face was a picture of dismay. He was dumb and plainly beyond any expression. Presently Johnse spoke.

"I see thar game—course thar's a traitor, but I 'low it hain't Orlick--they wanted t' beat yo'-all back, thinkin' yo' wouldn't be a lookin' fer 'em so soon—an' he war a spyin' on yore house, aimin' t' foller yo'-all to th' still—then raid us—but I changed his tune."

"I hope yo' hain't kilt em—'cause he belongs to Cap Lutts's boy—to me——"

"I kilt em, Lem—I had t'."

Lem still stared incredulously at Hatfield's grim, bearded face.

"Come 'long, Johnse!" exclaimed Lem decisively. "I 'low yo' believe yo' kilt em—but yo' can't lead me t'

his daid body—yo' can't," declared Lem dubiously. Gripping his Winchester, Lem started away down the trail on a run, with Hatfield and little Bud loping along after him.

When they arrived within sight of the place indicated by Hatfield as the spot where he had seen the revenuer's head disappear, the trio fell upon their knees, and crept cautiously along, with rifles ready and eyes alert. In a dense clump of laurel brush between two great dun rocks, they came upon a tan felt hat lying in a wide circle of dark blood. A few paces away lay a silver-mounted Winchester rifle. Lem knew the gun; the instant he laid eyes on the piece, he knew it was the property of Pete Burton, the revenuer. The front of the hat, just above the band, was slit open for six inches or more, as if cut with a knife. Lem's eyes glowed like fire-balls, as he examined the gun and passing it to Bud to carry, he turned upon Hatfield, who stood speechless eyeing the blood.

"Yo' said yo'd show me his daid body, Johnse—do yo' see hit?" Lem emitted a bitter, derisive laugh.

Hatfield's hairy visage was the picture of dumb bewilderment.

"Johnse Hatfield," began Lem solemnly, "could any man thet Gawd'll Moughty made human lose all thet blood and not stay heah, on thes spot?—eh? I kin tell from his hat yore bullet swiped em 'long th' forehead,—yo' hain't kilt em—yo'll never kill em—I'll never kill em—nobuddy'll ever kill em, Johnse Hatfield!—ef he wus a human bein' my pap would a got em 'long 'go—Johnse, when yo'-all kills a eagle yo' takes a bead on em pint-blank first, don't yo'?—sho'—

yo' don't shoot at his shadder skimmin' along on th' ground under him, do yo'?"—no. But when yo' shoot at this cussed revenuer yo' mought as well shoot at his shadder's fer's killin' him goes—he air a ghost. But I'll never stop tryin' t' git em anyways—I feel that I'll never git em—leastways hits soothin' t' be always a tryin'—cum 'long, Johnse."

They twisted in and out through the laurel and rhododendrons, between bald rocks, mighty and pigmy, and over crumbling logs coated with liverwort. Through walls of tangled thorn brush; out and along paths beaten by the wild razorbacks, and down, always downward, the three followed the erratic zigzag trail of blood for four miles. Down to the very water's brink of Boon Creek, where they lost it.

They traversed both sides of the creek up and down for miles with no signs of the lost trail. Hour after hour they searched until night came upon them, and they returned home, with the uncanny feeling that the wounded revenuer was likely to rise up out of the ground, or step out of the granite heart of some boulder at any moment.

At dawn the following day, thirty armed men gathered at the cabin. Lem spread them out, beginning at the canyon of Hellsfork, and they beat the rugged country systematically, working upward. Each day at sunrise they resumed the search where they left off until the eighth day, when they left all growth and foliage behind and came high up amid the naked, forbidding peaks of the range; precincts to discourage a mountain goat, much more a wounded man. They were rewarded with no signs of the revenuer.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN WHICH SLAB PROPHECIES

THEY disbanded, and Lem Lutts returned to the cabin, melancholy and morose. This futile hunt for his elusive arch enemy was prophetic of some strange, dawning evolution. He felt the tang of it in his blood. He saw it lettered in the patchwork of the shadows that tried to wrap their arms about him. Amid the swaying branches of the trees the sympathetic night winds lisped incoherently, and tried to tell him something. The feral night-hawks dropped their shrill cries ominously down from the sky; utterances seemingly meant for him. From down in the jungle realms of the deserted church the faint whimpering of a panther whelp floated up to his attuned ears, like the sobbing of a tired child, carrying the warning of an oracular omen he could not deny.

The tree-frogs piped the spirit of this premonition to him with a monotonous insistency that filled the boy's soul with an alien, restive turbulence not comprehensible. The katydid purred its mysterious cadence. To his keen interpretations all the subtle, nocturnal elements of nature united upon one portentous theme. A significant, adjuring symphony; the prelude of some miraculous happening that stood very close to his life; inspiring him with a wild, palpitating

unrest that puzzled his reason and stirred him like the touch of an unseen hand.

A week after his abandoned search for the ghost-like revenuer, Lem's haunting broodings resolved themselves into a quick, sudden action.

One morning, when Bud and Slab justly supposed Lem was still asleep, he appeared at the witch-elm horse-block with Johnse Hatfield's piebald mare. He gave to the mystified Bud and Slab a few brief instructions, absolutely distinct from any inkling of his intentions, and rode away through the chill mist and disappeared westward. He came back at nightfall of the fourth day with a bulky package strapped to his saddle. When he carried this bundle inside the cabin and exhibited its contents, Bud and Slab looked on in open-mouthed wonderment.

There was a fine blue-serge suit of store clothes, shirts, linen collars, ties, socks, underwear, tan shoes, and a direct insult to the etiquette of mountain head-gear—a slick derby hat, which Buddy regarded with open scorn; but which he speedily forgot when Lem unwrapped a lesser package and presented his brother with a pearl-gray, wide-brimmed Stetson hat for himself, and half dozen soft shirts, all of which were grotesquely over-sized. Lem also gave Slab a half dozen flannel shirts, two of which were a brilliant red, and which filled the old negro's mouth with a score of assorted exclamations that left small doubt of his gratitude and appreciation. Lem was non-communicative until after supper. Then it was that he called Buddy and Slab out to the horse-block and took them into his confidence, after Slab had sung "Kitty Wells."

"Now—Buddy," Lem was saying with profound emphasis, "to-morry yo'll be th' man o' th' house, understan'?—an' yo' got t' be a man—and run things like a man—'cause yore brother Lem'll be gone away from heah to-morry, Buddy—do yo' 'low yore brother kin trust yo'-all, Buddy?—eh, kin he trust yo'?"

Bud stood with a solemn, peaked face, into which had suddenly crept an apprehensive, wistful look. He had lost no time in donning his new things. Although his skinny little boy's figure was undersized, he had on a man's shirt; likewise a man's hat. He had in his grasp a man's rifle, a gun that had belonged to a very great man; undeniably the greatest man that had ever lived. That look of dull puerile doubt vanished instantly as the realization dawned upon him that his brother was now about to honor him with a man's commission. He straightened valiantly as he looked full into his brother's steadfast eyes and said:

"I reckon ole Cap Lutts o' Moon mountain was my pap, Lem—same's he was yo'n."

Lem bestowed a beaming look of pride upon him.

"I jest hoped yo'd say thet, Buddy—yore a game lad, an' yo' kin show pap's blood in yore veins any day."

"Air yo' a goin' fer off, Lem?" questioned Bud. Slab edged nearer, his old ears eager for the project.

Lem reached out and laid a hand on his little brother's thin shoulder, as with a jerk he tossed his chestnut hair backward.

"Buddy," he said in measured tones, "to-morry I'm a goin' away—I cyan't tell how fer—I mought be gone a week—I mought be gone a month—mebby a year—

mebby ten years—I mought never cum back, Buddy—but when I do cum back—yo'll know thet I seed Belle-Ann."

This intelligence jarred Buddy's hard, tight-lipped mouth ajar and fired his cold, misanthropic heart with a vibrant yearning. How he would love to see Belle-Ann! Slab slid gently off the witch-block like a turtle, and rubbed his gnarled old hands together in hearty approval.

"When yo'-all see Lem agin, Buddy," repeated Lem, "yo'll know I seed Belle-Ann—I air agoin' below, an' I air agoin' t' find Belle-Ann ef th' trail leads aroun' th' worl'—I aim t' see her face onct mo'—jest onct mo' fore I die——"

"Ef I see her, I'll cum back heah t' Moon mountain, an' never leave 'til yo' all lay me down 'side maw an' pap—ef I don't cum back—yo'll know thet I'm still a lookin' fo' our'n deah little Belle-Ann—er I'm daid."

"Mebby yo'll find her, Lem," predicted Buddy, "an' mebby she'll cum back home long o' yo'." An unwonted smile lingered on his countenance for a brief moment in this anticipation. Then Slab with deep solemnity advanced a sorceristic theory, drawn from his prognostic acumen.

"Lemmy—Lemmy," he began in a confidential, sibilant, half-whisper, "las' night—las' night," he peered cautiously into the gloom, peopled with gesticulating shadows. "Las' night er han' recht out an' tech me on ma foot—an' I wake up—an' er li'lle voice say, 'Slab, git up'—an' I git up—an' th' li'lle voice say, awful soft an' low like, 'Slab,' it say, 'Slab look out'—"

an' I peek ma haid out—an' thar set Mr. Owl—not er onery li'lle screech owl, what snoops wif de debil—but er big, yaller, honest ole owl, whut de Obeah-spirit send t' tell Slab er message, whut de good Lord hev in mind whut's gwine t' happen. Dah set Mr. Owl up in de daid cedar, wif de big moon right ahind him—den I snuck out an' slip up t' de daid cedar, an' stand jist as still, an' wait t' see ef owl say somethin'—'cause ef owl say first—den dat means bad—but ef owl wait fo' me t' say first—den dat means good—so I stand jist as still—an' owl he don't say nuffin'—an' I wait agin, an' owl he don' open he mouf—den I fix my hands, an' I say—'hoo! hoo! hoo!' an' jist ez quick ez lighten' Mr. Owl he say 'hoo!—hoo! hoo!' Den I say 'hoo! hoo! hoo!' seban times, an' ebery time Mr. Owl he answer me—den when I say 'hoo!—hoo!—hoo!' de las' time—Mr. Owl he flop his wings an' goed away—den I knowed shore dat somethin' gwine t' drap—den I looks 'round an' finds er li'lle bitty Obeah-stone—er li'lle white stone, wif er li'lle black speck on hit—an' I fetches hit heah an' lays hit down on de witch-block right heah—an' I turned 'round an' started back t' bed, when somethin' whispered ahind me—den I jump 'round—but I warn't skeert—an' dah she were—dah she were, Lemmie—dah she were settin' up on dis witch-block right whar I put de Obeah-stone,—dah set our li'lle Belle-Ann lookin' at Slab—I seed her just ez plain, Lemmie—jest ez plain ez I see you des minit—all dressed up white ez snow—an' all dem curls er hangin' down roun' her shoulders, an' her li'lle mouf wus er smilin' at me—an' her beau'ful eyes wus er lookin' right at me—an' I drap down on ma knees—right heah—right heah, whar

I stan' now—an' I hollers out: 'Hallelujah!—I allers tol' dem dat yo'd cum back, li'lle gal'—an' she stretch her hands out ter me—an' I bust out er cryin'—I couldn't he'p hit—I bust out er cryin'—an' I heer her voice just ez plain ez I heer ma own now,—I heer her voice like er nightengale's voice,—she say, 'Whar's Lem—whar's Lem—whar's Lem?—yo' Slab—whar's Lem?—blow de horn fo' Lem,—yo' Slab—blow de horn fo' Lem'—an' I git up off ma knees an' go t' tech her han' an' she warn't dah—she goed away jist ez quick ez lighten'—an' I look an' de li'lle Obeah-stone I lay on dat witch-block wus goed away, too—Lemmie—dat means dat we's gwine t' see li'lle Belle-Ann 'fore a great spell—yore due t' find li'lle Belle-Ann, Lemmie,—yo'll sho' see her—Buddy'll see her—Slab's ole eyes'll see her—yo' know, Lemmie,—de good Lord hev His pertic'ler ways t' tell good folks 'bout all des things—He kindly tells dem 'forehand—so's dey hearts won't break—so's dey'll hev c'urage, an' trus' in Him—Slab knows He do—Slab knows.'

CHAPTER XXXII

THE NEAR ASSASSIN

THE following day Lem Lutts arrayed himself in his newly purchased store clothes and prepared to face a strange, unfriendly world of which he knew little. Not a week, not a day, scarcely an hour had elapsed since Belle-Ann had gone to Proctor that thoughts of her were not uppermost in his mind. Indeed, it was the sustaining hope of seeing her that had held his unhappy being together. It was seemingly a wretched measure of years since that unforgettable day when he had kissed the little scar that crossed the part in her curls, when she had stood before him and crossed her heart, and pledged him that she would surely come back to him. But the day of her return, as he had marked it in his mind, a scintillating goal, promising an epoch of luxuriant life, had come, and long since passed. He had, while in prison, written half a dozen crude letters addressed to Belle-Ann at Beattyville. His credulous mind had always supposed that these missives had reached their destination. As he had never received any reply to his letters, he had deducted that either the subtle influence of education and society had taken hold of her, weaning her heart away from all thoughts of the mountains, or that some unforeseen circumstance beyond her will

had kept her silent. If it developed that he could not find her at the school, he had determined, next, to go down into the Big Sandy camps and hunt up her father.

In accordance with his sudden inception of this extended sojourn, he was quick to realize that to mingle with the proud inhabitants of the strange land, into which he sallied, he would be handicapped, and doubtless be put to a retarding disadvantage by appearing among them in the crude garb of a mountaineer. He had gleaned this bit of wisdom while in prison. A credulous, guileless spirit can learn more of the world in a city jail in one month, than he can learn in twenty years out on the Godhead, in the geodetic domains allotted him by Providence. Therefore, Lem had with rare forethought equipped himself in a manner not unpleasing, and calculated to ward off disdain and ridicule. However, he had postponed having his luxuriant locks shorn to the last minute, deciding to sacrifice them when he struck the first big town. So that now he looked a bit incongruous, his shining black derby contrasting oddly enough with his long, curling hair.

Lem had bidden Slab farewell, and after spending a time up in the Orchard beside the two mounds, he climbed up to Eagle Crown, his favorite, endeared refuge, to take what might be his last survey of the wild kingdom he loved so well. When he reached that dizzy height, he sat down to gain his breath. As he did so, his eyes fell upon a small, round object at his feet.

Instantly he picked it up, and with a reminiscent

smile pressed it fondly to his lips. It was a button off Belle-Ann's gingham gown.

Buddy in his impatience had wandered on down the trail toward the loop, where he had been waiting for Lem for well on to an hour, for he meant to accompany his brother as far as Boon's ford before taking leave. He had sauntered along idly and had reached a point opposite the gap in the spur, where he could look back and view the open trail, when a young badger suddenly ambled out in the path and stood regarding him curiously, with its pink snout working inquiringly. Buddy had no wish for the young badger, but, boy-like, he could not resist shying a rock at it, and at least inspire the creature with some sense of respect.

With a grin, he stepped over toward a spruce log half hidden beneath the foliage of laurel and wild dew-berry bushes. As he stooped down and took up a small rock, a sight met his eyes that electrified him, causing him to forget the little animal and to drop the stone as if it had been an ember. In an instant he had his rifle at readiness. The object upon which he had his eyes riveted would never have been detected by a lay mind. But Buddy's little greenish eyes, versed in woodcraft, knew instantly that the two round holes he had glimpsed meant the presence of a shotgun! If there is anything that the mountain-born hates worse than a revenuer, it is a shotgun. They regard this mongrel weapon with a deep, cordial loathing not to be reconciled. The sight of a shotgun in the mountains is always a forerunner of deviltry and treachery.

Bud looked around furtively, then he leaned over and with infinite caution parted the laurel. He recoiled, stung with amazement.

Sap McGill lay close up against the log, with an empty whiskey flask in his relaxed palm! The boy drew back and his brain began to work with great rapidity. The last time he had seen Sap he was tumbled in the road by a bullet at Junction City. McGill was now in ambush; hidden here, bent upon a killing, and had involuntarily fallen into a drunken slumber, overcome by liquor, as evidenced by the empty bottle. Then suddenly Buddy deduced a hypothesis that decided him irrevocably. McGill could be in waiting for no one other person than his (Buddy's) brother. McGill was hidden here waiting for Lem to come down the trail, when he would rise up and send two loads of buckshot into the back of Lem's head. Buddy's lips tightened fiercely. With a quick, deft movement he reached over and, taking the shotgun by the muzzle, drew it noiselessly out to him. Swiftly he broke the gun, extracted the two shells and placed them in his pocket. He then carefully replaced the gun in the position he had found it, and stealthily secreted himself behind a boulder less than thirty feet distant. Here he lay down on his stomach with his rifle trained through a crevice, over the spot where McGill lay.

To Buddy's tense nerves the minutes seemed like long hours. He lay so long in this one position, not daring to move to another shelter, that a dull aching began to traverse his arm, which he feared would jeopardize his aim. This was the only position he

could command here, where he could see the log held by McGill and at the same time hold a direct aim. From where Bud lay he could see the open trail through the gap for a distance of fifty yards without stirring.

But for McGill to get a glimpse of the path it was necessary for him to thrust his head far out from his place of concealment. Just at a time when Bud thought that he must surely risk a change in his position, a half-dozen razorbacks trotted up from behind. When they saw Bud lying on the ground in plain view, they uttered a series of affrighted grunts, and dashed ahead, two of them swerved and jumped over the very log that hid McGill, and must have come perilously near to jumping squarely upon him. The next instant McGill's head was thrust stealthfully out of the laurel, his eyes fixed intently on the scrub cedars that jutted out into the trail leading down from the Lutts cabin. As McGill waited to waylay Lem, his life in these minutes hinged upon a seemingly irrelevant and insignificant act.

The moment that McGill broke his gun and discovered that it had been tampered with, he would naturally replace the shells. And the instant that he replaced the shells, Buddy Lutts meant to send a rifle ball into his brain.

On the eve of leaving his sequestered haunts in the hills, none but the omniscient Providence could tell for how long, Lem Lutts was loath to turn his eyes toward the blue-grass country. So it was that he lingered, feasting his gaze upon the panoramic view that lay beneath Eagle Crown, every spur and nook and

cove and gulch of which he had been familiar with all his life. With a heaviness weighing his heart, but a determination unabated, he swept his eyes over the purple distance with one last farewell, and turning started his descent. His head had disappeared downward when suddenly, as if in response to a voice, he halted and, not knowing his own purpose precisely, he climbed back and stood up on the ledge, sending his gaze afar to the glistening patch of water that marked the Boon Creek ford; immortalized in his soul, with the last beckonings of her whom he adored with a flaming, compelling, deathless love that eclipsed and obliterated all else in life. His gaze dwelt here for a full minute. Then he turned half-way, then looked quickly back. Something there had attracted him. With his hand half raised, he pushed to the brink of the precipice. He now discerned the burnished coat of a blood-bay horse standing in the ford. Lem's mouth dropped ajar. As he strained his eyes downward, his breath paused with the miraculous thought that slowly filtered into his brain. From this vast, hazy height he could not determine whether the equestrian was male or female. But an exciting intuition seized his senses as he descried some object flashing methodically in the sunlight.

Unmistakably the distant rider was waving to him!

Then the signal changed to something white, flaunting against the azure space, and Lem's heart smote his ribs with a great bound of suffocating joy, as the influx of a scintillating realization obsessed him, and he started down that perilous descent faster than he had ever gone in his life.

CHAPTER XXXIII

BELLE-ANN COMES BACK

WHEN he reached the ground he dashed along the trail like a madman. On past the cabin he ran in great bounds; down the cypress cut, his speed increasing every second. As he rushed headlong down into the loop, a startling thing happened.

As Lem shot around a clump of scrub cedars that marked a sharp twist in the trail, the form of a man confronted him with a shotgun leveled at his head. At the same time the ambuscader pulled the trigger with murderous intent. The gun snapped with no report, and the sheer impetus of Lem's body moving at terrific velocity bore him down in a trice. As Lem flashed past, unable to check his headlong speed on the moment, he struck the mystified face a stunning, crashing blow. The man tumbled backward—his head striking a rock with a crushing impact.

It was only when Lem had turned back that he fully established the identity of his assailant, who had started to grow a beard. In his excitement and utter amazement, he had not heard the footsteps behind him. However, he received another shock when he saw Buddy run up to the prostrate McGill and thrust the muzzle of his rifle against the man's side. The

infuriated Buddy was on the verge of pulling the trigger when Lem sprang forward and grabbed the rifle out of his brother's hands. The irate boy shot an inquiring look at Lem.

"Warn't he layin' t' kill yo'—hain't I bin watchin' em fo' mo'n a hour?" protested Bud, plainly disgusted with his brother's interference. "Didn't I break his ole damn shotgun when he dranked hisse'f asleep, an' take his loads out—heah they air—now—now—see?—an' yo' hain't 'lowin' t' kill em?—when he plugged me twict in Junction City?" Buddy shook his head savagely, and glared at the unconscious form lying prone and inert on its back.

"Now yo' jest hol' yore han'," panted Lem. "Sho'—I'm aimin' to kill em, kill em?—I'll kill em twict er three times—I will——" He cast an anxious, wistful look behind him, then ran a dozen yards down the path, turned and plunged crazily back again, and acted like he had suddenly gone daft. He was mumbling muddled words that Buddy could not make out. Buddy had never before seen his brother in such a confused flurry.

"Sho'—I'll kill em, Buddy," reiterated the frustrated Lem, "but I hain't 'lowin' to kill em thes minit—his haid air busted ag'in' that rock—he don't know nothin'—an' I want em to know who kilt em, I do—I want em to see me—I want em to know that Lem Lutts keetched em at last."

"Whut yo' a runnin' roun' like a shot deer fo'?" interrupted Buddy in alarm.

"I want em to know thet he air a payin' in to Lem Lutts fo' all his other divilmint—an' fo' shootin' a

boy—yo’—all watch em, Buddy—keep your gun on em when he wakes up, an’ don’t yo’ plug em—hold em ’til I git back—Gawd’ll Moughty! I got to go——”

The gravel scattered and there was a rush of feet. Buddy looked around and saw Lem tearing off down the trail like a being distraught, and even faster than he had appeared a few moments since. Nonplussed at his brother’s conduct, amazed, he waited sulkily.

With fiery, belligerent eyes Buddy regarded the motionless figure of McGill. The terrible, pitiless hate that seethed and flamed in Buddy’s heart for the fallen foe lying on the ground before him had superseded a measure of his natural curiosity concerning his brother’s frantic and lightning-like appearance and his sudden and frenzied departure. Lem, in his excitement, had carried Buddy’s rifle away, leaving him weaponless.

A thought brought a grim smile to the boy’s lips, and a satanic light flitted across his eyes, like the shadow of a bird skimming the ground. He hurriedly withdrew one of the loaded shells from his pocket. He would surely now put an end to Sap McGill. A brute of his caliber should have died long, long ago. He would be dead and safely beyond all further deviltry in a few seconds. His eyes burning with the lust of this design, Bud reached down to take up McGill’s shotgun to reload it, when he heard Lem’s distant voice. His words startled Buddy, and arrested his hand.

“Belle-Ann’s a comin’—Belle-Ann’s a comin’—Belle-Ann’s come back,” echoed back to the boy.

Then it was that the psychological impulse dashed upon little Bud, wrenching out of his mind his intent

of manslaughter. His fingers never reached the shotgun. He dropped the loaded shell and, jerking his new hat off, he flung his head back and fairly flew after his brother. With all the might he could muster into his skinny legs, he left the scene of this bloodless encounter behind.

McGill lay face upward. He had not moved a muscle since he fell. The sleepy stillness was broken only by the wild bird voices of the wood. A suspicious catbird dropped down on the end of a log near the silent figure and gave vent to his whining, petulant phrase.

From under the rock upon which McGill's head had struck, the head of a live thing was thrust. Then a long, gorgeous body slid into view. Its sinuous length was embellished with beautiful pigments of gold and black and light canary. With the omnivorous curiosity of the reptile for all inanimate objects, the rattlesnake thrust his mouth, shaped like that of a catfish, up to Sap's ear. The two black rings circling his little incandescent eyes began to swell. The whole surface of his mottled head flattened out and pulsed. He seemed to be breathing through the top of his head. A peculiar half-sound, indescribable, issued forth when the dappled tip of the snake's tail quivered. Like a forked needle his tongue flashed in and out of his throat.

As the rattlesnake's challenge met with utter immobility, he started a thorough inspection. He began at the ear and nosed on down to the feet. Then he came up on the other side of the unconscious man, back to the starting point. A cloud passed, and the

sun fell straight down upon the man's face. With a snake's love for radiation the rattler, now apparently satisfied, glided up on McGill's breast. With no sign of life communicating, and finding warmth beneath him, and warmth above him, the rattler coiled himself in a jiffy and lay basking comfortably on McGill's bosom.

At the glad sight that met his eyes, Lem Lutts checked his wild, joy-mad race down toward Boon's ford. He became suddenly and acutely conscious that such a helter-skelter approach did not compare favorably with the beautiful theme of sweet dignity presented ahead of him. Lem now walked moderately to recover his breath and to compose and regain his equipoise. What he saw was a magnificent blood-bay horse flashing like crimson satin in the sunlight, his black mane and tail rippling in the south breeze. The animal lifted his noble head and emitted a neigh, which utterance was a royal echo from the pasture realms of the Blue-grass. The horse stopped under a great sycamore tree, where still remained the quaint characters they had cut into its bark in childhood days, when they two were playfellows.

Lem's amazed, staring eyes beheld a lovely girl dismount. She was tall and round, and withal more beautiful than any stretch of his imagination could picture a girl. She was attired in a handsome, modish riding costume, with dainty patent-leather riding boots. She stood now waving a silver-mounted whip as he approached.

"Oh!—Lem!" she dropped her gauntlets, tossed back her mass of curls and held her hands out to him.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE REUNION

“**B**ELLE-ANN!” His voice was husky and quavering. Her hands were closed within his mighty pressure.

They were looking into each other's face. The boy with incredulous, wondering eyes, reflecting a heart full to the brim with adoration; she, palpitating, her dimples aflush, her bosom lifting, her delicious red mouth ajar. And in the exquisite domains of those azure-tinted orbs lay the lucid litany of a wondrous, beautiful parable. Those two violet-stained eyes were misty with the text of a miracle that nestled in her heart, the tendrils of which she meant to train with care around the boy's mountain soul. In wordless, panting silence they studied each other's happy face for a long minute.

“I knew that was you-all up thah on Eagle Crown. Were you-all looking for me, Lem?” she questioned in a half-whisper, predicating an affection that had its inception back in the child days of yore.

“I was up thah a lookin' fo' yo', Belle-Ann—th' same's I bin a lookin' every hour since yo'-all went away,” he assured her, dropping her hands and with a movement to take her into his arms and kiss her bowed, smiling mouth.

Belle-Ann quickly drew back, with a tolerant ripple of mirth, thwarting his intent with the guise of a half-coquettish, half-mischievous challenge. But her purpose in this denial was tenfold deeper than girlish byplay. Her motive was infinitely more profound than to tantalize. She meant to withhold that priceless first kiss as a leverage to undo that which she had done. She meant to hold that first embrace as a reward for the reversal of the godless compact, the tenure of which she had long since penitently recanted.

Nevertheless, Lem was quick to divine the import of her act. He fell back a pace, abashed and crest-fallen.

"Thet's so," he said sorrowfully. "I hain't kilt th' revenuer yet, Belle-Ann—but I 'low I tried hard enough, Belle-Ann,—Johnse Hatfield shot em through th' haid three weeks back—but all we ever found o' him wus a hat, an' a rifle, an' a barrel o' blood—he must hev jest flopped his arms an' flew up in th' sky—daid er alive—he hain't on Hellsfork—he——"

Here Buddy rushed up, perspiring and breathing hard. He seized the girl's hand and hung on with a tenacity that bade fair to incumber her forevermore. The boy was too full to speak. His lips only trembled as he gazed up at her. When with endearing terms she pressed his thin little form to her and kissed him, the tears welled up and obscured his hard little eyes. Although these were tributes of joy from his stormy, suspicious heart, it was the first signs of tears any one had seen him manifest since old Cap Lutts had lain white and still, amid the flowers on God's acre. Then while Buddy fondled and admired the salient,

superb horse with his fire-rimmed eyes and slender legs, the other two sat down on a rectangular stone, all coated in liverwort, upon which they had lolled many times in days ago. And here they communed with happy, hurried words.

"But Lem," Belle-Ann was saying, "you are all dressed up—but for your beautiful locks, you look really citified—perhaps you-all was on your way to visit some young lady—am I right?—come now,"—she laughed coyly.

"Belle-Ann, ef yo' had come 'bout half hour later—yo' wouldn't a found me—I wus jest a startin' out on my way below t' look fo' yo', Belle-Ann.—I wus 'lowin' t' scour th' whole earth fo' yo'—I told Buddy an' Slab thet I'd never come back till I seed yore face jest onct, anyways—I wus goin' t' spend th' balance of my life lookin' fo' yo', Belle-Ann."

"Lem—didn't I cross my heart that day and pledge you that I'd come back?"

"Yes—but I wus afeerd thet somethin' had happened t' yo'-all, Belle-Ann,—then I togged myself up an' fixed to go below—then I thought I'd go up on th' Crown an' take a last look at the spot where I saw yo' last a wavin' at me, and pretty soon I seed somethin'—an'—an'—Gawd'll Moughty—thah yo' wus a wavin' right at me—then I sho' did make time a gettin' down off'n thah—an' as I run down th' trail—thet ornery Sap McGill jumped out an' tried t' shoot——"

With a fear-fraught half-scream, Belle-Ann had bounded to her feet.

"Sap McGill—McGill, here?" she cried out incredulously. Her bosom heaved with excitement, and her

eyes were wide and starry with a sudden new-born terror. "Oh!—don't tell me that McGill is up heah—on this side of Hellsfork!"

Then it was, with bated breath and hurried, fear-laden words, that she implored Lem to hide somewhere. When she finished, all the blithesome, pulsing happiness that had dwelt in her beautiful face a few moments previously had vanished.

Lem got quickly to his feet and stood eyeing her bloodless countenance in a trance of blank incomprehension.

"Tell me—tell me quick, where is McGill now?" she panted, her hat dropping from her nerveless hands and falling at her feet.

"Why—Belle-Ann—I left em a layin' on his back up at th' loop."

"Did you kill him?"

"Naw—I didn't hev time—I wanted t' meet yo'-all—I left Buddy a guardin' em."

There was pitiable, livid dread in her face now. Her pathetic mouth dropped woefully. She stood, with fingers interlocked helplessly, in the grip of a seething apprehension. Buddy, who did not understand the real cause of Belle-Ann's distress, stood with two clinched fists, and a look of awful destruction aglow in his eyes.

"Didn't I say yo' oughter kilt em—didn't I tell yo'?" he cried in piping, admonishing tones. Lem had not moved a muscle, though the girl's whiteness was communicated to his mask-like visage. Now he frowned upon Buddy.

"What ded yo' leave em fer?" he said.

"McGill will kill you, Lem," muttered the girl, beside herself with the violence of this sudden new fear that overpowered her. "If he isn't dead now—I know that he is lurking along the trail to kill you, Lem!—Oh, it's awful!—It's so disheartening to live such lives—what can we do?—I—I——" With her hands to her face she burst into sudden tears, precluding all speech.

Just as suddenly was Lem Lutts electrified with a quick determination. He grabbed Buddy's rifle.

"I'll trail em down ef he's gone, Belle-Ann—I'll sho' kill em now."

With a swift movement Belle-Ann clutched Lem's sleeve tenaciously to detain and dissuade him. But his eyes shone with a maniacal fire as he jerked away from her and ran back up the trail with strides that carried him far ahead of the nervous horse that had taken affright and had bolted and was now galloping up the rock-strewn path in Lem's wake. Deaf to Belle-Ann's appealing voice urging him to come back, Lem only yelled back over his shoulder:

"I'll sho' kill em now!"

The horse soon swerved off from the trail and plunged down toward the valley amidst the brush, with Buddy in pursuit. Belle-Ann ran now along after Lem as swiftly as her trembling, weak limbs would carry her.

When Lem Lutts reached the loop he halted, struck dumb with the spectacle before his gaze. McGill lay just as he had left him more than an hour before. Apparently he had not moved a finger.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE DOWNFALL OF SAP MCGILL

THINKING McGill dead, Lem made one step forward and stopped, attracted by a strange, quivering movement; then he beheld the rattlesnake coiled up on Sap's breast. Then a sudden revelation dawned upon Lem Lutts. He felt instinctively that Sap was not dead, although he could not have been whiter and more inert had he been so.

To make certain Lem cautiously shrank back, and taking care not to make the slightest sound, he worked his way around to the opposite side and gained a position where he could see McGill's face. Like a shadow he stepped out from behind a boulder and looked at Sap.

What he saw almost caused him to laugh outright. Sap was far from being dead. He was wholly conscious and wholly alive, but ludicrously quiet. His eyes were popping out of his head. They told that he would beg for his life if he dared so much as to speak. He hardly dared breathe. Great tears of terror were oozing out of his forehead and trickling in copious streams down across his death-like features. The only risk the dullard could take to express his agony was to roll his eyes.

The rattlesnake's head was focused less than twelve inches from his chin, and he knew well that upon the slightest tremor of his body the rattler would stab him in the throat. He knew well that the lightning of the heavens could not emulate the fatal quickness and rapidity of that snake's poisonous blow. For well on to two hours McGill had suffered the agonies of a thousand hells. Lem now spoke to him.

When Lem's words reached McGill's ears, his only sign of comprehension was an added bulge transmitted to his rolling eyes. Standing motionless and in even tones, to avoid startling the rattler, Lem said:

"Well—so yo' got t' yore jest end at last, didn't yo'—egg-dog? Belle-Ann is a comin' up th' trail in a short spell—an' I air a goin' t' kill yo' 'fore she gits heah, which is a mighty short spell t' live I 'low—so ef a skunk like yo'-all knows a prayer, why now's yore time to think hit—but I advise yo' not t' git up on yore knees er stir roun' much." Here Lem chuckled tauntingly and gleefully.

"Say—air thet a tame snake yo'-all got thah—eh? Ac's like he wus some kin to yo'-all—say, 'fore y'o go away—just glance yore mind over all th' pesky, onery divilmint yore folks has been a doin' fo' twenty years. 'Member th' day yore old pap shot my dad under th' truce flag thet my maw held up, 'cause we'uns wanted t' have peace—but yore old pap didn't git away, did he?—he was kindy slow-like. Say—yo' know a feller in these mountains named Johnse Hatfield—eh? Did yo'-all ever hern tell on em—eh? Ha-ha-ha! Hit wus a good dance, wusn't hit? Pears like Johnse sort a put a crimp in yore folks down at Junction

City thet night—eh? Say—yo' ugly groun'-dawg—I hain't a killin' yo' exactly fo' all thet—I air only aimin' t' kill yo' onct fer thet—but I air goin' t' kill yo' twict fo' shootin' a boy—yo' shot a little boy, dedn't yo'—eh? Yo' shot my boy brother twict an' tried t' kill em—didn't yo'—eh? Now I air goin' t' blow yore brains out——”

With his last taunts a dull rush of red rage overspread Lem's countenance, as with a quick, decisive movement he jerked his rifle to his shoulder and fell upon one knee. A groan of despair escaped McGill's bloodless lips now, and the rattlesnake instantly made that fatal loop at the narrow of its neck. Evidently Sap preferred a bullet in the head to a stab in the throat from the yellow monster that was flashing its pronged tongue in his face.

“Now I'll show Belle-Ann whut ugly brains yo'-all got,” muttered Lem, sighting along the glistening gun barrel.

A piercing shriek of horror rent the air. Belle-Ann was not a hundred feet away. A vivid terror stood in her eyes. She struggled for breath to thwart the tragedy that filled that instant.

“For God's sake—oh!—for my sake—don't shoot—Lem—Lem—Lem!” she screamed out, terrified, in begging, forbidding, distraught utterances, and collapsed in the path.

But Lem, unheeding, quickly pressed the trigger. There was a pungent crack. The rifle spat out a long, slender tongue of flame. A ragged wisp of blue-white smoke spread out, separated and floated languidly upward. There was an acrid odor of burnt

powder in the air. Across the tenseness of that long, awful moment the soft trill of a catbird grated like the harsh blasphemy of a parrot. The gentle barking of a squirrel impinged like a nerve-shattering noise.

Belle-Ann was on her knees in the trail—her face averted and her hands over her eyes to hide them from what lay before her. Her curls were shaking and trembling with the chill that swept over her body. She, Belle-Ann Benson, who could, in days gone by, have watched with interest and pleasure the killing of an enemy, and smile. But now the subtle crack of that gun-shot rived into her senses like a withering scourge. Had the bullet pierced her own vitals she could not have suffered thus. All through the after years of her life the reverberation of that sharp, little gun-noise hung about her ears, and she could never think of this scene without a shudder.

She heard a loud, strained laugh, carrying a volume of contempt and scorn. She peeped through her fingers fearfully. McGill was standing upright, wiping his wet, pallid face with his shaking, naked hand. Belle-Ann's hands came away from her eyes as she regained her feet, dumfounded, and stared as if a ghost confronted her. She doubted her senses.

"Belle-Ann," shouted Lem, "cum an' take a look at th' live coward!"

With a sudden influx of gladness she ran forward, a thankful heart beating color back into her dimpled face. She looked at Lem, dazed, nonplussed. Then she gazed at McGill and at a rattlesnake, whose bloody head hung to its neck by a slender ligature of skin

as it lashed the rocks with its dying tail. Not once did McGill look in Belle-Ann's direction; nor indeed did he meet Lem's truculent gaze. He stood abject, with downcast eyes, and the dull apathy of a sick ox. On his depraved features was a lettering of criminal sullenness; on his twitching lips the curse of cowardice. Beneath this avenging stroke of Fate his big, sinister hulk lopped down, and he stood stupidly licking his cracked lips like a spiritless dog.

Belle-Ann still stood awed, nearby, trying to solve this strange phenomenon. McGill's guilty heart plainly dreaded this fair girl's presence. He did not look up, nor did he essay to utter a word of defense. His shallow eyes only roved at his feet. He presented the picture of the crestfallen criminal cornered on the premises of his last losing stand.

"Pears like yo' hain't a carin' t' say much—eh?" taunted Lem, as with a sudden rising fury he stooped down and grabbed up McGill's shotgun from the ground, and with a series of terrific blows upon a nearby boulder he reduced the weapon to a broken, twisted wreck in no time. Flinging what was left of it out into the rhododendrons, he advanced and stood before his erstwhile dangerous enemy.

"Sap," he began, "how did yo'-all ever git out o' hell in th' first place—eh? 'Cause I know thet Gawd'll Moughty never made sich as yo' to be born—I don't 'low yo' wus ever born, an' I believe yo' wus too mean and pesky and treacherous t' live in hell—I 'low th' devil drove yo' out." He aimed a finger within an inch of McGill's nose.

"Looky heah—yo' owe yore dirty life t' Belle-Ann

thah—not t' Lem Lutts—'cause ef she hadn't come, yo'd be powerful daid against now—hit's a shame t' take thet pore snake's life away t' save sich as yores—now git away from heah—git out'n my sight 'fore I do kill yo'. Git out o' heah—an' ef I ever lay an eye on yo' agin on thes side o' Hellsfork—Belle-Ann and Gawd'll Moughty together won't keep me from killin' yo' on sight—yo' heer? Go, skunk—hit's ole Cap Lutts' boy a talkin' t' yo'—Lem Lutts."

In the tenseness and absorbing excitement of the moment, they had not heard the hurried clatter of hoofs, like the tattoo of a cavalcade coming up the trail. They did not see Buddy ride up on Belle-Ann's charging blood-bay—nor the other three horsemen that crowded along close behind him. 'Twas only when the three men rushed in upon them and arrested and shackled McGill that they fully realized what had really taken place.

The officer removed his hat and bowed in respectful admiration to Belle-Ann, with a smiling light of recognition in his eyes. He was the deputy sheriff who had spent a night at the Lutts cabin before Belle-Ann went away to school.

"With the charges against him at Junction City, I don't think this gentleman will bother you for a long time. You know the McGills don't own Junction City any more," he said, obviously wondering at the pretty up-to-date picture presented by the girl before him. The last time he saw Belle-Ann she wore moccasins, was bare-legged, and dressed in a gingham gown; but he had never forgotten her beauty.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BELLE-ANN'S RECANTED CREED

IN mutual contented silence they stood looking after the three officers leading their sullen prisoner down the mountain trail toward Boon's Ford. With the first wholesome grin that had touched his face for nearly two years, Buddy rode on toward the cabin astride Belle-Ann's splendid horse. Presently Belle-Ann looked up into the pensive face behind her.

"Why didn't you kill Sap, Lem?" she probed, though its answer had been happily divined.

"I hed a bead on his ear when I heered yore voice, Belle-Ann—I heered yore voice a callin' 'fo' my sake'—an' I jest couldn't do hit—then I shot th' snake's haid off."

Knowing Lem as thoroughly as she did, she knew that this humane, gallant act had been to him a real sacrifice. They sat down upon the log behind which McGill had hidden. She was waiting for him to speak. With covert, abashed glance, he was regarding her handsome costume. She knew that he was puzzled and wondering at this astounding exposition of wealth. Presently he spoke up:

"Yo'-all look powerful beautiful, Belle-Ann—I never 'lowed they wus sich fine things in th' worl'."

Her merry, sweet laugh rippled out now as she laid a white hand on his arm and looked up into his face with a challenge in her eyes. He did not press her for an explanation. Then with a toss of her curls, she launched forth and poured her fairy-like tale into his amazed ears, all about her wondrous discovery of a lovable, priceless grandfather.

Then in wretched contrast to Belle-Ann's glittering conquest below, Lem recounted his capture by the revenuer, and his tortuous measure of months in prison. He told of how he had written letter after letter to her, hoping, always hoping, hourly, daily, monthly, to hear from her. And the girl's eyes grew misty and her heart went out to him. The very recital of this experience cast a gloom over him now. Wherefore she sought to introduce a pleasanter theme and cheer him with prospects of the future.

"And, Lem," she was saying, "I have ever so much money—oh!—I don't know how many thousands of dollars—all my own, grandpa says."

Lem had not digested the story of her opulence as enthusiastically as Belle-Ann had anticipated.

"But I hain't kilt th' revenuer yet—so—so—I 'low——"

"No words can tell you how glad I am, Lem—that you have not succeeded in killing the revenuer. God will surely lead him to his retribution, but it is not for you to exact, and I now take back all I said—and you must promise me not to kill him if you get the chance, and I can't ever promise you-all anything until you make me this pledge."

Lem rose slowly up off the log and looked curiously

down upon her. At the end of a long minute he spoke:

"Belle-Ann," he said, "I can't understan' yo'—'fore yo' went away t' school I axed yo' t' promise t' marry me. Yo' wouldn't promise—yo' wouldn't even 'low me t' kiss yore face then—yo' said that yo'd never 'low nobuddy t' kiss yo'—thet yo'd never promise t' marry me—lessen I kilt th' revenuer—an' Gawd knows I been a tryin' t' kill em! Now yo'-all comes back an' tells me that yo' don't 'low t' promise me anythin' ef I *do* kill th' revenuer—I can't understand thet, Belle-Ann—I 'low yo'-all is hankerin' t' git shut o' me, Belle-Ann," he ended despairingly, passing his hand over his eyes as if to brush away this strange philosophy that had skeined itself in his brain in one insoluble tangle.

She did not respond straightway. She fully understood the magnitude of the task she had before her. To convert Lem to her new creed would enlist all of the gentle diplomacy at her command.

"Belle-Ann, I hev always loved yo'," he resumed solemnly. "I love yo' now—I love yo' mor'n I love my life—my life hain't as much as thet daid snake 'sides th' way I love yo'—I'd stand on Henhawk's Knob an' jump into Hellsfork ef yo'd ax me t'—but, Belle-Ann, I owe th' blood o' thet revenuer t' pap and t' maw—th' two graves up in th' orchard air a cryin' out fer th' revenuer's blood. I saved Sap's blood—saved him 'cause yo' called t' me not t' shoot—I let em go, much as I hate th' pizon mad-dog—saved em as bad as he oughter be daid—but, Belle-Ann, much as I love yo', yo' can't take th' revenuer 'way from me ef he's alive yit."

She was appalled at the terrible wave of pain and passion that now swept his countenance. He poised a clinched fist above his head, as he removed his derby hat, and casting his eyes upward he added:

"I'll kill thet revenuer—I'll kill thet revenuer, I will, ef lead'll kill em—I'll have his blood ef I git th' chanct—I'll kill em with my last lick o' lead—ef I go t' hell th' next minit."

She responded to this volcanic outburst with a soothing pressure on his arm, as she thrust her arm through his and they walked up the trail toward the cabin, her mind busily occupied, groping for a mode of procedure whereby she could convey to him the great divine law of universal love and charity, prescribing the return of good where evil is given—a practice not only to shame his erring enemies and brim their thoughts with penitence; but in its doing to enrich his own soul with a mollient peace, and clothe his life in a spiritual raiment rarer than gems and bullion of kings.

When they reached the old honeybee tree, they saw Slab cavorting down to meet them. His head was back-flung, his arms akimbo, and he showed a hock action, despite his age, that would have inspired a coach horse with bitter envy. As he neared them he began yelling:

"Hallalujah—hallalujah—hallalujah!"

He wrung Belle-Ann's hand, tears of joy following the creases in his old face. He circled around and around her, chanting various adages filched from the tenets of his sorceristic faith, all of which compared happily with Belle-Ann's presence. All the way to

the cabin Slab's utterances and antics were effervescent.

"I done tol' dem yo'-all sho'd cum back," he said stoutly. "Den when yore deah li'lle spirrut cum dat night an' tuck er way dat li'lle Obeah-stone—den I shore knowed yo' war due—an' ma heart war a shoutin' all night so hard dat hit keep me wake—an' heah yo' be li'lle gal—heah yo' be—hits Slab dat knows—Slab he knows."

"Slab," projected Belle-Ann, without the slightest prelude, "Amos Tennytown wants you."

These words halted Slab with one foot raised. He cautiously let the one foot down. The smiles that had wreathed his visage when Belle-Ann spoke were frozen there.

"Come on, Slab," urged Belle-Ann. "Surely you are not scared. Colonel Amos Tennytown sent you-all a kind message. He wants you to drop in and see him at Lexington, Slab. Do you remember when that cruel snapping turtle woke you up?"

Slab was now stumbling along open-mouthed, blinking down at the girl, his dim eyes shot with a smoldering fire of endeared reminiscences; a cherished theme that had hovered in his memory since the distant day when the blue and the gray had dueled,—scenes mellowed by time, but sweetly mated with "Kitty Wells." Unbelieving and in faltering tones of half reproach, he said:

"Li'lle gal, don' pesticate de ole man,—I's er ole man, li'lle gal,—yo' orter be good t' de ole man now—don' fool de ole man—no—don' fool Slab, li'lle gal—he—he——"

"Slab, I am not fooling you. How could I know

about the turtle and old Hickamohawk if I had not seen Colonel Tennytown? And he wants you down thah, Slab."

"Li'lle Amos—li'lle Amos?" he repeated, measuring the imaginary height of a boy with his hand. "Li'lle Amos—he want Slab?"

All doubt vanished.

"Hallalujah—hallalujah—hallalujah!"

Intermittently, Slab advanced stout volumes of oral matter to demonstrate that the long-looked-for millennium had arrived at last.

At the witch-elm block the old blind hound staggered exultantly about. Obeying the instinct of his lonely dog-heart, he yelped and yelped with joy at the vision his senses pictured for him, though which his blank, sightless eyes could not behold. Belle-Ann fell on her knees and took his old head to her, stroking his gray face and kissing his ears.

One of the girl's first acts was to gather two great sheaves of forget-me-nots. These she carried to the orchard. Lem walked beside her, and now they both fell silent. Dividing the flowers equally, Belle-Ann knelt down and arranged them with infinite care.

"Maw loved these," she whispered. "Maw loved these best of all, didn't she, Lem?" She looked up through a film of mist. Their eyes met, and Lem turned his back and walked slowly away and did not answer.

For half an hour the girl lingered there between these two graves with her memories. When she finally got to her feet and lifted her swollen eyes, she saw Slab standing looking at her. The tears were stream-

ing down his ancient, creased visage. His lips moved helplessly, but no words crossed them. He could only point to numberless withered flowers, and seared wreaths scattered hard by, which he had discarded to replace with fresh ones.

"Yes, Slab—you-all did not forget, did you?" she managed to say.

The old negro shook his white head, too overcome to respond.

Belle-Ann and Lem then made the rounds of the place, followed by little Bud'ly, lugging his father's rifle. They walked out beneath the magnolias, and the giant pines, and visited their old haunts, each of which stirred memories of hours ago.

When they returned to the house, Slab had a most tasteful meal prepared for them. The menu consisted of two kinds of bread, hoe-cake, and hot butter-milk biscuits with honey. It also embraced baked yams with fresh butter, fried spring chicken, poached eggs, rich, fresh milk, and blackberries and cream.

As Belle-Ann lingered over this repast, she felt that she had not, during her absence, tasted anything quite so delicious. Near dusk, Slab took up his hybrid banjo and repaired to the witch-elm block, followed by the others. There, with the blind hound's aged head in her lap, Belle-Ann joined in the chorus of "Kitty Wells." And as the shadows stole down and put their arms about them, the day lifted, and the thread-like note of the mock-thrush ebbed away from the blossomed sides of the mountain. The plaintive callings of the Bob White ceased, and the forest birds

folded their wings. And another choir of voices awoke to cross and re-cross the void of twilight.

The katydids began to purl. A symphony of crickets trilled away in the darkling rhododendron thickets. The tree-frogs piped an avalanche of pleading notes amid the ruby-throated magnolias. The silvery treble of the nightingale floated down from afar, and the hilarious killdeers, king of all-night revelers, screamed aloft and flapped their speckled wings in the early starlight. And above this, in souging, alternate waves of sound, a titanic rhythm trailed into this medley of wilderness voices—the savage, deathless music of the cascade ranting in the rock-barbed throat of Hellsfork, dying, swelling, reverberating like the barbaric boom of a tom-tom.

That night Belle-Ann occupied her own little crude apartment in the four-room cabin. She slept soundly and sweetly in this little wooden bed, which Slab had reverently preserved unaltered for her coming. And the night air drifted in upon her face, pungent with the scent of pine, and the old sweet odors that summoned a hundred memories to vivid life. There were the self-same multiplicity of night enunciations, consolidated and merged into a soothing litany, harping a pulsing consonance that lured the girl's senses away to the fantastic shoals of dreamdom. And sometimes, the same great, friendly moon that had followed her abroad, came now and stood at her window.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE GHOST-MAN

LEM had said little, but upon his honest, pleasing face there was now etched the momentous outlines of the most serious, profound problem that had ever confronted his tempestuous life. With the sober, solemn realization of this vital issue that had come upon him, he found himself mentally reaching out for sustenance. Seemingly he stood upon the pinnacle of an epochal summit, with all the threads governing his life, past and future, dangling limply beneath him. It was the tensest hour of his existence.

They sat in the moonshine on the witch-elm block, and the whip-poor-will was calling. They came here in the whispering gloaming ere twilight and night had parted. They still sat there; the girl talking incessantly. Time galloped by unheeded with the flight of an affrighted Pegasus. Phantom shadows grew and gesticulated and stretched their wraith-like arms out toward them. And the moon slipped over the spur and laved them with an effulgent benediction. Lem sat non-committal and stoic.

Belle-Ann's curls bobbed in the moonlight as she tossed them back restlessly. For more than an hour she had been pouring into his ears all the things that lay in her heart which had been re-cast in a new mould

of understanding and burnished with ethics of education. The titanic moment she had anticipated had arrived. The dawn of the morrow was to part them forevermore, or it was to bind their lives together irrevocably. He had again begged her to promise to marry him, and this was her answer. Her low, dulcet tones rippled on and on. Her little hands fluttered appealingly in their flights of emphasis. Her violet orbs were starry with the truths that hurried across her lips, and her whole being throbbled with the vibrant force of this conquest. He spoke for the first time.

“Ef yo’ keep on a talkin’ thet away, Belle-Ann,—yo’ll make me lie t’ yo’,” he predicted dolefully, casting yearning eyes upon her. As yet not once had he kissed that red-mouthed, dimpled face. Not yet had he clasped that withy, supple form to him. The price now of that treasured kiss, and that longed-for embrace, and her priceless love, was his whole and complete repudiation of his bloody creed of feudalism.

“I am not afraid of your deceiving me, Lem—you have never lied to me in the past, and I’ll trust you-all in the future. I mean to lift you up,” she went on earnestly,—“to show you a worthy goal that I know is thah awaiting your acknowledgment. As I have said over and over, Lem, I do not expect you to understand it all now, but I hoped that you would believe me, who have gone through it all with its blighting misery. Your whole life is now and always will be made furtive and fear-ridden, while you cling to this blood-dogma of revenge—always looking for the blood of your enemies, and when at last you get that

blood and delude yourself into the thought that you are satisfied, you find springing out of that very act other enemies waiting in your path. It is an endless chain of fight and flight and blood that is harrowing. I saw an example of it yesterday before my very eyes, because I know you would have killed Sap McGill had I not been thah. It is all fundamentally wicked. Oh, Lem! It is all hideously wrong. Now that I am rid of that awful sting, I cannot and will not link my life to one who harbors these awful things to drag us both down.

“Won’t you put this life behind you, Lem, and come down where God has granted a paradise—a paradise of peace? Down where nature has unfurled a grassy, level land and men walk in the open and can see each other’s faces? Down thah, Lem, where hearts beat uncontaminated beyond the maelstrom of feudal hate, and where all men are brothers—down in the land of hope—hope that makes a song of life—in the land of hope, Lem,—a cloudless, sunshiny fairy world—where dreams come true?

“You said you would love to go to Lexington to my grandfather, but you won’t leave the mountains until you have killed the revenuer and Sap McGill. Is that evidence that you love me, Lem? To-morrow morning I’ll ride Rajah back alone. I don’t believe that you love me, Lem—I can’t believe it——”

Lem got to his feet. He was very white in the moonlight now. He picked up a stick off the ground. He rested the butt of his rifle against the block and, placing the muzzle of the gun against his breast, he reached down and touched the trigger with the end

of the stick before Belle-Ann realized what he was up to.

"Belle-Ann, say that I don't love yo' agin an' I'll blow my heart out." Gently and quickly she took the stick out of his hand in alarm.

"Lem, there is a way out for you—there is a sustaining power that will help you, if you will only have faith," she pleaded. "'Know ye the truth and the truth shall make ye free.'"

"But he kilt my old pap,—an' my good old maw, Belle-Ann. I'd alers heer their spirits a cryin' ef I went away an' didn't git th' revenuer's blood," he protested for the twentieth time. "An' didn't McGill try t' kill me jest yisterday?"

"Lem," she said, "I tell you what we'll do. We'll go down to the church—we'll go down thah—you and me and Buddy—down thah by the altar where your father died. God won't deny you thah. We will offer up a little prayer for pap and maw, and you will ask God to show you the truth of my words—that it is wrong for you to hang back and sacrifice your future for the blood of your enemies. Take my word for it, Lem—God will surely lay His hand on those who have harmed you. Will you go, Lem—come now—will you go with Belle-Ann?"

For the first time Lem's face lost a measure of its despair. His eyes lighted up with the advent of an emollient hope, and a half-smile touched his lips.

"Come 'long, Belle-Ann," he agreed, "let's do thet." And a prayer mounted in Belle-Ann's breast as she called to Buddy to come along and bring a lantern. Then hand in hand they wound their way down the

moonlit mountain-side toward the deserted church. And up from the girl's heart a spa of hope was abubble. The joy of life was again strong upon her. There was a song in her soul and the blithesome days of yore were rippling in her veins.

The forsaken church stood out big and white, magnified in a pool of moonlight, like a runic tomb guarding the memory of a martyr. With a ruthless swish, the laurel wall that hemmed the clearing suddenly parted, and the next instant the scathed, battered semblance of a man-being crawled out into the silver moonshine.

A wound-burnt, sinister shape, half naked. The revengeful way-path rocks had bitten into his inflamed knees. The vicious thorns had torn and stabbed maledictions into his hands. The clawing underbrush had stripped his clothing away, and the poison ivy and skunk-viper had sprung upon and spat their gangrene acid against his nakedness. There was misery in each lift of knees and hands, as though weighted with ball and chain. In his zigzag wake there was a lesion of nauseous mocking horror. This thing panted like a spent buffalo, as with popped, blood-rimmed eyes it stared at the church.

It was the revenuer come back in the hour of his extremity.

With wabbling head, he focused his blighted face upon the church—a shrine all in white beckoning to him, insistently. Foot by foot he forged his tortuous way across the open and onward. His corporal being, ruined, ravished and wrecked, his derelict spirit was blindly upstanding. Excruciatingly and piteously

he moved across the sea of wild honey clover and fox-tail with the slowness of a shore-viewed water craft, stationary only while the eye held it, but with a trick to move when the gaze is lifted.

When this odious, strange apparition had gained a point midway to the church, then it was that a lithe, agile, uncertain shape, a spawn from the matrix of the shadowless gulch below, slid up out of the dark, halted on the verge of the shades and then as lightly as air sprung its haunches upward to a great spruce stump. It was the male panther who owned a mate and cubs, and who patrolled the darkling hours with a dare-all note in his minor night-squall; who dominated the animal kingdom and held in subservient fear all the lesser pantomimic pirates of the forest.

At first his eyes widened curiously as they settled upon the audacious trespasser in the clearing. Had this thing under his quizzical gaze walked upright, he could have understood and would have skulked hastily away, but now a quick challenge crowded into his feline breast, as he realized that an alien, hairy creature, that stalked on four legs, had dared to invade the night that belonged to him and the province that was his.

Straightway a keen and malignant resentment seized and traversed his bristling spine, and his long tail began to lash the ground menacingly. It wagged him into a great fury. As noiselessly as a moccasin slides into the water, he dropped from the dark spruce stump into the velvet mullein leaves, and skirted the whiteness of the moon. He leaped lightly through the space and landed in the shade of the church. With a sud-

den wary flash, he darted forward. Then, boldly and ready, he turned sharply and advanced in the forefront of this new enemy that now was his prey. Stealth was in his padded paws as he lowered his ermine belly to the ground and crept sneakingly to meet the newcomer.

When a mere six feet separated the two, the panther's hairy, spotted lips parted thirstily. He choked back the growl of savage exultation that welled up in his chest, his yellow eyes all afire with lust. He gathered his steel-like thews under him with a mighty tenseness to spring. His wagging tail stopped and stiffened. As he made to leave the ground, the thing before him jerked its gory head suddenly upward, looked, and thrust a laugh in the brute's face.

Such a laugh! The splintering, squawking reiterations of petered-out echoes, bubbling up into a mundane night from the precincts of the eternally damned. That laugh splashed upon the serene night like the plunge of a boulder into a placid pool. It drove the pith out of the panther's militant cat-heart. It curdled the will to kill that had blazed from the beast's agate eyes. Instantly the brute, dazed with terror, wrenched his round head askew, to shut from his tan eyes and black ears the sight and the sound of this monstrous, unknown antagonist.

The brute's tail went limp as he hurtled obliquely through the air, landed in the bull-grass, plunged into the inky shadows and fled away from this moonlit spot with its hideous blot of terror, and hurried toward the pitchy brakes that hemmed the river, with panic curdling his jungle blood.

The maimed, bedraggled hulk careened; then at the end of a panting struggle, fell over the door block and tumbled heavily against the church portal. The dilapidated, weather-scarred door gave way unresistingly to him and his bedlam cry as though it had boded this unholy visitation. He stopped on the threshold, sprawling half in, half without. The uncouth noise of his breathing hissing through a ragged ruin of teeth, cut the sepulchral stillness of the church room with the portent of some awful prediction. His haggled, bleeding hand stamped its red curse upon the door panel. Then, with a mad, mighty will, he lashed his flagging spirit to another effort and broke into a pitiable, wabbling, four-legged trot.

When his swollen, bleeding feet disappeared, the church door swung back and engulfed the revenuer's racked, gaunt bones within the ostracised temple of death. With stark eyes upward and ahead, he stared through the dark to the spot where a single lance of moonlight stabbed obliquely through the dismantled window, revealing a cross done in blood that lay prone athwart the untrodden pulpit floor.

Without, a white virgin mantle of peace and purity enveloped the haunted church. The honey clover, foxtail, mullein, and dill-poppies had closed over the horrible path-way leading to the church door-block. The panther was gone. A seductive south wind rippled across the blossomed clearing and a hundred families of unnamed flowers raised their heads and nodded to the stars. The far-off, drowsy baying of a hound drifted down from the ridge and trailed plaintively into the night. And from somewhere the sweet love-

tale of the elusive nightingale was told over and over again. There was utter papal peace without for several moments. Then suddenly this magic spell was startlingly burst asunder with a rising tempo of sounds issuing from within the church. It grew into a horrific, guttural clash. The noise of contending demons deadlocked. The riotous commotion of a thousand struggling, distraught fiends told of some terrible enactment inside the church.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE HAUNTED CHURCH

AS the trio approached the church, Buddy hung back reluctantly. He did not relish this nocturnal invasion of the gospel-house where no human foot had trod since the killing of his father. In truth, Lem shared this apprehension also, but was valiantly cautious not to betray this aversion in Belle-Ann's presence. With this cryptic timidity, both the boys marveled at the voluble mirth and bold blithesome advance of the girl; not understanding that Belle-Ann's education had burned away all barriers of superstition.

The denizens on Hellsfork had long given this lonely, desolate structure a wide berth. Many a bold and audacious spirit, knowing no other fear, quaked with the thought of entering that dilapidated storm-battered sepulchre. Not because a man had been killed therein, but there was a ghostly phenomenon connected with that musty, bat-haunted altar, uniquely horrible.

That rubric cross had cut its ragged blight into the senses of the mountaineers to a degree that forbade all thoughts of approach. There was something at once subtle and strange and unspeakably terrifying in the

remembrance of that red picture, something that inspired them with a lasting, superstitious dread.

Indeed, a treasure trove could have reposed upon the dank floor of this haunted church within easy sight without fear of molestation. Weird and creepy tales were rife outlining amazing visitations here. It was told with conviction by some whose ears had heard, and whose eyes had seen, that on each moonlight night a screech-owl would flutter to the broken window of the church and call. Whereupon the red, ragged picture on the altar would stir and move and sit up; then gather itself into human semblance and stalk to the window. And old Captain Lutts' ghost would commune with the little feathered creature. Then the screech-owl would hurtle away, and the phantom would stalk back and lie down, and resolve itself again into that fearsome, crimson death-splotch that naught save fire could ever obliterate.

Belle-Ann was in the lead when the three reached the door-block of the church. Then, with a self-conscious lack of chivalry which inspired him with a sudden spurt of courage, Lem stepped in front of her, where he stood lighting the lantern, when Buddy, who had halted at the corner of the building, suddenly hissed softly and motioned for them to join him. Bud stood pointing ominously amid the skeleton limbs of a dead sycamore tree. Belle-Ann laughed amusedly.

"Why, Buddy," she reassured, "that's only a pretty, harmless little owl."

"But hits a scrutch-owl," frowned the boy, shrinking away.

"Oh, come on, Buddy!—I really believe you are

afraid of ghosts," returned Belle-Ann, taking him protectingly by the hand.

Re-enforced by the girl's utter absence of fear, Lem pushed the door open, and stepping within led the way, lantern in hand. Upon their approach to the altar, the bull-bats flapped their bony wings amongst the rafters. There was in the fetid gloom of the place a permeating musk of things seemingly not of this earth. Lem hung up the lantern on the hook at the end of the dingy rope suspended near the pulpit. The rope, which great spiders had converted into a swing, now felt soft and snaky beneath his touch. He turned the light up as high as he could without smoking and faced Belle-Ann. He saw at a glance that a measure of her temerity had vanished.

A smothered exclamation fell from Lem's lips. He pointed through the buff halo cast from the lantern. There against the south wall of the room some of the benches could be dimly discerned overturned,—others twisted and broken and scattered in a mass of wreckage—while one balanced perilously on the casement as though a hand had sought to take it out through the window.

"Who yo' 'low done thet?" inquired Buddy in a tremulous whisper, clinging timorously to Belle-Ann's skirts.

"I don't 'low any human bein' done hit," predicted Lem in faint undertones that faltered with a creeping, choking apprehension. A queer brain-numbing apathy settled upon them that seemed to deprive them suddenly of the use of their tongues and limbs.

"Oh, nonsense!" discredited Belle-Ann bravely. "Some mean boys perhaps."

Disbelieving, the brothers stood rigid and shook their now pale faces in denial. Belle-Ann did not fear ghosts, but there was undeniably some strange mortal influence circulating the eery atmosphere of this place like the proximity of some menacing presence close at hand, but unseen. She fought hard to repel this unknown fear that was stealing upon her, but, despite her valiant struggle, it was fast seizing upon her nerves and permeating her whole being with singular insistency.

With an effort she gathered herself together.

"Now hurry on, boys," she directed briskly in a voice that sounded unnaturally furtive and low. "Buddy, you get in here between Lem and I—there—that's it. Now, boys, we are going to say a little prayer for pap and maw, and you, Lem, remember."

At a slight sound the three impulsively and unconsciously took hold of each other and turned blanched faces toward the window opposite the altar. At the same instant, a screech-owl closed his wings on the window casement and sat immobile, like a creature without life, while a slender, livid finger of moonlight crossed its speckled back and, continuing on, pointed specifically to the bloody cross athwart the altar.

Little Bud faltered weakly and shook like a boy with the ague. His lips worked mutely and tried to whisper something, but his tongue cleft, paralyzed with a prickly dread that stole over him, and his teeth began a forbidding tattoo. He cast an appealing look at Lem; wherefore the mere sight of Lem's

white face accentuated his own fleeting courage. The grim lethargy of this subtle, contagious dread had communicated its blight to Lem's senses with equal virulence.

A pall of lethal fear deprived Belle-Ann of words and action. What with the awful thick dark, made pitchy beyond the buff circle of the flickering lantern; a fetid, curdy, musty, stifling blackness which, she now felt instinctively, held screened just there, some hidden horror reaching out to wrap its smothering terror about her.

The fan-like hiss of the hybrid bats that blundered aloft, their vicious unearthly squeaks, stabbing the dead stillness, added to her cryptic dread. Upon a sudden current of vagrant air a handful of fire-flies were driven through one of the sundered windows, whereupon they bobbed and swayed about evilly against the haunting gloom of the church like ghastly corpse candles. Together with the unblinking stare of the screech-owl from the moon-touched window casement, all these menacing influences combined and laid hold of Belle-Ann's will like overpowering hands of living agencies crowding her remorselessly to the verge of panic.

She stood rigid, listening with a natant, sickening consciousness that something terrible hung at her back. Then, ashamed of her exposition of timid indecision and fear, she valiantly strove to disguise with action the sudden racking shudder that compassed and rippled over her being, like the chill of an icy current.

Belle-Ann summoned all her failing faculties and levied upon her will to proceed with the ceremony of

the sacred mission that had led them to this Godless place. But she only stood fixedly, rigid and helpless, growing paler with each succeeding moment, and gazed blankly at Bud and Lem alternately. Their nerves were as yielding as jelly strings. Other than the silky rustle aloft, punctuated occasionally with the thin needle-like anathemas of the bull-bats, there was now not the slightest sound within to disrupt the death-hush of this place. Nevertheless, Lem craned his neck, edging closer to the other two, and whispered portentously:

“Ded yo’-all heer anything?”

“No,” returned Belle-Ann faintly and uncertainly.

Buddy could only shake his head. Then sharply and, oddly enough, in unison, impelled by a sudden common instinct, the trio wheeled about, facing the wrecked benches. What they saw in that instant congealed the warm flow in their veins to currents of ice and drove their very breaths away.

Three hearts smote their ribs a single whack; then seemingly, melted away and sank downward and out of their bodies, leaving a trio of lifeless, inanimate mummies, frozen into horrified, stony attitudes. An awful thing hung there on the edge of the grommet of light. A blurred, half-naked, grisly monster sprawled on its loathsome haunches before them,—a thing topped with a blood-mottled, hideous head, made frightful by two luridly igneous, horrible eyes. Eyes girded and shot with a bloody film bulged fixedly up at them, glaring through the flickering orange light. The eyes—the eyes!

Divided by the part in the middle, one half of the

wiry hair stuck up, the dead white hue of chalk, admitting its stains of red. The other half bristled, an ebon black blighted with its share of gore. At once it gave the startling impression of separate semi-faces filched from two different rawheads and slapped together thus, in smeared, mismated makeshift, that was hideous. Had only its fearful Nemesis stayed his devil-genius and spared the torrid eyes,—monstrous ember eyes that flamed like live coals against the dark,—mad-red eyes that burned and sparkled and sputtered up from their dancing depths, emitting and vomiting over the brims, a changing luster, blended with all the fevered fires of hell—eyes that eroded a nauseous path with their abhorrent stare. The accursed thing crouched there as immobile as the owl. A limp, blood-oozing tongue protruded from an addled, unspeakable mouth, distended and heinous with jagged teeth askew. Girding the besmeared forehead at the hispid white and black hair line of this festering scourge-scathed visage, just where the scalp separated and curled apart, a revolting ribbon of pure skull shone,—a strip of skull drained dry and clear and white as polished ivory; shimmering out like the badge of a death-head from some grim grot of perdition.

The three tried to flee from the awful, withering presence of this nameless thing. They tried vainly to cry out; to vent the horror that was upon them, depriving them of all utterance and action.

They only clutched each other nervelessly and stared insanely. Thereupon, in an unlooked-for instant before their livid faces, this ghastly misshapen thing struggled to its naked feet and lurched past them to-

ward the altar, with the faltering wabble of a foundered ox. Up across the corner of the pulpit it clambered, and, reeling too near the edge, tumbled off the other side and struck the floor with a heavy, resounding thud, where, amidst jerky groans that were not human enunciations, it panted and floundered and arose once more.

Up again with a mighty torturous effort, the hulk mounted the platform a second time, and with head dangling at the end of a limp neck, crawled to the ragged cross, etched out with the blood of old Cap Lutts. Here it mumbled gutturally and labored crazily to gather up the crimson altar-piece into its seared, torn arms. Then again up to its feet it reared, and, standing thus with arms upflung, the stillness was shattered with frantic echoes of a broken word-spluttering, hell-twisted cackle, carrying a faint gleam of coherency and culminating in ravings that made the night hideous.

“I say—I say—I say—” gathering stress, louder and louder it shrieked until the very air curdled with these eery cries. “I say—you there, you there—you God—you God—I say the law’s here—the law’s here—the law, the law, the law I say—hear me?—hiding, hiding?—no, no, no, I have never hidden from men—I’ll not hide now from my God—I’m here now, God—‘Thou shalt not kill—thou shalt not kill’—but I done it—I done this—these hands done it—see, God? They are wet with this deed—but I swear the law drove me to it—the law saddled a hundred offenses to my life—but I’m here now, God—I bring these offenses here—I done it—I done it—these hands done it—these two blood-stained hands—the law made me—I swear it—listen,

—you can't get me—you can't rend me—you starved heathens—stand back—stand back, you dungeon-dogs—stand away there, you ratty jail-birds—you can't get at me, ha, ha, ha!—gnaw your iron cuffs apart first—bite your cuffs in two—gnaw them until your teeth shatter, and your gums flood your felon throats—ha, ha, ha!—Oh, my head, my head—Christ, the world's afire—the world's burning up—listen—listen——!”

Hereupon the screech-owl awoke to quick animation. With trembling wings slightly lifted, it thrust its head through the broken window-pane and uttered a scathing arraignment—a long-drawn, graduating, derisive titter that raked the ghoulish solitude of the church like perdition-music—a mockery medley wafted from a cortège of the doomed.

As the last prickly notes dropped down and trailed like a thread of sin back into the owl's speckled breast, the gory raw-head blundered around and fixed that mawkish, ghastly hell-mask full upon the girl and two boys, whose feet were locked immovably to the floor with terror. Then in emulation, seemingly, of the owl's tittering, it belched its awful laugh into their faces. Such a laugh—its chilling, unhallowed screech launched a petrific measure of untold vocal wickedness, an awesome, direful gamut of echoes that gathered volume, scattered and split, crossed and recrossed; reverberating through the death-still atmosphere like the hysterical chattering of a band of stricken, tortured souls.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE FLIGHT

HUMAN senses could not withstand such an onslaught. It startled the three to instant action. The tide of self-preservation ebbed back into their bodies; with one accord they reared their arms upward across their faces to ward off the shock of that accursed sound, as though its very effluvium scorched its scar into their flesh. There was an utterance of mingled gasps. There was a sudden rush of jumbled, panic-stricken footsteps. A tumbling, scrapping, frantic confusion. A groan—a half scream—a sob and the door banged.

The church was empty, save for the mumbling, croaking, mad lazar.

In getting out Lem had stumbled in the door and fallen heavily over his rifle. When he scrambled to his feet again, he beheld Belle-Ann and Buddy fleeing across the moonlit clearing. He started to follow, but checked himself and stopped short; he stood combating the superstitious fear that had dropped into his senses and sapped away his equanimity.

“Gawd’ll Moughty,” he muttered audibly, “air this ole Cap Lutts’ boy runnin’ away. Not by a dern sight—I’ll go back an’ finish em.” Then he hallooed lustily after Buddy.

"Hey, Buddy—Buddy—Buddy—cum back heah—cum back heah, I tell yo'—cum back!"

Buddy came back reluctantly, his thin countenance still grim with pallor and an inquiring look in his wild eyes.

"Whut ails yo', Lem?" he panted.

Lem regarded him a second with an admonishing stare, forgetful of his own conduct.

"I'm ashamed o' yo'," he said.

"Whut, Lem?"

"Whut yo'-all a runnin' fo'—eh?" demanded Lem.

Bud jammed one hand into his pocket, abashed, and cast a fearful glance toward the church door.

"Don't yo' know hit's the revenoor?"

"Yes, course I do, Lem—but—but they's a hant in em."

"Hant er no hant, we'uns air agoin' in, an' ef he hain't daid——"

"Yo' darsn't, Lem—no—no," protested Buddy in alarm. "Yo' darsn't kill hit, Lem—yo' darsn't kill a hant—th' witches 'll spell-tuk we'uns an' foller we'uns alers, alers. Slab says so—Slab knows."

"Well," returned Lem, "leastways we'uns 'll go back an' see."

Whereupon he strode to the church door resolutely and pushed it half open. Buddy still hung back undecided.

"Hain't yo' ole Cap Lutts' boy?" rebuked his brother severely. "An' hain't that the revenuer?"

"Sho'," agreed Buddy, now plainly embarrassed, and followed with determined alacrity. Howbeit, the same ghostly dread hung at Lem's elbow, but his mighty

will whipped his body into subservience and he boldly re-entered the church, and made his way toward the lantern that shrouded the altar with its yellow glow. Buddy followed closely and tremblingly at his heels.

The soft, irregular, rapid pad of bare feet met their ears, punctuated by a prodigious breathing that might have issued from the bellows of a blown horse. They caught alternate glimpses of the bestial thing, as its lengthy, starved shadow hove around the near corner of the altar and struck the far rim of light. It flitted past like a gesticulating, dying toad, glued to the tire of a wagon wheel. It was galloping madly in a circle—milling around and around and around the platform as if ridden and spurred by an incubus, bent on the reward of a trophy hell-cup.

And each time it came round to the dark blood-picture on the floor, it cleared this with a mighty leap into the air, as a horse makes a wide, dangerous ditch. The rustling wings of the eery creatures amidst the rafters aloft were hushed. The lance of moonlight had faded from the window casement and the owl was gone. The Lutts boys halted; gripped and raised their rifles mechanically for a shot. Each time the tattered apparition flashed into the light on its desperate circuit around, their fingers would curve spasmodically about the triggers for the pull, but each time that opportune fraction of a second eluded them and the ghastly spectre sped onward.

The astounding manner in which this careening, wavering scarehead held the narrow limits of its course without plunging off the stage was acutely awesome, and little short of a phenomenon. Every downward

lunge was checked as if jerked by an invisible cord. Verily, it seemed to be held to its path by the influence of a powerful magnet. As the boys stood thus agap, in firing attitude, undoubtedly the subtle agency of a deep-seated plenipotent superstition which so thoroughly saturates the mountain-born had now risen up and cast its obfuscating shade between the quarry and their intent to kill.

With mutual glances they peered at each other irresolutely. At this juncture, the pattering of naked feet suddenly ceased. Again they fixed their eyes on the pulpit and its gloomed blasphemy. It tottered on the brink of the platform a second; inclined perilously forward; started on its headlong plunge outward, then miraculously checked its descent and straightened. Then, backing away, it paused, stiffened and fell backward with the rigidity of a board.

Lem and Buddy, collecting their befuddled senses, made their way forward. The hideous mass of bones and blood and rags now lay quite still on the altar. Through a short interval the two watched it for signs of life. Presently, Lem prodded it with his rifle. It gave way, yielding and inert, and now Lem took the lantern down from the hook at the rope's end and, advancing dubiously, he held the lantern over the awful spectacle and dared a look. That look sufficed. What had once been the revenuer lay sprawled athwart the bloody cross—dead.

Outside the church door Lem halted and wiped his face absently. A look of deep perturbation was plainly perceptible on his countenance. A gulch-scented wind rode the plaintive sobs of the she-panther

up from the darksome thicket below, and Lem harkened attentively, as though he had never heard these faltering, familiar notes before.

"Leastways," he projected presently, "he got part o' what's due him, Buddy."

"But he'll cum back, Lem—he will," predicted Bud stoutly. "They's a hant in em—he'll cum back sho'—yo' see—hants alers ac's like thet—then they sneaks back agin."

Lem had started dejectedly across the clearing and did not appear to hear his brother's apprehensions.

"Yo' go ahead, Buddy," advised Lem, "an' catch up with Belle-Ann—I'll be 'long directly."

Buddy's thin, colt-like legs struck a trot, and Lem followed slowly up the mountain side, deeply absorbed in thought and obviously disgruntled. Altogether, the whole untoward events of the night had conspired to cheat him out of his revenge. This was the strangest night he had ever known, the happenings of which seemingly, derided his own reality. A night divided into ecstasy and torture, and above the chaos of his soul, the voice of Belle-Ann ever rippled with the monotone and insistency of running water.

When finally Lem reached the cabin he found Belle-Ann huddled on the horse-block, her face pallid and distressed from the effects of the terrible, revolting scene she had witnessed in the church. Buddy sat beside her saying things, which she heard vaguely and to which she made distrait response.

Lem put his rifle and the lantern down and stood before her.

"I air sorry, Belle-Ann, thet yo'-all had t' see sich a sight," he said slowly. "He's daid."

She arose quickly to her feet and looked searchingly into his face.

"You—you—you didn't——"

"No, Belle-Ann—I didn't kill em. We'uns went back after yo'-all left an' he were up on th' altar daid."

"Oh—how awful—how terrible it all is! Oh, I wish it were morning—that I could ride away from heah! Even a day of this awful life is more than I can bear. Are you satisfied now, Lem?" she ended sadly.

"No, I hain't," he returned hotly. "I wus cheated out'n his blood. Pap an' maw wanted em t' die at my hands—they ded. Belle-Ann, air yo' 'lowin' t' go way in th' mornin' an' never cum back?" he finished, with a look of despair settling on his features.

"I am going in the morning, Lem," she answered decisively, though a note of utter sorrow crept into her gentle tones. "You have had your opportunity. You told me Johnse Hatfield offered you five hundred dollars for your interests heah. Surely you could have gone down to Blue-grass with my grandpa and taken Buddy and Slab along, and—I—I—could then—but you want to stay here and feed your soul on blood. Could you ask a more bitter punishment for the reve-nuer than what you saw to-night? I implore for the last time, Lem—put that evil life behind you, Lem. Ask God to help you, and take my heart and hand on it that He will not forsake you. You will come through as I did. Will you try, Lem?" she pleaded softly, with a toss of curls and a tender, compelling light in

her sweet, sad eyes. "Let me lead you, Lem," she whispered.

The boy's face paled suddenly. It was the advent of a terrible upheaval coming upon him. Belle-Ann saw and divined his intent.

With no backward word, only a look that embraced an untold, profound meaning, he hurried from her, spiritless and disconsolate and tumultuous. Her eyes followed him, enthralled. She knew where he was bound! She prayed devoutly that the web, traced by destiny, wrapping their two lives into a unit, would not now, at this crisis, burst its ligatures asunder. She prayed with all the fervent strength of her young heart that Lem would come down from Eagle Crown and take her in his arms,—take her willing life to him irrevocably, with a new precept written in his heart.

CHAPTER XL

HIS ROCK OF AGES

BUT as Lem climbed upward, a withering despair mounted abreast with him, like the shadow cast by evil. By the time he had reached the giddy apex of the cliff, he was staggering amidst the chaos of a battle with himself that was slowly outdoing his soul.

His mind had come, miraculously, to nurture the holy dogma that Belle-Ann had brought back to him. He could see its wonderful sequence plain in Belle-Ann's beautiful face. In her angelic violet eyes he beheld its wholesome, serene pictures. He could hear it, vocal, in the anthem-music of her soft, new speech. Her very sweet, divine presence irradiated its palpable truths. All that was good in him was calling out for her.

But in the under-tide of some indefinable, contending, compelling element he was drifting apart. While his mind opened its portals to all the logic so earnestly tendered and tutored by Belle-Ann, his back-standing, immutable mountain heart fought it off like a destroyer,—repelled its invasion with a titanic force that his willing energies could not subjugate. The tentacles of his father's creed promptly admonished and enmeshed his rebellious heart, protecting its odium,

cleaving to its tenancy of "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth." Which adjuration only lent impetus to an endless cycle of strife and distress, rolling his feverish soul back amidst bones that curse the dead years—that warp the souls of men, and bow down hearts that God made to beat through life upstanding, radiant with harmony and hope and buoyancy.

In the growing vortex of this tumult of mind and heart, Lem stood like one distraught, circling the limits of the table rock, caged by empty space,—scarce knowing that his feet lifted, oblivious to his whereabouts. Through this seething, tangled skein, his thoughts seeped for an instant and fled backward. He viewed the past. He saw only two sodden graves side by side. His beset pilgrim mind then turned toward the future, and groped out into the years to come in a vain quest for succor and some element of honest hope.

The boy's thoughts rushed back upon him with a picture that forbade contemplation—a barren, dismal prospect—a measure of life that did not embrace Belle-Ann. He would choose death, he told himself, rather than gain and mislead her. Even had he sought to, he knew he could not withstand his own lie to her. She whose limpid, steadfast, child-eyes could read every line that crossed his soul—every thought that passed his eyes. He knew a lie would sheathe itself in its own being.

In his extremity, he stalked madly about the confines of this moon-touched mount. His perturbation waxed to a volcanic upheaval that now inflicted a physical pain. To him it was as if these two conflict-

ing forces had confiscated his corporal structure for a ravaging *mêlée*, augmented by two combative rivals struggling in his own heart. His mad love for Belle-Ann—his blind adherence and faith in the code-honor of his hillman lineage. That there was something amiss in this faith his mind could not deny but, odd'y enough, his heart hotly rejected it all, stirring him to mad, reckless action. Belle-Ann filled up the whole of Lem's wild, humble life. Without her the future held no hope. Without hope he wanted to die. His vain effort to dislodge the scourge within his soul, goaded him to maniacal thoughts.

Then, in an unlooked-for instant, an awful wrong shaped itself to a determination. He would hurl his tortured self over the cliff. He told himself that he was not fearful of the fall. In proof thereof, he rushed to the jagged brink of the ledge and looked down into hazy moonlit space and was unafraid.

With a desperate movement he snatched his hat off and cast it down at his feet. His toes inched over the abyss in his aberration. He gathered a long breath. His knees bent to the leap. His heels raised slowly under him; when in this instant a memory dashed upon him, and he straightened and stiffened, electrified.

The thought of Caleb Peevy rived into his muddled, benumbed mind. Caleb Peevy, who had jumped wilfully off Henhawk's Knob into Hellsfork three years since, and had gone to hell, so they said. A check of repugnance swept him as he recalled the lasting scorn and contempt of the mountain folk, and the epithet of coward—coward that followed Peevy past the grave

with its two-edged stigma that linked, inseparably, to his memory to-night.

Lem drew back, stung with self-shame. A hope drifted back into his distraught breast. He looked upward into the astral sky for God's guiding star that Maw Lutts had shown to him. All aquiver, he watched for the flambeau of Belle-Ann's pious prophecy: "Know ye the truth and the truth shall make ye free!" A divine revelation ebbed across his chaotic senses.

With a sudden replenished faith he looked to God, as he recalled the despised, loathsome dead man now lying on the altar of the church—asleep now, across the crimson picture that his, now dead, hand had shaped with the blood of Lem's father. Surely none but God's hand had wrought this retribution. Verily, this Omnipotent Being would not forsake him now?

He was now sensible to the God-sent monitor that had saved him from McGill. He was sensible to the Providential agency that saved him from the Judas, Orlick.

With praises, he remembered Belle-Ann's escape from this vampire. Surely this self-same God would not deny him now. Lem did not mumble disjointedly now. He did not whisper incoherent, aimless pleas.

Now, from the crest of the world, his aching breast heaving, and his erring feet firm upon his ancestral Rock of Ages, he lifted his face up to the trembling stars, as with outstretched, pleading arms he cried out vociferously to God for Him to come to him—called out, in ringing, fulsome words that carried afar,

for Him to hasten, lest he perish in the conflict that made blind agony within him.

And ere his wet, quivering lips had closed, and while still his eyes were upward, and his two arms imploring Heaven, the two forces that had, like live combatants, met midway of his soul for supremacy, did separate.

The white purity of Righteousness had come into his evil heart, and the blackness dropped away and out of his life! And all the old poisonous venom, festering soul sores and gnawing misery ebbed out of the boy's being and left it receptive to the influx of harmony and heart-peace that he saw in Belle-Ann and which he so ardently craved.

Panting like a spent man at the end of a long run, Lem now fell down on his knees in his copious gratitude.

On his knees, his head on his arm, in a divine lethargy, he rested. With prayerful, oft-said words he pondered vaguely upon this miracle. So engrossed in his felicitude and deep thanksgiving was he that he did not see the gruesome spectacle at his back.

Belle-Ann sat upon the witch-elm block and strained her eager eyes upward. Aloft there on Eagle Crown she could see Lem against the moon-laved night. Now she could discern his figure full—now his upper half. Again his head only would make a blot. Moving—always moving. She divined the terrible struggle going on in his breast, in his will to renounce the hurtful creed that heredity had written in his blood, and she realized that the conflict was all for her own sake. She measured the boy's love and honor with

ample adoration. He would not come to her with a lie on his lips to disguise the heritage of murder coiled in his heart.

As Belle-Ann waited and watched tensely, a pulsing anxiety swept her heart, like recurring waves gale-driven. Suddenly she leaped with a bound from the witch-elm block, her eyes full of a startling picture. The moon on the descent had caught Eagle Crown rock in its mystic grip, holding it out like a mighty bauble adorning the breast of the mountain.

Lem's full figure, framed within the moon's disk, was etched in magical proportions, like the portrayal of a powerful night glass.

Enraptured, she looked and saw Lem on the brink of the cliff, seemingly so near that she instinctively stretched out a hand to attract him. As she looked she saw him stretch his two arms outward and upward, and she understood their pantomimic plea.

The next instant the sound of his voice, faintly audible, reached her ear. She heard his inarticulate utterance, as with a fervent cry he called out to God, from his dire distraught heart.

Belle-Ann's white bosom heaved and caught a sob of salient joy as she darted up the trail toward Eagle Crown. She would fly to his side now. Lem needed her now. He needed her, who was a part of his life, there to succor him in this the blackest bereft hour of his existence. She knew that God had heard his abandoned supplications. She knew that God was reaching down to him a staff of righteous strength. She would hurry to his side, with the re-enforcement

of her own great love while God was there helping him.

Belle-Ann darted to the rock-runged ladder that led the jagged, perilous way up to Eagle Crown. She climbed and climbed and climbed. Many times did she pause for breath. Then she climbed again and turned and twisted and clung on and pulled herself upward, always upward, insensible to fatigue. At last her eyes reached the level of the great jutting boulder and her gaze fell off into moonlit space. She drew her lithe self up and, half turning, beheld Lem's recumbent form bowed down beside a dun indenture in the table rock. He was unconscious of her presence. There was pathos in his crouching, still form.

There was dazed, mute ecstasy in the dark violet of Belle-Ann's eyes which never lifted from this penitent figure. She stood, to still her pounding heart, and waited for him to feel her nearness, or turn his face to her. The satin lustre of her curls was moist and her bosom lifted, palpitating with the advent of the new, great joyous thing that stood upon the threshold of her life to enter and spread its felicity and untold bliss.

All oblivious, Lem was kneeling amidst this new-found grace, and the quiet of a peace that cometh only to the righteous. Belle-Ann had suffered its pangs. She had reaped its peace. She knew the pathology of the pestilent revenge-sore that blights the lives of men. And she experienced all that Lem felt.

With her eyes still upon him, Belle-Ann took one

quick, short step forward. She spoke his name, low and soft and vibrant with adoration.

As though he expected her, he looked up, smiling and tranquil, and his every radiant feature told of the triumph that compassed his renovated soul, purged now and wholly clean of its vindictive lust.

His apostasy was full and complete. He rose up strong now and bigger and taller than she had noted an hour since. And there was plain in his face at that instant a certain nobility and greatness.

He stretched his eager, long arms out to her.

"I'll let yo' lead me,—I'll let yo' lead me now, Belle-Ann!" he cried out, his happy eyes aglow with emotion and untold, deathless love.

She tossed the curls back from her lovely be-dimpled features, all aflush now. With a finger upon her bowed lips she answered:

"Kiss me heah—Lem," and walked into his waiting arms.

CHAPTER XLI

IN WHICH PROVIDENCE TAKES A HAND

HE crushed her to him with a passion that bade fair to stop her breath. He poured out his kisses upon her lips, and face, and eyes.

He kissed the little scar that crossed the part in her hair. And there he held her for long, lingering minutes, loath to untwine his arms. Her hot breath was on his neck, and he surfeited his senses upon the incense of her curls.

"We'll all go down to Blue-Grass together now, won't we, Lem?" she said.

"Sho'—I'm done a warrin' now—I'm done fo' always—an', Belle-Ann, my darlin'—I want t' git a edication like yo'-all—eh?—I want t' make myself fittin' fo' yo'. I sho' will do hit, with Gawd's help—an' yore'n. I aimed to ax yo' again to marry me pint-blank—but I don't want yo' to jest now—'til I'm fittin'—I air a goin' to study th' books by day an' by night—I know I kin learn—I'll do hit er bust—then when yore sure I'm fittin'—an' kin talk nice like yo'—an' look decent-like—then—then——"

He drew her to him and buried his face in her curls.

"Little Belle-Ann," he muttered, his joy crowding his words, "little gal, whut I knowed would come back——"

"Did I not cross my heart, Lem?" she said, and as her lips parted to tell to him all that lay in her heart for the future, a swift, blighting look of horror dashed into the girl's face, leaving it whiter than moon-pallor. A half-screamed, incoherent outcry burst from her lips as with outstretched arm she pointed behind him. Responding instantly to her alarm, Lem flung himself around.

Together, transfixed and agape, they stared. A startling sight stood in front of their eyes—a spectacle that filled the sensitive girl with a panting, sickening horror. She stood all a-quiver, her two little hands clutching her breast and her violet eyes swimming in terror. For a tense long minute they could neither speak nor move.

Then Belle-Ann's one hand shot out and grasped Lem's sleeve imploringly.

"Oh, Lem—Lem!" she cried, "can't we get it out—oh! can't we hurry and take it out, Lem?" but even as she talked she knew the hopelessness of the intent in her mind.

"I 'low hits too late now, Belle-Ann," returned he, in tones a trifle unsteady. "Hit air God's buryin' now," he added, with no trace of venom in his tones.

"Oh!—Lem, it's too awful—too terrible to watch and think about," pursued Belle-Ann in half whispers broken with emotion. She dropped her lids and placed her hands over her eyes.

The night wind carried an ominous groan. A dully grinding, crepitating sound came up to the lofty heights of Eagle Crown.

Even now there was a tremendous gutting upheaval

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William Oberhardt del.

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“Hit air God’s buryin’ now.”

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below them; then with a dynamitic cough of concussion the entire roof of the church belched upward and fell in and a wide black flight of smoke hurried up to the high heavens and blotted the scintillant stars. Then a measureless, flanged blanket of blood-hued flame followed, propelling still higher the ebon clouds above it.

Here the flame turned to orange and split, and dropped back into a seething pit, where it gathered another and greater force. Then a lance-like turret of pure fire spurted straight upward, struggling and twisting and stabbing its lurid path through the pitchy volumes of smoke that rolled and plunged and tumbled infernally; filching with edacious swirls, great amber flakes of tinder, delivering them up in spiral gusts to the whining wilderness wind, which in turn hurtled its meteoric salvage, red and alive, out over the rampant waters of Hellsfork.

The clearing was transformed into an oscillating arena of lurid light that eclipsed the stars and drove the moon pallid. The front wall supporting the belfry was last to go. Its superstructure half devoured, the belfry itself clung on fearfully askew, like a man skidded from a high cliff, hanging by a single root awaiting his strength to ebb. The pitiless flames duelled, raged and fought ferociously over their prey of fire-bitten logs that strove vainly to rise, only to be stricken, again to fall back, casting groans to the spectral night. They turned and stirred and crawled in agony, like the maimed half dead.

Suddenly the sheet of flame scathing the front wall fell back again for another assault and, taking it thrice

with blasting, mighty tongues, took the key-log to the belfry for its own. And as it went the belfry trembled and quaked on the threshold of its doom. For a minute it hung there like a mortal thing, having eyes to see down into the white-hot pit—fearing something there that this grim-hell clasped to its red breast, vauntingly and gloatingly. Something more scathing, more horrifying, more contaminating than the mere scourge of molten annihilation.

The fire gnawed its trembling support away, and the belfry staggered, tottered and succumbed.

As it hurtled headlong downward, the bell shrieked out across the night,—a throttled, frenzied medley of fear-stricken mad utterances, and tumbled over and over, and went screaming into the ghost-man's casket of destruction. And roundabout them fluted leaves of flame grew. And the fire made flowers that covered them over.

Incessantly the lurid lustre of the embers died down, only to leap pulsing up anew, like the rhyming flush of heat lightning playing behind pearly clouds. As the dull red flung its cycle outward from the vermilion pyre of the doomed church, it caught in bold, startling relief, the mask of a human visage. The russet of the dancing, dying flames touched this pale, marcid face with a florid, sanguine flush. Only his peaked, lupine features were visible against the purple green of the laurel. He was there in the beginning, and he meant to stay there to the end. He meant to keep his adder-like eyes charm-fixed and unmoved upon this death pile, until its face was gray and cold. He

meant to see that no treacherous, human skeleton pushed up out of the yielding ashes and stalked abroad. There was reverence and infinite tenderness in his fondling of the rifle Buddy now hugged in his lap.

His dead father's gun. His heritage that naught would part, until the epoch, that came to still his little hardened heart, stepped between them. As the fire smouldered, thus did the boy's eyes smoulder, while he watched audaciously and fixedly; for deep down in his warped, puerile soul the curtained joy of revenge was a-sputter. Now his weazened countenance broke with a satanic grin, ill to behold, the while he mumbled things to himself.

"I 'low th' ol' Scratch ez a pickin' em, an' a spearin' em, an' a humpin' em 'roun' down below 'bout now—leastways I'll see his bones burn up, I will," he muttered in sibilant, soul-deep glee.

Like a luscious, esculent morsel he rolled the words over and over. The sound of these disjointed phrases spelled happiness to his soul.

"I'll see his bones burn—he cyan't cum back ef I burn his bones all up—th' ol' Scratch'll have t' keep em, ef I burn his bones up—he'll have t' keep em." The jungled hills, a-hush, were ominously empty of night voices.

And all the soft-footed creatures of the wild crouched fear-crazed in their lairs, and peered tremblingly out at this fire-swept, fearful night. A furtive, fleeing wind, ocean-bound, whipped the slatternly dawn clouds away from the wan face of a vigilant moon. Its haggard visage looked pityingly down

upon a boy-heart clasping a rifle to his breast like a brother, his dream-dizzied head, pillowed upon the scoughing bosom of a wilderness world—fast asleep.

THE END