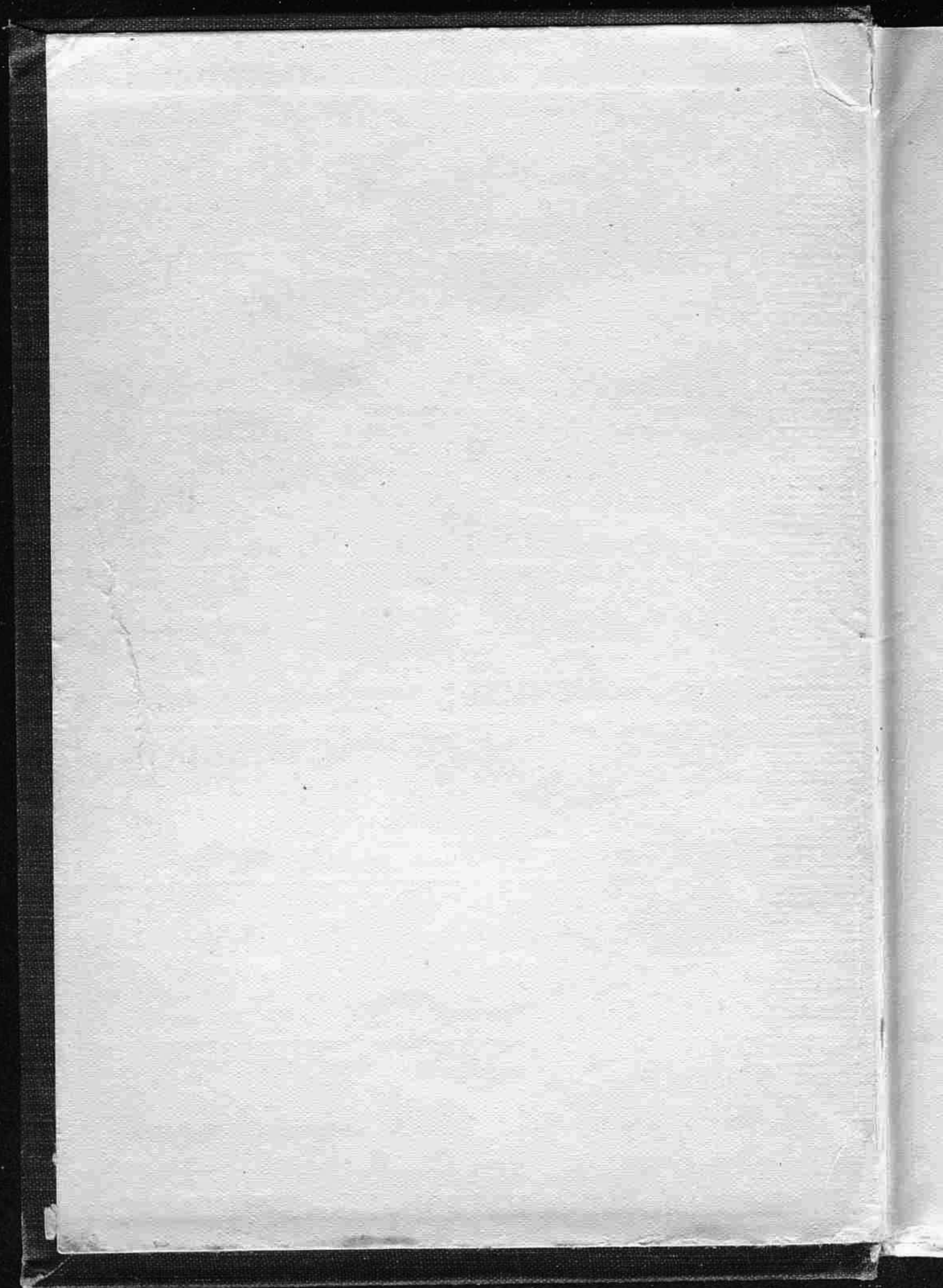
VISITING THE SIN

by

EMMA RAYNER



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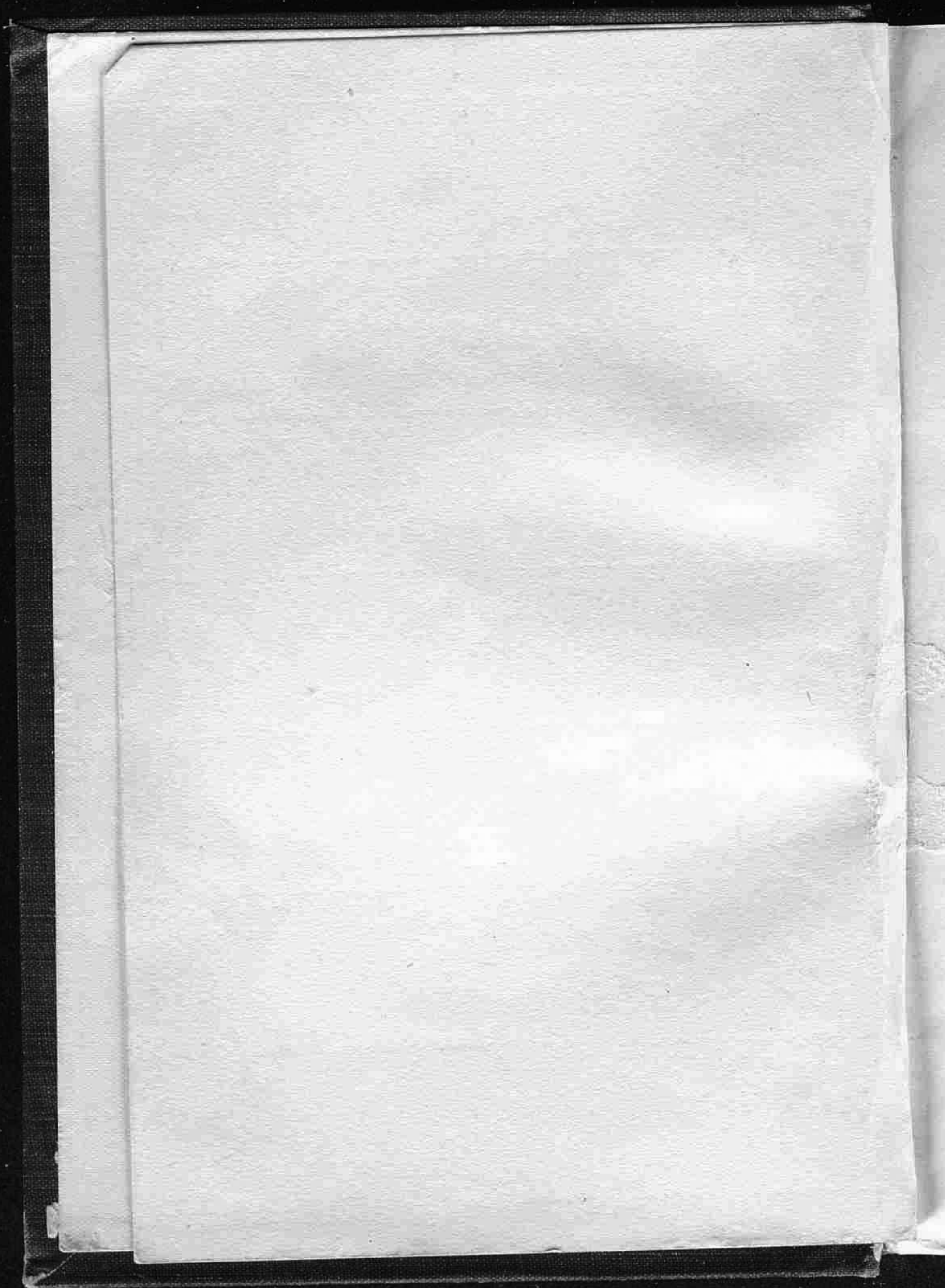

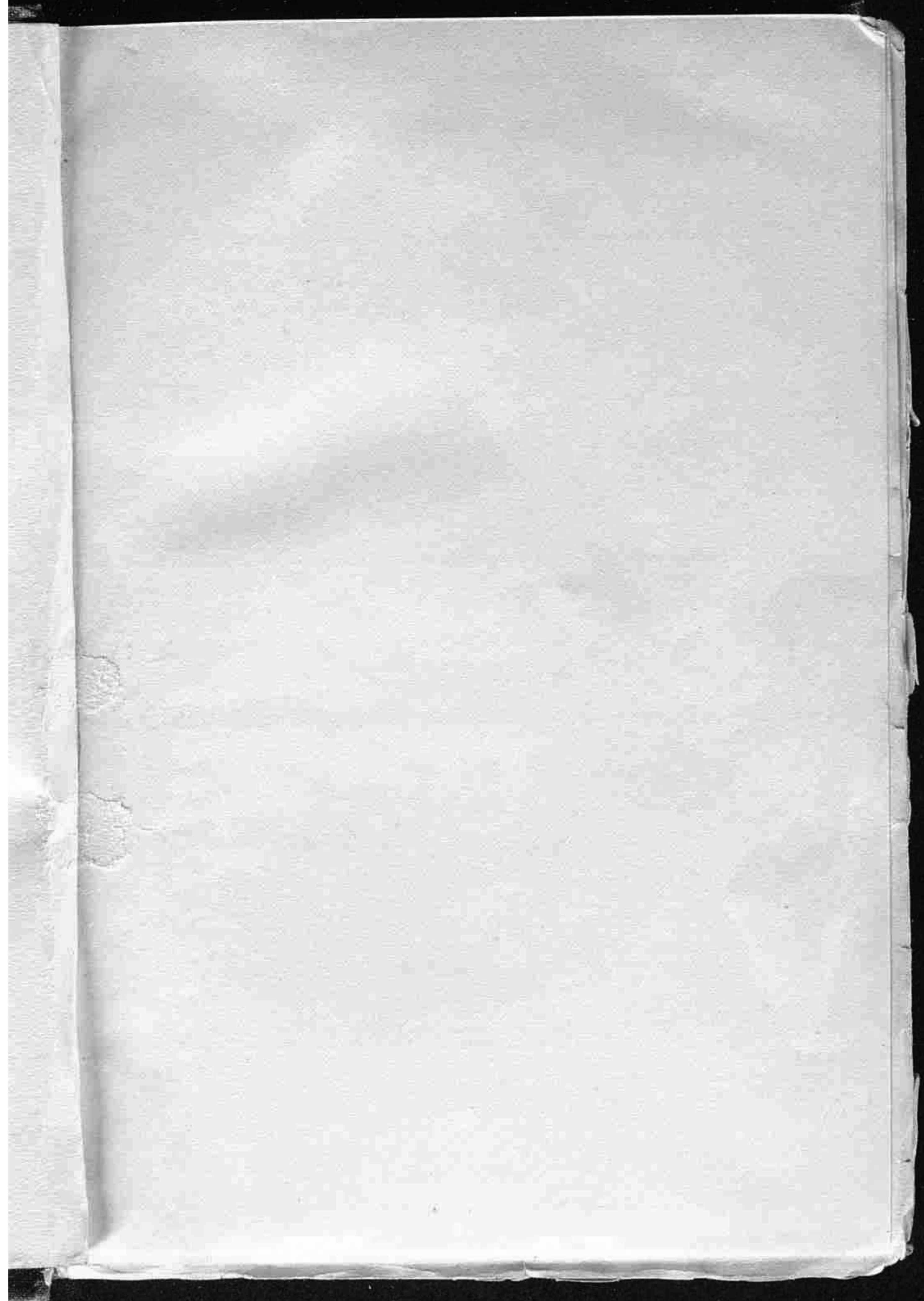

By EMMA RAYNER

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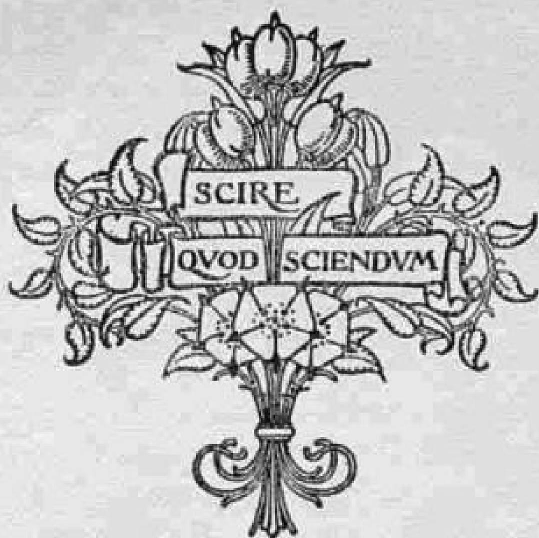
VISITING THE SIN

A Tale of Mountain Life in Kentucky and Tennessee

By

EMMA RAYNER



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PREFACE

It may possibly happen that some reader of the following pages may see in the incidents found therein that which to him will appear as evidence of a somewhat free flight of fancy. To such the author would like to explain that, although the plot of the book is entirely fictitious, there are but few incidents introduced into the story which are not founded upon real happenings, not necessarily in the actual neighbourhood where the story is located, but within the mountain district of Kentucky and Tennessee. Taken directly from the mouths of old residents, these incidents and traditions have been woven into the thread of the tale; and whatever of strangeness or unconventionality they may seem to possess must be attributed, not to the teller of the story, but to the wild, untutored life of a people who twenty-five years ago were not quite what they are to-day, when education is penetrating even into the most remote recesses of the hills, and the stories of long ago are told cautiously and with many a look at the listener to detect the first approach to a smile of ridicule or disbelief.

The details of the fight before the door of the church were drawn from the lips of a resident of the hamlet where the skirmish occurred,— a hamlet where, even to-day, the sheriff deems it wisest to go with words of friendship on his tongue.

An actual occurrence of like character has been made the foundation for the story of the death of Abner Poteet, some of the details of the dream having been told to the author by an old resident of the mountains who was personally acquainted with the dreamer, and who heard the story from his lips before, in accordance with the warning, he unresistingly yielded up his life.

In the particular form in which they are woven into the tale the incidents are to be regarded as purely fictitious. Nevertheless, their foundation lies firmly fixed upon fact.

In the matter of dialect the object has been to keep to the more general form of it heard within thirty miles of the spot where the story is located, allowance being made for changes already produced by education. Dialect varies much in different districts, even within a small radius, and that which may be a fair reproduction of the speech of one neighbourhood would be open to criticism in another.

BOSTON, 1900.

VISITING THE SIN

CHAPTER I

CLANG and clamour and click! The tongue of the old bell struck noisily against the metal, and stopped, as if in horror at its own performance. It ought surely to have picked up more music from its surroundings. The leaves above it rustled as in derision of its efforts, and the clear call of a bird put its clamorous echoes to shame. The soft chug, chug, of water drawn into a deep hole in the rock, and the melodious chatter of the same agent as it swept along the shallow edge of the stream, made particular notes in the chorus of harmonious sounds that held sway in these Kentucky woods.

The old bell was out of harmony with its surroundings. They ought to have put soul even into its cracked metal. Forest kings that had held court in these mountains for centuries shook their leafy crowns in derision at the barbarous efforts of the interloper. The girl whose hand pulled the cord and set the harsh tongue to vibrating was an interloper too; but *she* was not out of character with her surroundings. The tall, supple figure, the slow grace of movement, the dark, slumberous eyes, with possibilities — no, rather with promise — of passion beneath their calm, were in keeping with the hills and the forest.

The girl and the bell stood at the foot of a high mountain, or, more properly speaking, a cleft made by

two mountains, that, sweeping together just beyond the spot where the bell hung, left a long, deep valley, little more than a notch in the great, overshadowing hills. A lengthy, low structure built of logs was behind her, and the stream tumbled over boulders and tree-trunks almost at her feet.

She lifted her eyes for a minute to the mountain opposite, and then raised her hand and set the bell clanging again. In answer to the sound a figure came swinging down the mountain side, and another and another appeared between the trees. With long, easy strides those mountaineers descended the steep face of the hill, never stopping to pick out a path. Their destination was soon proclaimed to be the building before which the girl stood, and they came straight on towards it. Hungry men were not likely to turn aside for an easier route, and the bell had just announced that supper awaited them.

At the same time, from the door of a mill, hidden from the eyes of the girl by a ragged bluff, half a dozen men passed out into the sunlight, and started for the spot towards which the descending figures were converging. The mill was well out of sight of the low log building, and of the house that stood by its side. The sister of the mill owner would have it so.

"I'm not aimin' to live on top of the mill, or of the mill-workers, either — if I do board them," she said, with a touch of scorn in her voice. "They're mountain men, all. Ary one of them can stand a five minutes' walk before he eats, or if not, he may go hungry."

So the logs of the long, low dining-hall were piled one upon another at a convenient distance from the mill, and the house of the mill owner rose near by. It was of logs also, but it was not the usual log house of the Kentucky mountains. This was large, and light, and high, and its chinks were well covered with bark, nailed

on securely. Inside, the neatly boarded walls showed the grain of the cedar that grew in plenty on the mountains. The plants that blossomed in the windows were not brighter than the room to which they belonged. The dark eyes of the mill owner's sister were sworn foes to dirt and dinginess.

"I'm powerful glad to hear that bell."

The first arrival swung himself round the end of the building, and pulled up at the big half-gourd reposing on a smooth section of tree-trunk which measured not less than eight feet across, and did duty as an outside table.

"Jist in time," he added, glancing over his shoulder at the tall, lean wood-chopper who followed him closely, and taking possession of the gourd and the water it contained at the very moment when his companion's hand was stretched out to draw it towards himself. "Not so fast, friend. Hit's he'p yerself in this crowd."

"You'll do, then,— nary one better," responded the other, as he watched the first-comer liberally and leisurely souse face and hands in the cool water.

Around the corresponding half of the gourd the rest of the men were crowding, taking deep draughts of the clear spring water with which it was filled to the brim. When all had taken their turn, and the water supply grew low, the men, clean and cool as to faces and hands, filed into the dining-room.

"Dal back yet?"

"No."

The eyes of the girl were turned full on the questioner. The answer, though short, was deliberate, the gaze more so.

"Powerful slow, hain't he?"

"Is it Garl Cox that talks of slowness?" she said, with a curl of her lip and a derisive light in her eyes. "When Garl starts a chopping match with Dal, it'll be a si-ight."

The long drawl upon the last word gave it expression. The man's face reddened as a laugh went round the table at his expense.

The girl turned away, and her assistant, a stout mountain woman, appeared with a huge platter of fried pork. Hungry-looking eyes brightened, and, for the time, tongues had other work to do than to inquire about the mill owner's absence.

He for whom they had asked was not far away. Following the stream that had hewed out a channel for itself down the face of the rock where the two mountains met, he had come almost over the little camp before he flung himself down on a decayed tree-trunk. To rest? Hardly. His attitude had little of restfulness in it. To think, perhaps,— or to despair. His face suggested the latter inclination. It was the face of a young man, but a disappointed one,— ay, and a troubled one.

"I was a fool," he said, in a low, pained tone,— "a fool! And I always am and always shall be while I trust in good in man or woman."

His head went down on his hands, and the mountain grew still as if innocent of human occupant. A mischievous squirrel presently dropped the shell of a last year's acorn in his hair, but the young man did not look up. A dogwood tree, incited by a saucy breath of wind, flung a spray of its great white bloom sheer in his face, or in that part of it that was not altogether covered by his hands. A lizard crept out of the rotten trunk and scampered over his foot; and a scorpion came dangerously near, and then glided away. He saw none of them. What he did see was his own folly and its consequences.

"Fool!" he said again, after a long silence. "Fool, to trust ary man — as fur as that."

Even those words, harsh as they were, were softened by the Southern drawl till they lost the worst of their

sting. He might be a fool, and he might know it, but the strident tones that make the word an insult were absent from the voice that uttered the reproach. Southern in tone and Southern in nature was the young man, who at another call from the bell, sounding not unmelodious across the space that separated the mill owner from the mill, lifted his head and looked the world in the face.

"Fool or not, it will avail nothing to sit here," he said, and rose to his feet.

Though almost over the camp, a big swell of the mountain lay between. He took the shortest way down it. The choice of route scarcely suggested a strong love of life. The last call of the bell came up to him as he sprang from a huge boulder, and stood again on the edge of the torrent. The sound, unsoftened now by distance, embodied the camp life to which he was returning. He shrank visibly from it, hesitated a moment, and then went on.

The clatter of knives and forks and the hum of voices came to his ears as he passed the open door of the long dining-hall. He turned his head and looked in, his eyes passing over the row of men seated on either side of the uncovered table, and seeking the figure of the girl who stood at the further end. Her face was turned towards the door, and the look upon it caused his feet to linger, even before he heard her voice.

"Fill your mouth with victuals, Jim Fletcher, and give your tongue something better to do than to rattle aout the emptiness of your head," it said. "Ary dry gourd can rattle when it's shook, but nary man stops to listen to its clatter. When men want to know the character of the owner of this mill, it's not to Jim Fletcher, nor to any other empty head they'll come to ask."

There was a chuckle and a laugh down the line as the

discomfited Jim followed the girl's injunction, and in his confusion conveyed an unusually large lump of pork to the capacious gap behind his lips.

"Don't be too hard on Jim," remonstrated a burly mountain man who sat near the end of the table at which the girl stood. "Jim hain't the only one that says Dal's been tuk in powerful bad."

"I never said Jim was the only idiot around," replied the girl, in clear, musical tones, and with a look that sent the eyes of the speaker down on his plate.

While a loud laugh ran round, a rough, savage-looking man dropped his knife, and turned angrily on the speaker.

"You-all can fix hit abaout as ye like when *you* open yer mouth," he said; "but hit's we-uns that 'll hev to lose for Dal's foolery."

The sound of the words travelled up to where the girl stood, and down through the space between the speaker and the door, passing into the warm April air without. It brought the feet of the passer-by to a stand, and almost turned them into the room. His eyes darkened, and then glowed with a light that answered to another just kindled inside,— the light that shone dangerously in a girl's eyes.

"When ary one of you loses a cent by Dalbert Mozingo, come to Naomi Mozingo and say so," she said in clear, vibrating tones. "Till then hold your tongue, and let better men speak."

She disappeared through a door in the rear of the building, and presently returned with a big dish of cobbler pie held in both hands. Knives and forks suspended operations for a minute, and then made a dash at the piled up delicacy. Before ever it reached the table, the load had grown lighter. It came in heaped high as the platter would hold, the rich mellow apple quarters peeping out from the broken, piled up crust.

"Cobbler! Cobbler pie here!" came from all sides; and great gaps soon showed themselves as fork after fork was thrust into the yielding mass. Not a scrap remained on the dish when the men straggled out into the light that was reddening as the sun dipped down. They were rugged, untutored mountaineers, every one of them, — fierce looking, too, men whom one would instinctively abstain from angering.

The girl was left alone. She stood with one hand on the table, staring into the sunset glow beyond. It was not the sunset that was reflected in her eyes. The light without was too peaceful to be responsible for that within. And when the sun dropped suddenly below a mountain peak, and the valley and the lower hillsides were left in shadow, the light in the girl's eyes grew brighter and more threatening. There was no sunset glow to be made responsible now.

Not until the stout, strong-armed assistant returned to the room did the mill owner's sister arouse herself from that unseeing stare into the lessening brightness without.

"Gather up the dishes, Texas," she said. "I'm going into the house."

It was in the living room that she found her brother.

"Well?" she said, going up to him, and looking into the face that turned to greet her.

Her voice had lowered, and the fire had left her eyes. They were soft with sympathy now, as they met those of the young man. She put her hand on his shoulder.

"George Roach has played you false again," she said, and the words were not a question.

"Yes. He went to Louisville and got the money before he ran off."

"All of it?"

"Every cent."

They stood looking at each other.

"That comes of having a partner," she said at last.

"And of trusting him."

A smile, half scornful, half tender, came to her lips.

"While Dalbert Mozingo lives, he will trust," she said.

He drew himself away with a smothered exclamation, then turned and laid his hand on hers.

"I don't see why I should resent the truth," he said, with bitter humility. "It's not pleasant to be reminded that I'm an idiot, even though I know right well it's no lie."

"A good-natured fool would be nearer the mark," she said slowly, and her eyes looked into his with a flash that was tender as it was brief. "But the fool must pay for his folly."

"He's paying dear," he said.

She noticed the break in his voice.

"Well — we must start afresh," she replied.

He looked at her sharply.

"How? We're six weeks behind with the men."

"There's the money for the stuff that went aout last week. Roach didn't get that," she ventured.

The gloom on his face deepened.

"That's not mine," he answered shortly. "Rogers has got to have it. He wants it plumb bad. It's his. He mortgaged his farm to help me. The money's called in. He must have it in a month. I can't save myself by another man's ruin."

She drew a long breath.

"A month! We can't do it," she said.

"We must," he answered fiercely. "Will Rogers staked all he had to give me a start. I swore he should not lose. He shall have that money if I have to fight my way to him with it."

"It may come to that," she said grimly.

She turned quickly. Her ear had caught the sound of a footstep without.

"Better meet nary one of them to-night," she said.

He disappeared into an inner room.

"It's come to sneaking off like a coward," he muttered.

"Are you aimin' to come aout, Naomi? Hit's goin' to be a powerful pretty night."

She recognised the voice of the young man who spoke, but for a minute she did not answer. She was thinking.

"All right," she said, after that momentary hesitation. "I'll come when I've seen how Texas is getting on with the dishes."

She went to the door of the inner room.

"I'm going aout with Frank Sharp," she said.

Then she turned quickly and visited Texas in the kitchen.

The face of the waiting cavalier cleared as she came out into the twilight. He was a bright-eyed, sharp-visaged mountaineer, young and stalwart. The hair that hung long in his neck had been combed with exceeding care, and the hand that rested on the door-post shone with the vigorousness of the scrubbing it had received. A walk with Naomi Mozingo was a prize for which a man must bid high. Not many men, old or young, in all that valley, or on the mountain sides either, but would be ready to bid, and scarcely one but would go out of his way at Naomi's call. They were not insensible to beauty, if they were mountain men. The soft ring of the girl's voice had more than once turned them aside from a fixed purpose. That it had turned many a man's head was well understood.

"Hit'll be as pretty a night as ever you see," remarked the young man as they left the door.

She did not answer.

"Frank," she said after a moment's silence, "what did Jim Walker mean this evening?"

"What the rest of 'em mean," he said, looking at her admiringly. "Thar's gittin' to be a mighty uncomfortable feelin', Naomi."

"The men are fools," she said, and she smiled at him as she said it. "Nary one will lose by Da-al. But they've got to wait."

They might or might not be fools as a whole, but that smile put one of the workmen safely into the category.

"*I* know Dal's all ri-ight," he said, the long drawl on the last word softening it wonderfully. "But the men are in a mighty hurry. Yesterday was a week, Dal promised 'em he'd pay in seven days. They've done expected hit. He's back, hain't he?"

"Yes."

"Has he got the money for the wages?" he asked.

She looked at him for a moment.

"And what if he hasn't?" she demanded in a tone softly defiant.

"Hit'll be powerful awkward," he said.

There was silence between them. She was pondering his last words. She understood enough of the nature of these men to know that it *would* be "powerful awkward." It had been awkward enough since George Roach, the mill owner's partner, had gathered together all the available cash and disappeared. That was a month ago. Naomi Mozingo had never doubted the possibility of working through the difficulty — until to-night.

"Awkward or not," she said at last," "it's plumb certain they've got to wa-it."

"Hain't Dal aimin' to pay? Hain't he got nothin' for they-uns?" asked the young man.

"Frank," she said, "it's safe to tell you. I can trust you anywhere" — he drew himself up an inch or two higher — "and with anything. We've got to earn that money before it'll come."

He stopped, and looked in her face. The last faint rays of light were playing upon it. In that fading light the eyes had grown wistful and sad. They looked straight into those of the young man — and won.

"Hit hain't goin' to be my fault if thar's ary trouble," he said. "I'll he'p all I know how, but lor, they're plumb crazy."

CHAPTER II

"THE tree's done killed pappy!"

The words burst forth in a shrill, weak voice, the weird mournfulness of which struck cold to the heart of one listener, at least. He was crossing the threshold of the log cabin as the child spoke, and the blue, quivering lips were close to his heart. They had been still ever since he started with her towards the house. Now they opened, and that one startling sentence escaped them.

"Killed your pappy!"

A woman turned from the hearth. She took a step towards the young man as if she would snatch the little girl from his arms, then stopped, removed the pipe from her mouth, and glared at the mill owner.

"Yes, killed him plumb dead."

The words ended in a gasp. Dalbert Mozingo looked down into the colourless face, and noted the effort the child made.

"You've done killed her, too, I reckon," said the woman, nodding her head towards the little girl, but addressing Dalbert.

The heavy features of the speaker had taken upon themselves an expression of savage moroseness. She laid her pipe on the narrow mantel-shelf, and waited for the mill owner to speak.

"She's hurt," he said hurriedly. "A tree fell on her, and—him. I've sent for the doctor."

"A powerful sight o' good hit'll du to send for a doctor for a dead man," said the woman savagely. "Whose fault was hit he was under the tree? Hit's you-uns that 'ticed my man, and every other man, to cut down

good trees jist to put money in *your* pocket. If he'd 'a listened to me, he'd never 'a chopped another tree for a man that cain't pay and don't mean to pay."

The mill owner made no answer. He carried the child to one of the four beds that filled the four corners of the room, choosing the one nearest to the hinged shutter, which, swinging wide on this April day, left open a square hole in the wall,— sole window to afford light to the interior.

"Better not touch her till doc gets here," he said. "Her arm's broke. The less she's handled, the better."

"I reckon," replied the woman, in a dull, hard tone.

She sank upon the chair from which she had risen, and put a lump of tobacco into her mouth. Then she resumed her stare into the fire.

She asked no questions about the accident, and the young man turned again to the child. She was a little girl of nine or thereabouts, and the mill owner shuddered as he saw the flaxen hair dyed red with blood that was not her own. He had shuddered before, when he saw the two heads lying so near together,— the man's and the little child's. The rosy bloom of the Judas tree was not the only red that had coloured the mountain side that afternoon. When Dalbert Mozingo sprang up the rocks in answer to a wild cry that came ringing down the mountain, he saw the two faces lying very close, separated only by the ruddy stream that was widening between them.

"Pappy's killed!" shrieked the little girl; and he did not contradict her.

The face so near to hers was stiffening already. The blood would not flow long. The tree that had struck the child to the ground had fallen upon the body of the man in such a way as to crush the life out, even if the blow on the forehead had not been severe enough to cause death. Dalbert had turned his attention to the little girl.

"Where are you hurt?" he asked.

"Everywhars," replied the child. Then, as he lifted her, she tried to stretch out her hand. "Pappy, oh, pappy!" she moaned, and fell back with a shriek.

"You must not try to use that arm: it is broken!" the young man exclaimed hastily, taking the injured limb in a firm grasp lest she should hurt herself more.

She had lain very still while he carried her home. He thought she had fainted. But now her eyes were wide open.

"How came the tree to fall on pappy?" he asked, the grim silence of the woman making the moments seem long.

The child stared at him with mournful eyes.

"He was cursin' at you," she said, with startling distinctness. "He'd chopped a right smart inter the tree, and all at once he stopped to say a curse agin you, and afore he could finish hit the tree come plumb atop o' him and me. He never spoke no more atter that."

A curse against him—and on a dying man's lips! The face of the mill owner darkened.

"I reckon the curse 'll stick if he didn't finish hit!"

The words were emphasized by a deliberate and vicious spit at the fire, the tobacco juice from the woman's mouth sizzling vindictively as it reached the hot embers. The dark blood rose to the young man's forehead. The effect of the words was visible on another face also. A pair of eyes flashed, and lips opened as if to speak. They closed again, however, and the boy to whom they belonged leaned back against the wall and fixed his gaze on the mill owner. Perhaps he was waiting for him to answer. If so, he was disappointed.

For a long time there was silence in the room. The mill owner was thinking that Lemuel Sutton had always been a hindrance to his progress. He had from the

first been suspicious of the young man, for a long time refusing him the right to pass through a piece of rough mountain land in his possession. It was the nearest route from the stream to the road beyond.

"We-uns done without a mill afore you-all come, and we can du without hit yit," he said.

He had kept up his opposition until another outlet, less satisfactory, but more available, had been almost decided upon, and then come to terms. But he had never grown friendly towards the mill or its owner, and his voice had been the loudest in outcry when the money ran short. That he had died with a curse against the mill owner on his lips Dalbert could well believe.

The minutes passed. The woman stared at the fire, and the boy stared at the mill owner. The stare was of a different character in the two cases, however. The one was vicious, the other friendly.

"Howdy, Jane."

A neighbour poked her head in at the door, and peered curiously round the room. Then she allowed her body to follow her head.

"Howdy," she repeated, aiming her second greeting at the mill owner, who sat on the edge of the bed, holding the little broken arm

"They're bringin' your man home," she added, walking over towards the fireplace.

The woman by the fire neither spoke nor moved in answer, only her lips formed themselves into the right curves to eject a great squirt of tobacco juice that with unerring aim was shot at the one stick of wood yet glowing on the hearth. The boy took his shoulders away from their contact with the logs and went to the door.

"Yes, they're a-bringin' of him, mammy," he said.

"Bringin' of him home!" ejaculated the woman, in a loud, hard tone. "And whose fault is hit they're

a-bringin' of him home that away — carryin' him like a log, and him not able to he'p himself?"

"It was an unfortunate accident," said the mill owner soothingly, "but I don't know that anybody's to blame."

The woman turned upon him.

"He was killed a-doin' you-uns' work," she said. "If you-all hadn't come here, he'd 'a been alive now. Did we-uns want to cut the trees down? Them young uns hain't got no pappy, and I hain't got no man, all along o' you."

Dalbert Mozingo recoiled. The savage animosity of the words carried a sort of conviction with them. For the moment he felt himself the murderer of Lemuel Sutton.

"Pappy was tight!"

The sounds were hurled into the stillness of the room. The boyish, unhesitating tones cleared away a mist from Dalbert's brain. He could understand the accident now.

"You shet yer mouth," said the woman savagely.

"Rhody knows," continued the boy, undaunted. "She's pappy's gal. She's been atter him since noon. Warn't he drunk, Rhody?"

"Yes, he was powerful drunk," said the child slowly. "He tuk another dram jist afore he begun choppin' that tree."

There was a movement about the door.

"Better keen up the fire, Jane," recommended the neighbour. "Hit may be wanted. They're tol'rable near now."

They were bringing the dead man across the threshold.

"Oh, lor! Mercy sakes! Lue-uke at the young un! She's as white as her pappy. Oh, lor, hit's a si-ight."

A crowd of women and children trooped in after the sober-visaged men who bore the body of the wood-

chopper. Three or four masculine forms brought up the rear. The space between the beds was becoming full.

"Make way there, friends."

"Here's the doc!"

The man who pushed through the crowd around the door was a fine specimen of the mountaineer. He stood six feet two without his shoes, and was sufficiently stout of limb to be well proportioned.

"Put him on the bed," he directed, sweeping off from one of the remaining three resting places the occupants who had taken possession. "Thar's nothin' to be done for hi-im."

The long drawn out final word was uttered as he turned towards the little girl.

"And so you got hurt too, Rhody?"

His fingers were already feeling for broken bones.

"Don't!" said the child, sharply. "Let him du hit. His hands don't hurt like yourn."

She was looking towards Dalbert.

"Git aout o' thar!"

The mother of the child stood by the mill owner's side.

"Yes, I'll go now," he said, with an air of relief. "I was caring a little too much to leave her till doc come."

"Don't!" repeated the little girl impatiently, as the doctor's fingers came in contact with the bruised body. "I hain't aimin' to be hurt no more 'n I can he'p. Let Dal feel. His fingers don't poke inter me like yourn."

The small mouth was drawn with pain. Very evidently the broken arm was not the full extent of the injury.

"You must let the doctor see where you're hurt, Rhody," said the mill owner, in a soothing tone. "He can't make you better without."

"Hain't he seed enough?" said the child wearily.

"I aches everywhars. He hurts more 'n the tree. *You* feel, and let him take his hands away."

Thus it happened that in the examination which followed it was the mill owner's fingers that loosened the child's clothing, and the mill owner's voice that spoke comforting words. Before the broken bone was set, the small face had grown whiter than before, and it mattered little to Rhody whose hands touched the aching limb. Her eyes were closed, and the doctor experienced no opposition to his will.

"Oh, lor, mercy sakes, she's white as death! Hit won't be long afore she's laid aside o' her pappy."

"Yes, and that comes o' takin' up with foreigners. Would my man ever 'a been layin' thar that away if *he* hadn't come?"

The speaker pointed a finger at Dalbert.

"Hit'll be the child next," she continued. "Hain't thar death plain enough in her face?"

The crowd squeezed nearer to the bed. Dalbert and the doctor were still busy over the fainting child.

"Thar, that's all I can do for her," announced the doctor at length, straightening himself up and breathing a sigh of relief.

"Is there serious injury?" asked the mill owner, in a low voice.

"Serious enough," replied the other cautiously. "I hain't expectin' to attend to that arm agin. I sot hit for fear she'd pull through, but I hain't reckonin' on hit."

"Poor little thing!" said the mill owner, softly. "I reckon I'll go before she comes to."

"Well, Mrs. Sutton," he continued, in a louder voice, "we've done all we can for Rhody here. She'll come to herself after a bit. And when you get over this a little, you'll own that I had nothing to do with the accident."

"I shain't own nothin' o' the sort," she snapped. "That gal 'ud 'a been runnin' around, and her pappy a-settin' thar, smokin' his pipe, if you-all hadn't never come."

"Well, well," said Dalbert, a little sharply, "you're in trouble now, and you don't see straight. I'll go."

"I'd 'a been mighty proud if you'd 'a gone sooner."

They were her parting words.

When he had crossed the threshold the mill owner drew a deep breath. The dark, cool woods were before him. He plunged into them. Here, at least, he would be free from his enemies. How bitter the woman had been! And she was not the only one who was ready to lay every ill to the door of an employer who had taken the work of the men and found himself unable to pay for the same.

Dalbert Mozingo was not at all sure what the outcome would be. Unless the men would keep on working, and give him time, there would be as little chance of paying in the future as in the present. His face was dark as the shadow in the woods. After his experience of that afternoon, he was looking on the dark side of things. Why not? The brightness never realised itself, he argued. He started when a hand was laid on his arm.

"Hullo!"

A boy stepped out from behind a tree.

"Why, Lem, I didn't know you'd left the house."

"Yes. I come aout to meet you."

The bright eyes that had stared in his face as he waited for the doctor were looking up at him now. There was silence for a minute. Dalbert had come to a stand.

"Don't you take no notice o' mammy. Pappy was tight."

The young voice was urgent.

"Yes — I know."

"Hit hain't no fault o' yourn."

"No. But I'm sorry."

"You needn't. You hadn't nary thing to du with hit."

The last words were spoken from a distance. Lem had backed into the shadow of the trees, a sudden shyness taking possession of him. The next moment he had disappeared.

CHAPTER III

THE day was hot, a typical April day for the Kentucky mountains,—a June day a Northerner might have called it. Cedar Fork, by which name the stream that ran past the mill was known further on, where its valley widened out and boasted an acre or two of level ground, shone clear beneath the sun's rays. So did a spring that, to use the phraseology of the Cedar Fork land, "boiled up" by the roadside at a spot yet more remote. A man wearing a broad-brimmed hat and a red shirt stooped to put his mouth on a level with the rock from which the water gushed out.

"That's tol'rable refreshin'," he said, wiping the heat drops from his face, and stopping to take breath after his deep draught.

The red shirt glowed hot in the sunshine, and above it the dark hair of the wearer hung low. The hair bore signs of little extra attention. The red handkerchief also, that surmounted the warm-tinted shirt, was adjusted with precision. The preacher did not forget his position in the community. To-day was Sunday, and he was bound for the "church-house" at Cedar Fork. He was warranted in expecting a good attendance there, for, since the mill was started, men had poured into the hamlet. The neighbourhood of Cedar Fork might be slow to welcome the invasion of a saw-mill, but it was not slow to secure a share of the mill owner's money.

The preacher lifted his head, and looked at the sun.

"The evenin's drawin' away tol'rable smart," he said, and resumed his walk.

In reality, it was but two hours past noon. The par-

ticular time in the "evening" at which service was to be looked for in the Cedar Fork "church-house" was three o'clock.

"Howdy, girls," said the preacher, with the ready courtesy of the region greeting two maidens who came to a cabin door at the sound of footsteps.

He walked on, wrapped in meditation. His thoughts were of the congregation that had that morning gathered ten miles further back among the mountains to listen to the discourse he was about to repeat in Cedar Fork valley. Some of his hearers had hardly yet reached their homes. They thought little of riding many miles to and from the service. And Elisha Tiller thought less of preaching twice or thrice on a Sunday, and walking twenty miles between services when, as to-day, the lameness of his mule necessitated the exertion.

"Howdy, babies."

He was passing two healthy, grimy-faced youngsters tumbling over one another and over the low cabin steps in their eagerness to get a sight of the preacher.

"Howdy, boys," he added a minute later, when two lads came to a stand by a gate leading into a field.

The road was becoming less deserted. From bridle-path and mountain track a sprinkling of horsemen and foot travellers turned into the valley road. Now and then a horse or mule carried double, the good wife riding behind her husband, her generous sun-bonnet sheltering her face, her arm encircling the waist of her lord.

"Howdy," said the preacher, in cordial greeting, as one and another passed him.

The "church-house" at Cedar Fork was a square log structure, peculiarly well adapted to the summer needs of the valley. That is to say, it was peculiarly ill adapted to the winter needs of the same. Windows were hardly essential features of the edifice. The spaces

between the logs could well serve the purpose. In winter it was necessary to sit in a square close around the big rusty stove, for the rain had a trick of blowing in squalls through the room. The stove occupied the exact centre of the floor; and the rain and snow had been known to fall sizzling upon its surface, swept sheer across through the big gaps in the outer walls.

The "church-house" stood on level ground at the top of a hill, up which the road sloped sharply. To-day nobody would have passed it without notice. It might be an insignificant log building at ordinary times, but not when those mountain men and women were gathered around it. The "church-house" would never lack character with those rugged faces in the foreground. Tempestuous as the wind-swept heights of their native land, the mountaineers had imbibed along with her simplicity the wildness of nature as they knew her. There was not an insignificant face among them, but there was more than one fierce one.

The occasion was the monthly preaching service, but that did not hinder the men from bringing their guns along with them. They felt more at home when thus equipped, and at any time a squirrel, or larger game, might cross their path.

Some half-dozen of the company had drawn together in a group. There was a discussion going on. At least, it was to be inferred that there was a discussion. Raised voices and impatient ejaculations, with here and there a curse, reached the ears of those outside the immediate circle. Gradually the scattered figures drew round those others as a centre.

"Hit hain't no good squeezin'. You cain't squeeze blood aout of a post if you du try."

"I reckon thar's a leetle blood left in Dalbert Mozingo yit," came the answer, in a sneering tone. "Thar's ways of drivin' a leetle of hit ao-ut, if hit hain't no good to sque-eze."

The speaker glanced at his gun as he spoke.

"Whar's the good o' spoilin' everybody's chance?" demanded the other, hotly. "If the mill stops, we-all lose money and work too."

"I reckon," was the answer, spoken slowly. "And what 'll Dal lose? Tell me tha-at."

"Hit hain't goin' to du us ary bit o' good to make him lose," replied the first speaker, his face growing red with the excitement of the argument.

"That's hit," chimed in another. "Hit hain't goin' to du us a mite o' good to hurt Dal."

"Hain't hit?" demanded his opponent, savagely. "Hit's goin' to du me a sight o' good. Hit 'ud be a mighty pretty sight to me to see a bullet put through his black heart."

"Hit hain't no blacker 'n yourn, I reckon," said Frank Sharp angrily.

"Hain't hit?" was the sneering answer. "Who said so? Naomi? How many kisses did she promise ye to stick up for her precious brother?"

Just what would have been the reply is not known, for at that moment the red shirt of the preacher was seen upon the brow of the hill.

"Howdy," he said, in loud, cheerful tones.

Part of the congregation followed him into the building. The mountain folk were a church-going people. The argument outside was interrupted. Frank Sharp was among the men who went into the house.

There were mutterings of wrath without. Public opinion was sharply divided on the subject of the mill owner and his sister. Frank Sharp was not the only man who looked at the question in a light thrown upon it by a girl's face. The mill owner's sister had more influence over the men whom her brother employed than any of those men would have been quite willing to acknowledge. If Naomi Mozingo had not been at Cedar

Fork, it is safe to say that the whir of wheels would not at this juncture have been heard there.

Neither Dalbert Mozingo nor his sister was among the worshippers. This was not because either was indifferent to the privilege of attending the monthly service, but because neither felt inclined to mingle freely with the Cedar Fork people under the present circumstances.

The winter arrangement of seats was still in evidence within the "church-house." It was more convenient so. If the stove was not wanted for heat, it was still very surely wanted. How else could there be as natural a common centre towards which, with thoughtful precision, preacher and congregation could spit?

The footsteps of the gathering people sounded loud upon the puncheon floor. The seats around the stove were taken up. One by one the men dropped in, to balance themselves upon the narrow bench made from a chopped out rail and located near the door. There were some who sat on a log outside. It was conveniently near the door. The words of the preacher could be plainly heard, and when he grew eloquent, and his voice rose and rose till the deep purple of his face bore witness to the honest effort he was making in behalf of his hearers, they were in a good position to benefit by his discourse.

Elisha Tiller was not the man to cheat his congregation with a mild, gentle application of the gospel. These were the old days, for in the year 1875 the old methods yet prevailed in the Kentucky mountains. A preacher must be strong of lung to arouse his hearers to enthusiasm. Elisha's lungs were irreproachable, and he had a reputation for eloquence.

In anticipation of such eloquence a tin pail had been placed conveniently close to the good man's feet. It was filled with the purest of spring water but a few minutes

before he entered. A gourd with a curiously curved handle floated invitingly on its surface. It was well that gourd and water were handy. There were times when the preacher exhausted the resources of even his powerful frame, when his voice rose and rose till the largest volume of sound possible for it to produce rolled through the yawning crevices of the logs and out of the open door, and the speaker gave vent to a gasping "ah!" ejected from his mouth the last remnant of moisture it contained, and had recourse to the pail and the gourd. It was with the ease of long practice that he carried the water to his lips, and emptied the gourd without the loss of a single drop.

It was not irreverent,— that long, exhausting torrent of words, and the vigorous spit with which the eloquence concluded. It was a sign of the earnestness of the preacher, and it never failed to attract the best attention of the hearers.

On this "evening," as the preacher proceeded, he grew especially energetic. Without stopping in his remarks, he rolled up the sleeves of his red shirt, and stood with sinewy arms bared for the struggle with his discourse.

"That's powerful convincin'," whispered a good wife to her husband.

A more than ordinarily emphatic spit at the rusty stove was his answer. The preacher's voice was rising again.

It was when it had reached its highest point, and was almost ready for that final "ah" with which exhausted nature for the moment gave up the contest, that the report of a gun brought the congregation to their feet. That "ah" was never uttered. A woman shrieked.

"Mercy on us! Oh, lor! they're shootin'."

There was a rush for the door, and then a recoil.

"Keep away from thar! You'll git shot!" shrieked a mother, clutching a venturesome boy by the arm.

"Hit's Mat Hutsel! He's the fightin'est man I ever seed."

It *was* Mat Hutsel, the savage-looking mountaineer who had declared himself anxious to put a bullet through Dalbert Mozingo's heart. He was over free with his bullets. One of them had nearly gone through the head of Beth Morgan, a young man who had been sitting on the same log by the "church-house" door. Beth belonged to the opposite faction. "That witch gal, Naomi, had spelt him," Mat had sneeringly declared.

It was a pity somebody had not "spelt" (bewitched) Mat himself. Any kind of a spell that could charm away his savagery would have been for the good of the community. Mat had been drinking. From his pocket a bottle had more than once been produced while the preacher was talking.

"Take a drap?" he had said, once, twice, thrice passing the bottle to his neighbours.

Every time he offered it he took a long pull at it himself. The whisky was the regular home article, made among the mountains, in stills that were not open to inspection. It was strong, and Mat had drunk more than a little of it before he came to the "church-house." The last "drap" had passed his lips less than two minutes before the gun shot was heard. The corn whisky had fired his brain. Mat was ready for a quarrel.

And the young man whom he began to taunt about Naomi, speaking the words in a low sneering tone that was yet audible all along the log seat, had taken too many mouthfuls from the same bottle to be quite as cool as he might have been. There was a moment when he answered the taunt, and then there was the ringing shot.

"Stop that! Mat Hutsel, drap that gun!"

The preacher was at the door, the women and children crowding round him or following behind him.

Another shot was the only answer. It came perilously near being fired right into the shrieking crowd.

Back they tumbled, in wild confusion.

"Shet the door! You'll be shot! Come in, Elisha! Come in, you!"

A woman pulled her half-grown boy inside the building, and succeeded in shutting the door. The preacher was yet outside.

"Stop that shootin', I say! Hain't this house a house o' worship? Hit's a sin and" —

But the preacher got no further. The shooting was becoming general. A dozen men were already in the fray. A bullet whizzed past his head and buried itself in the door-post. He put his shoulder to the door and burst it open.

"If they *will* shoot, let 'em," he said. "Thar's lives worth savin', and hit hain't no good throwin' 'em away on them that's too plumb crazy to hear the powerfulest screechin' aimed right at their ears. They-uns has got to fight hit aout."

They *were* fighting it out.

"Oh, lor! Oh, mercy! Beth's down. Mat's done killed him."

There was a heavy fall, and young Beth Morgan lay motionless. Nobody stopped to lift him. His friends were too busy trying to pour hot lead into his opponent, the leader of the attacking party.

Mat Hutsel fought like a fury. His enemies were sheltering themselves behind trees. He advanced a few yards in front of his victim, and stood madly courting attack.

"He's hit! Mat's hit!"

The shout was from the opposite faction.

They were right; but Mat stood his ground, firing savagely at his opponents, and calling on his friends to bestir themselves.

Another shot told, and another.

"His legs is all mashed up!"

A watcher through the great chinks of the "church-house" excitedly explained the situation to those less favourably situated for seeing.

"Oh, lor! Oh, lor! Hit's awful! He's done for, but he's wallerin' on the ground and shootin' still."

"Done for" or not, the hands in savage fury pulled the trigger of the gun till the charge was exhausted. Then the wounded man began crawling away, dragging after him the leg that, shattered in two places, looked as if it would drop off on the road, and forcing the other, from which blood flowed in streams, to do duty for two. With the bullets dropping around him, he crawled painfully, but with amazing swiftness. His goal was a great chestnut tree that stood behind the body of Beth Morgan. Its broad trunk offered inviting shelter. To die in? Not just yet.

With almost incredible endurance, Mat Hutsel dragged himself not only *to* that chestnut, but *up* it, climbing on the side farthest from his enemies. Ten feet from the ground the trunk divided. A broken right leg and wounded left one notwithstanding, Mat climbed that tree to the notch. Then laboriously reloading his gun, he rested it in the crook, and brought his eyes on a level. Below him, only a couple of yards away, lay the body of his victim, Beth Morgan. Mat's face was terrible to look upon.

"Come on!" he muttered through his set teeth.

He was waiting for death—and his enemies.

The latter were a little cautious about "coming on." His friends, too, were harassing them, though they were a little less venturesome than Mat. Shots sounded on all sides. One or two others fell, and crawled away, or were helped away.

"Come on," muttered Mat again.

The blood was trickling from a wound in his forehead, and smearing the white teeth that gleamed like those of a savage animal.

And at last one "came on," watchful, and ready to dodge.

"Take that!"

Mat's gun spoke, and Mat's eyes gleamed. The shot was effective. That it accomplished less than the shooter expected was perhaps owing to the fact that at the moment at which it was fired Frank Sharp appeared in the open, his gun raised and pointed towards the spot where Mat Hutsel's eyes were for the moment visible. His object was to cover the approach of the man who was creeping nearer to the chestnut tree.

A loud oath and another shot was Mat's greeting for the young man. A yell of triumph from the blood-stained lips told of his furious gladness when Frank's arm fell, broken at the elbow. It was a moment of exultation — and doom. In his savage glee Mat drew himself up towards the notch of the tree. Now was his chance to put a bullet through the young man's heart. He forgot that he was exposing himself.

A fierce yell brought a crowd round the bigger crevices of the "church-house" walls. Then a wailing shriek went up.

"Oh, lor! Hit's a si-ight!"

From the crotch of the chestnut a distorted face was seen surmounting a reeling figure. Then the body of Mat Hutsel fell headlong to the ground, dropping upon that of his victim. They lay as if in close embrace,— young Beth Morgan and his murderer.

The sight arrested even the fierce fury of those mountain men. The shooters lowered their guns, and the wounded took advantage of the lull in the storm to creep away. Then the preacher opened the door of the "church-house" and stepped out among the crowd.

With burning, eager words he demanded a cessation of hostilities. And the leaders, such of them as were left, moved sullenly off, and the wild, short fight was over. But the memory of it would linger, and men would be careful how they went out after nightfall, for the love of vengeance is a quality that the mountaineer has inherited from his forefathers.

Dalbert Mozingo stood by the door of the mill. He had heard the shots, and had gone a few steps down the valley. The shots were too frequent to suggest a lucky encounter with game. A faint sound of shouting had once or twice come to his ears.

The mill was a mile and a half from the "church-house," with wooded hills between. The sounds came to the young man's ears broken and subdued. He was wondering a little uneasily what had happened, when Lem Sutton suddenly stood by his side. The appearance was sudden, for he had not seen the lad approaching.

"Say, Dal!"

The boy came close to the young man, and fixed a pair of eager, startled eyes on his face.

"Well!" responded Dalbert, slowly.

"You-uns better go in, and shet yer door, and bar hit. Thar's shooting up at the church-house."

"Shooting!" said Dalbert, in quick alarm. "What do they want to shoot for? What's the row about?"

"You," replied the boy, significantly, "and *her*."

He pointed towards the rock round which a girl's figure was seen approaching.

"What's that you're saying about me?"

The soft, half lazy sounds had a laugh in them. Naomi had seen the pointed finger, and come up swiftly.

"What's that you're saying?"

"They're shootin'," the boy stammered out, embarrassed by the eyes that were looking at him with the suspicion of a laugh in them.

"Shooting? More fools they. What about?"

The tone was easy, but the girl's eyes were keen. Lem fancied they could see through him.

"Hi-im — and you."

He turned, as if he would have darted away; but before one foot could be put ahead of the other Naomi's hand was on his shoulder. She deftly turned him round, and looked into his eyes.

"Now, then, aout with it," she said. "What's the shooting about? Who's shooting?"

"Mat Hutsel, and Frank Sharp, and Beth Morgan,— at least, Beth *was* in hit. He hain't now. He's dead."

"Dead!"

Brother and sister spoke together. A horror that was beyond words was on Dalbert's face.

"Yes. Hit was in the preachin'. Mat shot him. Mat's legs was all mashed; but he climb into that thar chestnut forenenst the church-house, that un with a divided trunk, and he stuck his gun through the notch and shot. He was a-shootin' when I come to tell ye. I seed his eyes a-peerin' through that thar openin' jist afore I started."

Dalbert was too much engrossed with the terribleness of the situation to appreciate the self-denial that had sent young Lem away from the fight in the very height of the excitement. Beth Morgan was dead, and the quarrel had been about him — Dalbert Mozingo — and his sister. For the moment he was stunned.

"Where are you going, Naomi?"

The girl was already many steps away. He had not seen her start.

"To stop the shooting," she said, the red colour sweeping in waves across her face. "Keep away! Don't hinder me!"

This as he sprang forward, and laid his hand on her arm.

"You shall not go," he said emphatically. "I'm going myself."

She turned upon him.

"Dalbert Mozingo," she retorted, "ain't you got any sense? Do you think it will make them more peaceable to see *you?*"

"Perhaps not." His tone was bitter. "I make no claim to popularity, but they can at least shoot me instead of one another. It might be more just."

"Don't be a fool," she said, impatiently breaking away from him. "If you come, you will put my life in danger, and do no good anyway."

She was speeding over the ground in the direction of the log church as she spoke, the angry colour still flaring across her face.

Dalbert looked after her, and hesitated.

"I might as well be shot as have everlastingly to play the part of a coward," he said.

Her answer was a laugh.

"There's lots of courage in doing a foolish thing, ain't there?" she called back.

"You better do as she says. They-uns are powerful mad."

Even at that moment Dalbert could not fail to see something of the pride that shone in the boy's eyes. The feeling of comradeship was strong in the heart of Lem Sutton. For the time he was one with the mill owner. Dalbert did not guess that the small lad had long ago accepted him as an object of worship, and that this moment, when he could feel that he was essential to the safety of his hero, was one of the proudest in his short life.

"You go in the house, and shet the door. I'll tell ye if any of they-uns comes," he said.

"You shut your mouth," said Dalbert, curtly, but not unkindly.

The boy obeyed, and they watched together.

Naomi Mozingo had not gone half-way to the church when she met Frank Sharp. The young man's face was white.

"Go back!" he said peremptorily. "Thar's no more preachin' this evenin'."

"Preaching!" she said scornfully. "Who's going to preach to murderers?"

"I thought you didn't know," he said.

"I do. How dare you mix yourself — and me — in such a fray?"

Her eyes were darting dangerous gleams at him. They wounded as effectually as the bullet that was yet in his arm. His face flushed.

"I went to he'p my friends — and yours," he said.

"My friends!" she retorted. "And they show their friendship by fighting like wild beasts about me. Truly they are friends worth having. Shooting is the work of cowards, Frank Sharp, and I acknowledge no coward as friend."

She would have passed him, but he stretched out the uninjured hand and clutched her sleeve.

"What are you goin' to du?" he asked.

"Stop the rest of the fools," she said.

"You needn't. They're all gone — or dead."

He loosened his hold, swaying as if he would have fallen. She turned then.

"Go on to the house," she said, in an altered tone. "Dal will do what he can for you till the doctor comes."

"I won't."

He staggered to the roadside, and dropped exhausted on the grass. Scarcely a trace of colour was left in his face, but there was a savage gleam in his eyes.

The girl came and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Let me see the wound," she said. "That bleeding must be stopped."

And in spite of his protestations she did what she could to stop it, and then went back with him to the house.

She sent Lem Sutton for the doctor. It was long before he came.

"Another bullet to look after?" he asked. "Well, you-all that have got off with nothin' worse 'n wounds may think yourselves in luck. You've come aout of hit better than Beth Morgan, and Mat Hutsel, and Jim Somers."

It was the first intimation that any besides Mat and Beth had paid the full penalty. Dalbert Mozingo's face grew more drawn as he listened to the doctor's words.

"I didn't know it was Jim too," he said hoarsely.

"Why, man, don't take hit so-o," said the doctor, heartily. "Hit hain't your doin'. If they want to shoot, they'll always find something to shoot about."

But Dal was not comforted.

CHAPTER IV

THE accustomed quiet of the mountains was broken. The very stream ranted of strife. With loud insistency Cedar Fork bawled and threatened, its every tone a menace. Storm after storm, short and furious, had swept over Cedar Fork valley, setting the air ablaze with lightning, and pouring into the creek a wild rush of water that taught Cedar Fork its power. There was strife in the air, and strife in the water, and strife in the bearing of the men and women whose feet trod valley and mountain sides. Discontent had been growing for weeks. The crop was ripe now.

Mrs. Sutton, sitting, glowering over the embers on her hearth, was not the only one who laid at the door of Dalbert Mozingo the unfortunate fact that the graveyard had grown richer since the tree-buds burst their sheaths. It was hardly fair that the mill owner should be held responsible for the breaking loose of passions always too near the surface for safety; but inasmuch as there would have been no shooting if there had been no ill-feeling, and there would presumably have been no ill-feeling if there had been no mill, the inhabitants of Cedar Fork valley, taking the shortest road to a conclusion, laid to the charge of the mill owner the disasters that had attended the shooting on the previous Sunday.

Worse still in its effects on the situation, Dalbert Mozingo was inclined to follow the line of reasoning adopted by the mountain folk, and to arrive at a conclusion not far removed from theirs. Not so, the mill owner's sister. She noted the stern sadness of her brother's face with growing disapprobation.

"You're thinking yourself a murderer now, I suppose, because a set of crazy mountain men see fit to call you so," she said, with lively scorn in her tone.

"If I'd never come here, Beth Morgan and the rest would be alive to-day," he said, his voice hoarse with the pain of putting the horror into words.

"Perha-aps," she said, with a long, sarcastic drawl. "They *mi-ight* be alive, and they mi-ight not. It takes a little less than nothing to set the-em fighting."

Then, as she looked into his face, her tone changed. "Dal, you're a real fool," she said; but she said it softly. "If all the men in Cedar Fork valley — and aout of it — choose to break one another's heads, or shoot one another dead, for love or hate of me, is it ary fault of mine? Where there's gunpowder there 'll be a burst up sooner or later. What does it matter who is the match?"

"What does it matter?" he repeated, pain and regret struggling together in his voice. "Nothing, perhaps, in the result, but everything to the match. If I could give back life to Beth Morgan or Jim Somers, I would change places with either one of them to-day."

"Hm! The world would be a sight richer for the exchange, wouldn't it?" she said.

The mill-wheel was turning to-day as briskly as ever, — more briskly, perchance, since the stream was full. The mill owner's sister had promptly silenced all talk of stopping the work.

"Since my coming here has done so much harm, I had better pull down the mill and be gone," Dalbert had said on the Sunday evening when the valley grew still as a battlefield after a conflict.

"How are you aimin' to pay the men?" asked his sister quietly.

Dalbert was silent. In truth, he could not pay them unless he pushed the work further. The mill was pay-

ing expenses and giving a fair profit. In time he would clear himself of the difficulty into which his partner's sudden flight had dragged him. But not yet.

So the mill went sawing on, and upon the mountain the sound of the axe was heard as usual on the Monday following the shooting fray. A few places were conspicuously vacant. They did not all belong to dead men. There were those who had been active in the shooting who deemed that Cedar Fork was not a desirable place of residence in the immediate future. Not that any greatly feared the law. Cedar Fork was in the heart of the mountains, and Cedar Fork was a law unto itself. The next time the sheriff had occasion to pass through the gap that gave easiest access to the region he took pains to explain that he had no evidence against any man in the neighbourhood, and that his intentions were strictly friendly.

He was speaking the literal truth. It behooved a sheriff of those days to be friendly in the Cedar Fork valley. Why should he be any other? There were a hundred sheltering rocks from behind which a bullet could pop to the certain undoing of an officer foolish enough to be unfriendly with an impregnable mountain district.

No, it was not the law they feared. But after that day there were men who went about with pistols slung around their waists, and one or two of the shooters, having a premonition of danger, took their guns and went out hunting,—away from the seat of strife.

And outwardly the valley grew quiet, though the stream menaced, and dark faces scowled, and Mrs. Sutton talked loudly of the disasters that had come to the neighbourhood in the wake of the mill, and dubbed Dalbert Mozingo the murderer of "her man and her young-un."

For little Rhody lay by her father's side in the dismal

burying-ground on a hill-top denuded of trees. The sloping shelter of rough boards placed a few feet above those two desolate graves was not in sight from Mrs. Sutton's window, nevertheless, it afforded her satisfaction to sit there, and point a vindictive finger in that direction, while she cursed the "foreigner who had come to a valley where nary one wanted him, and nary one was the better for his comin'."

Lem turned up every day at the mill. Since he had brought the news of the shooting he had felt nearer to his hero. The boy kept his eyes and ears open. That was how it happened that he knew a little more about the sayings and doings of the men than they suspected. On one occasion he repeated what he heard to Dalbert, but the look of sadness on the young man's face was not the expression he had desired to call up. All the rest of that day the mill owner moved about under an added gloom, doing the work of two men in a frantic effort to make up by personal exertion for that which was lacking, and feeling all the time a sense of guilt that was more wearing than the labour. Lem decided that he had made a mistake. After that he carried his news to Naomi. She only laughed.

"Let them talk," she said. "What finds its way aout of their mouths leaves so much the less in their hearts. The more they say, the better. It lets off some of their spite."

But she took note of all Lem told her, and was watchful.

It was more than a week after Dalbert had undertaken personally to fill the vacant places at the mill that a stranger rode into the valley. The sky had grown tranquil again, and Cedar Fork only occasionally growled out a note of warning. The stranger seemed struck with the beauty of the scene.

"Where's the mill?" he asked of a man who was coming towards him.

"Yander,— more's the pity!"

"Pity, eh?" said the stranger, in an undertone. "Then you're no worker at the saws."

He was wrong. It was because he *was* a worker that the mountaineer was aggrieved. He had come down from his home, miles away in the mountains, to help in the mill. He was one of those for whom Naomi provided in the boarding-house, and whom Lem watched closely. He pointed surlily down the stream as he spoke.

"Get along 'yander,' then," said the stranger, shaking the bridle on his horse's neck.

The saws had stopped their relentless tearing through the hearts of trees, and were resting for the night. Working hours were over.

Once again the stranger stopped his horse to look around him.

"A fine prospect for a mill owner," he said admiringly.

In the natural order of things Dalbert Mozingo should have been pleased to welcome his visitor. He brought money. And money was sorely needed at the mill. The mill owner was not glad to see him, however— there. His coming brought with it perplexity, and possible danger.

His stay in the valley was short. He left early in the morning, riding away beneath the splendid forest trees, the girth of which more than once called forth an expression of admiration.

"You've got some first-class timber here," he said, coming to a stand before a chestnut that measured ten feet through. "They're well pleased with it up yonder."

He had had good opportunity to judge. For the past month the greater part of all that the mill turned out had gone into his hands.

The mill owner rode far enough with his visitor to put him in the way of crossing the mountain by a short cut. He was nearing home again when a mountaineer

brought his horse alongside, the two finding barely enough room to ride down the mountain path.

"Was that man James Low?"

The mill owner looked at the questioner steadily for a moment before he answered, "Yes."

"Him the stuff from our country's been goin' aout to since Tuesday was a month?"

"Yes."

The answer was short and not conciliatory. Dalbert Mozingo understood the purport of the questions.

"Did he come this way to pay for hit?"

The mill owner reined in his horse, and turned full on the questioner.

"What he came here for is my business, not yours," he said. "Look here, John Sharp. Every cent I owe you I'm going to pay. But I can't pay to-day, and I ain't going to be questioned about my business, or about the business of ary man that comes to my house."

"*Your* business, is hit?" said the man, a savage intonation in his voice. "And hit hain't mine? You hain't cut none o' the trees that went to that thar Jim Low off 'n my land, have ye? And ye don't owe me a smart sight on to a hundred dollars? Hit hain't my business, hain't hit?"

He turned his horse up a steep slope, and disappeared.

"There's going to be trouble with them," muttered Dalbert. "I wish James Low had made an appointment beforehand. I would rather have met him anywhere than here."

For, of the five hundred dollars that had come into the mill owner's hands that day, not a cent could be spared for the mountain men. Dalbert felt that his honour was at stake. Twelve months before he had allowed a friend to mortgage his farm to help him put machinery in the mill. That five hundred dollars was needed to save the farm.

"Well?"

Naomi's smile was half encouraging, half questioning. She had waylaid her brother before he could reach the house. Her hand gently caressed his horse's nose, while she looked into the rider's eyes.

"John Sharp was at me."

"Ah! Thought he'd be in ti-ime. Well, the rest are ready to follow suit."

"How do you know?"

She laughed.

"Haven't I the best little spy in Kentucky to keep me informed?" she asked lightly. "Trust Lem Sutton for letting anything go beside hi-im."

"What are they going to do?"

"Force you to pay the money."

She was watching the effect of her words. It was very apparent. The mill owner drew himself up proudly.

"They've made a little mistake," he said. "I'm sorry, but nary cent of it can come to them."

Her face grew grave for a moment. Then she laughed.

"Don't tell them that," she said.

"Why not?"

"For the good of — we-el, the money."

"Do you think they'll get it away from me?"

"No," she said, and the laughter broke again about the corners of her eyes, though her lips were grave.

That night Frank Sharp entered unannounced. Naomi had seen little of him since she helped tie up the wounded arm. He had apparently not quite forgiven her for her attitude on that occasion. His present visit was to her brother.

"Thar's tol'rable talkin' goin' on," he said, providing himself with a chair and placing it conveniently near that of the mill owner.

"Is that anything new?" asked Dalbert.

"No — hit hain't."

The young man sat down deliberately.

"They're sayin' hit was James Low what come here last night."

"They might be further from the truth," replied Dalbert.

"And they're sayin' he's done paid ye for the logs we-uns have been snakin' down the mountain."

"Suppose he has?" said Dalbert slowly, looking the young man full in the face.

"Hit hain't much account to me," was the quick answer. "I reckon I can du without *my* money. But thar's them that won't."

"Your father among the number?"

"Yes."

The tone was a little defiant.

"I met John Sharp this morning," said the mill owner. "I told him, as I tell you, that if you have patience, not a man of you shall lose a cent."

"*I* hain't afraid of losin'," said Frank quietly. "*I* hain't aimin' at gittin' money aout'n ye. What I come to tell ye was that you'd better look aout. The losin' hain't a goin' to be all on one side."

"What do you mean?"

Dalbert had risen from his chair.

"See here, Dal! Are you goin' to keep that money in the house?"

"No."

"I reckoned so," said the young man. "Hit hain't Dal Mozingo that would keep ary cent for himself when he owed hit to others. But if you hain't goin' to keep hit, you're goin' to pay hit to somebody. How much of hit's comin' to we-uns?"

"That's my business."

"Hit hain't mine," was the answer. "I hain't lookin' for none of hit. But some is."

"They'll not get it — aout of this."

Frank Sharp rose, and faced the mill owner.

"Look here, Dal!" he said earnestly. "Hit won't du for you to tell that to ary man but me. Hit hain't safe."

"You asked," returned Dalbert shortly.

"And you'd give the same answer to the next that asked?"

"I generally speak the truth," said the mill owner.

"Well, don't speak hit jist now," replied the other. "Thar's mischief among the men. They say that money's theirn, and if you rob 'em of hit, thar hain't no harm in turnin' round and takin' hit."

"They'd better try," replied Dalbert, the angry blood mounting to his forehead, though his voice was cold and calm.

"That's what they're goin' to du."

"When?"

The short, pertinent question rang through the room in a girl's voice. Frank Sharp turned hastily. Naomi stood within the door, her dark eyes looking deeper than usual as she fixed them on the visitor's face.

"That's jist what I come to tell ye," said the young man eagerly.

The sight of the girl had scattered his resentment to the winds. He was her humble servant as soon as those eyes met his. She smiled upon him.

"I thought there was something afoot, and I thought I should soon hear of it," she said.

"They're goin' to wait till Saturday if you-uns don't take no steps to send that money away. But if you-uns goes outer this valley, they-uns 'll stop ye," explained the young man.

"They wi-ill?"

The drawl upon the last word gave it a tinge of satire. The young man looked at her disapprovingly.

"Hit hain't no joke," he said. "They're dead in earnest. Some on 'em was for comin' and makin' Dal pay up to-night; but thar's lots on 'em hain't willin' to go so fur. They'd stand by ye if the rest warn't so plumb set."

"How many are the rest?" she asked, her voice grave again.

"More 'n half the men," he said. "Hit's luekin' serious, Naomi."

"What 'll they do if Dal chooses to ride away to-morrow?" she asked.

"Go atter him, and stop him."

"Where?"

"I don't know. I guess" —

He got no further. The girl's hand was laid on his arm. His eyes sought and then followed hers until they came to the mill owner's face. It was hard and cold, but the eyes shone with a light that was not pleasant to see.

"The men are crazy," said Naomi. "They'll not get the better of Dal, and they'll never be the worse for him if they don't spoil everything by their foolish interfering. It's stifling in here," she added. "It's a right smart hotter to-day than it's been any day this spring. Come outside, Frank."

Frank Sharp was not the only man who sought the mill owner's house that evening. But Frank Sharp was the only man who saw the mill owner.

More than one of the most determined among the workers essayed to have a talk with Dalbert, and failed. The object of each was the same,— to secure all, or part of the money coming to him. It was quite late that night before Naomi Mozingo decided that it was cool enough to retire indoors. She had long ago sent Frank Sharp away; but she had had quite an earnest little talk with him first, and when they parted, her hand rested

somewhat longer than usual in the uninjured member that Frank extended to clasp it.

Just how each and all of these would-be callers were prevented from entering the house, possibly only Naomi knew. Some went away swearing, and some laughing; but they all went away, and they all threatened that "they'd have hit aout with Dal in the mornin', whatever Naomi might say."

"We-ell, the sooner that money reaches its destination, the better."

Naomi had rather carefully fastened the doors and drawn down the curtains before she spoke. It was an hour when the mountain side was usually asleep, but she was disposed to run no risks.

"I'm going with it to-morrow," said Dal.

"Where to?"

"Jellico. I can send it by mail from there."

"And what if they stop you?"

His eyes significantly sought a pistol with which his fingers were toying. He had been cleaning and loading it.

The girl's gaze rested on it too.

"If you have to use that, Dal, promise me it shall not be until the last moment," she said.

He looked at her in some surprise. Fear was not a prominent characteristic of Naomi Mozingo.

"I would not use it at all," he said, "if the interest of another were not at stake. That five hundred dollars *must* be got to Rogers. The men can be paid later. It's now or never with him."

"Yes — it must go to him," she said thoughtfully. Then, after a moment's silence: "Well, fight like a fury if you like, but don't bring that thing aout till you can't push on a step further. I reckon it's getting powerful late," she added. "We'd better be going to bed. What time are you aimin' to start in the morning?"

"Early," he said. "I'd go to-night, but I'll not let them say I sneaked off in the dark for fear of any man."

"It's not a handful of mountain men that will ever have the chance to boast that they got Dalbert Mozingo aout of his bed before his usual hour," replied the girl, scornfully. "There 'll be a sight of time to go to Jellico between breakfast and sundown. Let the men get to their work first. Then you can ride off quietly. They'll not need to be told that you are going aout of the valley."

Dalbert Mozingo did not know — how should he? — that John Sharp, the father of his evening visitor, had taken steps to assure himself that none went out of the mill owner's house between evening and day dawn without his knowledge. What Naomi knew she did not tell.

"There, go to bed! It's getting powerful late," she said, breaking in on the young man's meditations some thirty minutes later.

A directed letter lay by his side. Naomi lifted it, and weighed it for a moment in her hand.

"You'll not want the money till you get to Jellico," she said. "Better not put it in here — or in your purse either. I'll do it up in a separate packet for you. Then, if there should be any fighting," —

"It's safe enough where it is," he answered wearily.

"Perhaps. But I shall feel easier when you're gone if I know I tied it up myself. I'll get it all ready for the morning."

He looked at her sharply.

"Do you think I'm not capable of taking care of it to-night?" he asked.

"Do I think you go off at less than nothing, like a double charge of gunpowder?" she retorted. "You can keep the package where you like. But it will be safer to make a package than to carry the money loose in your purse. It would not so easily be found. For the rest, you can please yourself."

She held out her hand for the money, and he gave it to her.

"Now go to bed," she said.

But she was not a bit surprised, when the package was made up, to find him walking backwards and forwards across his room. She came inside, and laid a small parcel on the table that served as washstand.

"There's your package," she said. "And you need not put a pistol beside it. I'm not looking for a raid on the house to-night."

He did not smile. He was thinking of the morrow, and of the possibility that the honourable keeping of an engagement that had never looked more binding than it did to-night, would lead to difficulties more serious than any he had yet encountered. It was not fear that kept Dalbert Mozingo wakeful that night; or, rather, it *was* the fear of shedding blood. The danger to himself was a secondary consideration.

He did not think he slept; and yet his ear must have been less alert than usual that it did not hear a light footstep pass his door, nor the click of the outside latch. Perhaps the step was unusually noiseless, and the touch upon the door-handle cautious. Perhaps he had grown drowsy, for it was at that earliest hour of dawn — before the birds have fairly awakened — when the weariness of a long night's waking has not yet been overcome by the stimulating light of day.

It was earlier than usual when Dalbert Mozingo came out into the sunlight, his face showing signs of his night's unrest. Naomi was in the kitchen. She called to him as he passed.

"I fed Charley and Duke, and turned them aout for a run," she said. "You won't want Charley till after breakfast. There 'll be less suspicion if both horses are running loose."

She had come to the door, and the last words were spoken in a low tone.

"I don't care what they suspect," said her brother, impatiently. "It will not remain suspicion long."

"Don't you?" she answered. "There *is* such a thing as prudence."

She turned away, and went into the dining-room.

The men were moving betimes. They had failed to see the mill owner over night. There were some who promised themselves better success this morning. Not all those who strolled towards the dining-hall while the sun was a comparatively new arrival were reckoned among Naomi's regular boarders. It was not breakfast that possessed the chief drawing power this morning.

Naomi was to all appearance hospitably inclined. She came to the door, and greeted the intruders.

"Come in, all of you that are hungry," she called. "We can find room for a tolerable few over and above them that eat here reg'lar."

"Whar's Dal?" asked more than one gruff voice.

"Dal? In the house, I guess. He'll be along for breakfast."

Possibly none but Naomi knew just the difficulties she had surmounted in persuading her brother to put off the encounter until after the early meal.

"What's the use of delay?" he asked irritably. "It has got to come to a fight between us; and the sooner, the better."

"It shall not come before breakfast if I can prevent it," replied his sister; and it did not.

"Come right in," she called peremptorily, standing in the doorway, a presence that not even a troop of angry mountaineers could overlook, and that few of them could disregard. "Don't tell me you've eat already. Nary one of you will be the worse for an extra snack, seeing you all turned aout so early."

They looked at her sullenly and sheepishly, and then the majority of them sauntered into the dining-hall.

When Dalbert came in at the rear door there was a sudden halt in the business of finding seats. Voices grew loud, and more than one man advanced towards the mill owner.

Dalbert Mozingo looked ready to meet the attack. His face was paler than usual, but it would have taken not a little self-complacency for any there to imagine that he had inspired the mill owner with fear. He began to speak, raising his voice to make it heard above the others; but Naomi rapped sharply on the table.

"I reckon I'm mistress he-ere," she said, slowly and distinctly, "and I'll not have eating and talking going on together. Eat your victuals, and stop your questions. When you're through with eating, there 'll be time enough to quarrel, and you may do as much of it as you've a mind to. Sit right down, every man of you, for there's nary one in these mountains shall keep my breakfast waiting."

They obeyed her, and she rewarded them with a breakfast a little more liberal than that which was every morning set upon her table. The hands of the clock pointed to seven before the meal was over. Naomi glanced significantly towards them.

"Go and ring the bell, Mance," she ordered. "Eating is good enough in its place, but it don't pay after seven by the clock."

"Hit hain't no use ringin' the bell. We-all have got to have a word with Dal," said one of the visitors emphatically, his tall, powerful figure rising with threatening haste from the table.

"Say away. I'm ready to hear," replied the mill owner.

"Let them squabble as long as they like," whispered Naomi, as she passed her brother. "They 'll not try violence here. There's too many on your side. The danger's when you get well aout of the valley. I know

that for a certainty. Put it off as long as possible. I have a reason for wishing it."

She passed him, and went out, leaving Texas to clear the table. They were all too much engrossed in the dispute that immediately began to notice that she went round to the back of the dwelling, and was presently climbing a narrow path leading into the recesses of the mountain. While yet the argument waxed hot within the dining-hall, and Dalbert sought by patience and firmness to convince the men that, while he was unable to meet their demands, his intentions towards them were honest, the girl, hot and breathless, sprang into a sheltered hollow of the hills, where two horses were quietly feeding.

"Here you are, my beauties!" she said softly. "Gently, Duke, gently!"

This to the foremost animal, that came trotting towards her, his neck outstretched and his ears working excitedly.

It was little wonder the girl knew just where to seek the horses. She herself had led them hither not many hours before. She went confidently to an overhanging rock, and, stooping down, drew out saddle and bridle. Then, putting her hand on the neck of the nearer horse, she spoke to him softly.

"Come, Duke, we have work before us," she said. "No, Charley," as the other came jealously up, "you must stay here. Your master will want you later."

It took but a few moments to saddle the horse, then for an instant the girl's eyes looked into his.

"Now put your best foot foremost," she said. "You're as good as a goat for scrambling and climbing. To-day you must aout-do yourself. Swift and sure, my beauty. A false step may do more than break your own pretty neck."

She guided him out from between the rocks, sprang

on his back, and a minute later was climbing where neither roadway nor bridle-path told of the possibility of ascending.

Great rocks broke in sheer, wall-like precipices down towards the valley. Skirting around them, the girl and the horse gradually wound their way up. The animal deserved the praise she had given him. He clung to the rocky ledges as sure-footed as a mountain goat. Now and then the voice of his mistress urged him on.

It was a rough road and a short one. Not more than twenty minutes from the time the girl's foot pressed the stirrup the daring little horse scrambled up a break-neck slope, and placed his hoofs on the sod above.

"Well done, Duke! We're on top now."

The girl lifted her head, and drew a deep breath of relief. A long, almost level stretch of mountain summit was before her.

"Now, my pretty, do your best," she said. "It ain't going to take yo-ou long to cover four miles of this."

She bent over the horse, speaking the words almost into his ear, her hand at the same moment giving the glossy neck a gentle slap. The animal started, tossed his head, and was away, his feet flying over the turf.

"Gently, Duke! Look aout for rocks," said Naomi.

Once, as they drew out into an open space where the valley she had left was in full view below her, the girl turned and looked down. A peculiar smile was on her lips.

"I wonder how soon they'll be fighting down there for—nothing," she said, in her low, musical drawl.

Then she laughed, and her face clouded.

"They might fight it aout as long as they'd a mind to, but there's Dal," she said, and stopped.

The next moment Duke felt an impatient tap on his neck.

"Faster!" said his mistress imperiously; and a spurt from the willing horse answered touch and voice.

Naomi drew rein where a bridle-path, steep and rocky, showed a way down into the valley on the other side of the mountain.

"Now gently! Slow and sure," she said, and gave all her attention to the descent, that presently brought her into a tiny hamlet lying tucked in between the hills.

"Howdy," said Naomi, in a matter-of-fact tone, as she entered the building that served as post-office and village store.

She noted the mail carrier waiting for his bag.

"I thought I should be just in time," she said, drawing a bulky letter from her pocket. "I calculated the mail would be about sta-arting."

"It's powerful lucky you warn't too late," said the postmistress, handling the letter curiously, and then affixing the official stamp. "I was jist gittin' 'em ready to go. Want ary thing to-day?"

"No, get your mail off first. I don't recollect anything I want," said Naomi. "I'll just wait and think."

And she did wait, while the bag was slowly locked and handed to the carrier. Then, when she had seen him mount his horse and ride splashing along the bed of the brook that answered for a main road through the hamlet, she suddenly decided that she was in need of no article from the store to-day.

"I'll be getting back," she said. "There's a sight to be done with so many men about."

"Had some trouble up your way, hain't ye?" asked the postmistress, curiously.

Naomi looked at her for a moment, and then laughed.

"Depends on what you call trouble," she said. "If men want to shoot, it's powerful unreasonable to say they sha'n't. If they're satisfied I don't see who has a right to grumble."

Then she mounted and was gone, the loose stones flying from beneath Duke's feet.

"Now for the other half of the performance," she whispered, while a light shone in her eyes, and died out again for the fear that took its place. Naomi was thinking of her brother.

Dalbert himself was at the moment riding along a mountain road easy and safe compared with that by which Naomi had come. The packet his sister had tied so carefully the night before was hidden away in an inner pocket. He was later than he had expected to be, yet he was riding slowly.

If the men whose angry demands for money had delayed him long had hoped to play upon the fears of the mill owner, they had found themselves mistaken. Dalbert's lips were pressed together, and there was as much anger as determination in his bearing. The hand that held the reins held them firmly, and checked rather than hastened the speed of the animal.

Dalbert was fully alive to the danger of being waylaid, but, whatever feelings were uppermost at the moment, personal fear was not among them. His energies were concentrated upon the carrying out of his purpose. That five hundred dollars must reach Jellico before night,— *should* reach Jellico, if he fought every inch of the ground between. The mountain town was a central point for the country round. From it his letter would safely reach its destination. But the young man did not delude himself into the belief that the ride to Jellico would be of an uneventful nature. The threats, half-veiled, with which the men had met his refusal to devote a large part of the money he had received to the payment of their wages, had been very clearly understood. When the arguments, which had been of the nature of demands, had ended in the sudden withdrawal of the men to their work, he had realized that the cessation of hostilities was to be attributed to the presence of wiser heads among them, of men who

saw the inadvisability of pushing things to extremities, and who had a following quite as large as that of the malcontents. The dispute was ended for the moment; but the strongest argument — the resort to force — was yet to come. Frank Sharp had intimated to Naomi that the policy of the more extreme section was to attempt violence only at such time as they could be sure of coming upon the mill owner when unsupported by his friends, and Frank Sharp knew. His father was among the dissatisfied.

"They will hardly venture to make it a case of highway robbery," thought Dalbert; "and if they do try it" —

A hard smile played for a moment about his lips. It went as quickly as it came. Where was the room even for the satisfaction of anger in a question that presented two wrong sides and not a right? If he had to fight, it would be in the interest of a man who had a perfect right to the money. Ay, but it would be against men who had an equal right. Why should they not insist on payment, and that at once? Why should they let money that they had earned go out of their reach, while they waited for that which, being in the future, might never come? Supposing they did waylay him, who would be the most guilty of robbery,— the man who was carrying off the proceeds of other men's labour or those who in ignorant rage took that which ought to have been their own? He drew himself up in self-scorn.

"It's a nice distinction by which means I shall prove myself the greater defrauder," he mused; "and yet Will Rogers would be the biggest loser,— and he shall have the money, come what may."

What might come did come, and that before long. The mill owner was nearing a point at which the road approached the stream, widening out towards a grassy stretch, laurel-edged, where the rocky bank dipped

sharply down to the water. At this spot two or three mountain paths converged. It was a convenient place for rendezvous, and as he reached the trees and came in sight of it, Dalbert was not surprised to see a group of horsemen there before him.

"They have lost no time," he muttered, his lips falling again into a cold smile.

He rode forward.

"How now?" he asked peremptorily. "Why have you left your work?"

His words were addressed to men in his own employ. There were others there who, like Frank Sharp's father, were not workers at the mill or the chopping, but to whom he was in debt for timber cut on their land. Not a man in the group but had a right to lay his hand on the mill owner's bridle, and demand payment of his claim.

"*You* know what we-uns have come for."

The speaker was John Sharp. He wheeled his horse across the road in front of the mill owner.

"Do I?" The words rang out loud and clear, with no trace of anxiety in the voice. "I know what your action looks like; but I'm slow to believe that the men of Cedar Fork have descended to highway robbery."

"Robbery do you-uns call hit?" demanded a workman. "Thar hain't no robbery abaout hit. Hain't a man a ri-ight to his own? That money you've got in your pocket's ourn. We-all have worked for hit fair and honest. If thar's any thievin', hits them that robs honest workin' men that's the thieves."

"I have told you before that you're not going to lose a cent if you have patience," said Dalbert sharply. "What more can I say? This money belongs to another. If it were not so, you should not have to ask twice. As it stands, I could not give the money to you and remain an honest man."

"I've never heared that a man could remain anything but what he was," sneered John Sharp. "You hain't a-goin' to remain an honest man till you're an honest man to begin with. Thar hain't no honesty in takin' what belongs to we-uns clar outer the valley. I say hit hain't no stealin' to stop that sort of honesty."

"That's so, John," broke in another. "Stealin's takin' what don't belong to you. Hain't that so? And don't the money Dal's got in his pocket belong to we-all? Then hit hain't no stealin' to take hit, is hit?"

There was a general murmur of assent, broken in upon by the voice of the mill owner.

"*You* may think you have a claim on this money," he said, "but the law acknowledges no man's right to lay violent hands on what is in the possession of another, however much he may think himself aggrieved."

"The law!" interrupted a strong, derisive voice. "Thar's law in Cedar Fork, but hit hain't the fool law of the courts; and as for possession, we can soon put *hit* on the right side."

There was a loud laugh at the sally.

"Hit's this way, Dal," said a great, rough-visaged mountain man, pushing his horse to the mill owner's side. "We-all have tried fair words, and come off the losers every time. We hain't aimin' to try no sort of words any longer. That money's ourn. We-all are goin' to take hit. Hain't that so?"

He turned to the others as he spoke.

"That's abaout hit," came the answer from many voices.

"Not so fast," said Dalbert, coolly pointing his pistol at the speaker. "Stir a finger, and you are a dead man."

But while he spoke, he saw the glitter of half a dozen pistols, and more than one gun was made to cover him effectually

"Don't be a fool, Dal! You don't stand a mite of chance," said a mountaineer, with gruff good-nature. "We-all don't want to hurt you, but you've got to give up that money."

The mill owner turned his face towards the speaker. It was white and hard.

"When Dalbert Mozingo gives you that money to save himself, call him a coward!" he said, in a voice that rang across the mountain road and out upon the stretch of hillside above.

The sound of his words had not died away before it was followed by a sharp report. The bullet flew wide. Perhaps it was intended that it should.

Dalbert looked towards the spot from which it came. His own weapon was raised, and his finger on the trigger. The moment for which he had prepared himself had come,—the moment when it was necessary to shoot, and to shoot to kill.

Not quite. Before that answering pressure which would turn the argument into a deadly conflict was made, there came a second report from far above the heads of any of the group. It had the effect of diverting the attention of the combatants, and, once alive to outside influences, every man heard the sound of hoofs coming on at a mad gallop. A minute later every man had the chance to hear a girl's voice, a well-managed, far-reaching voice, that spoke to be heard.

"Are you fools — to fight for nothing?"

She came in sight almost as the words reached their ears, her horse tearing down a narrow path to the highway.

"You here, Naomi? This is no place for you," cried Dalbert.

She rode straight through the group to his side, none attempting to stop her.

"Why should I not be here?" she asked, in a tone that could be heard by all.

It was not Dalbert who answered.

"You'd better go back, Naomi. We've got a little account to settle with Dal, and we're goin' to settle hit."

Naomi turned on the speaker.

"Settle away," she said sharply. "I'll stay to see fair play."

"Naomi, this is folly. You *must* go. I will not have you here. What good can you do? Don't you see that you are hampering me?"

Dalbert spoke in a low, irritated voice. She smiled, her face close to his.

"I know what I'm about — better than you do," she said.

Then she turned to the men.

"Come, say on," she invited. "I'm not here to spoil sport."

"No, and you hain't goin' to spoil hit."

It was John Sharp who spoke. He took care not to meet her eye.

"Come on," he added, turning to the others. "We-all cain't wait here all day. We're goin' to take what's ourn, and that's all thar is abaout hit."

They began to close in. Naomi watched them quietly, keeping close to her brother's side.

"I shall be sorry to be the first to shoot," said Dalbert. "But unless you make a way for my sister and myself to pass, I shall be bound to consider it a case of assault with intent to rob. I warn you I shall consider myself justified in using this."

The pistol was again in evidence. So were those of the other men.

Suddenly Dalbert felt the pistol snatched from his grasp, and was hardly in time to see it hurled far up on the hillside. The next moment Naomi's followed it.

"Naomi, how dare you?"

He turned upon her savagely. She only smiled.

"Now will you shoot an unarmed man?" she cried, flashing a pair of scornful eyes on the Cedar Fork men.

"We don't want to shoot. Hit's his own look aout. We-all want that money, and we're a-goin' to have hit; but we don't want to hurt him."

The speaker's voice was sullen.

"Give me my pistol. I'm ready to fight it aout with you," cried Dalbert, in a white heat of passion. "I ask favour of no man."

"Stop a minute," said Naomi calmly. "Nary one of you knows what he's talking about. Now then, let's understand one another. You ask for — what?"

"The money Dal's got in his pocket."

"You shall have it."

"*Naomi!*"

She had never seen such a look on her brother's face before, but she met it with a cool smile.

"You shall have it," she repeated.

"Ay, but we-uns hain't foolin'," said one of the men. "We mean all the money he's got abaout him in ary place."

"And I'm not fooling either," she said, looking them squarely in the face. "You shall have every cent that Dal and I have on our persons. Will that satisfy you?"

"I guess hit will," said one of them.

"Naomi, are you mad?" asked Dalbert, in a low tone.

"No, but you are — with passion," she said. "Do as I tell you. I'm no fool."

"You are a coward," he said scornfully.

"Am I?"

Her eyes flashed, but they laughed too.

"Dal wants to fight it aout," she said, glancing towards the men. "He doesn't know, any more than you, that there's nothing to fight about. We're about

as poor as Job — Dal and I — to-day. All we've got wouldn't count up to ten dollars; but what there is you may have, if it will help you any. Come and take it, one of you. It don't need a dozen to carry it."

"Move aside, Naomi, and let me recover that pistol," said Dalbert softly. "This is worse than folly."

"You shall have it — later," she said, keeping her horse between him and the hill. "Don't crowd so close on Duke. He's getting excited."

So were the men. They came pressing nearer.

"Look here! We-uns want that money what Jim Low paid Dal yesterday. He's got hit, and we're goin' to have hit."

"You'll be powerful smart if you get tha-at," she said, with a long drawl on the last word. "That money has left Cedar Fork valley, my friends. It has been paid to the man who had the first claim on it."

Nobody stared at her harder than Dalbert. There was a dead silence. It was broken by John Sharp.

"You cain't fool we-uns so. Dal never went outer this valley last night, for I watched the house myself."

"Is that so?" asked Naomi. "It was a pity you had your labour for nothing. No, Dal did *not* go aout of the valley last night."

"Then how did the money go? I should like to know that. John Sharp ain't no fool."

"No-o?" she said slowly. "And you would like to know how it went. Well — I took it."

"You?"

"Yes. It was not heavy."

"Naomi, what do you mean?"

"When?"

The two questions were simultaneous. She ignored Dalbert's, and answered that of the men.

"When? While you were quarrelling with Dal. Do you know how much time you've wasted over this

wrangling? You began at seven. Look at the sun. How far is it from noon?"

She pointed upwards as she spoke.

All eyes followed her glance. A curse or two, not loud, but deep, made answer.

"Thar's only your word for hit."

John Sharp had returned to the attack.

"Yes, there is. You can search Dal's pockets. He'll let you, since you have dared to call his sister a liar."

"Did you fool him as well as us-all, or are you-uns both foolin' we-uns?"

The man who spoke looked suspiciously from brother to sister.

"I guess—I fooled the lot of you."

She laughed.

"Dalbert has a precious package hidden away somewhere," she continued. "He was prepared to sell his life for it. He will perhaps be willing to let you see it now. It should have contained the money James Low paid yesterday. I have told you that money is in the United States' mail-bag. Dal, give them your purse and that parcel."

The face that he turned towards her was still white with anger.

"I know as little as the rest what you mean," he said. "I have vowed to carry that package safely to Jellico. I wish you would go home."

"Give up the package," she said in a low tone. "Do you take me for a liar?"

"I don't know what to take you for," he replied.

For answer she suddenly thrust her hand into the inner pocket where she knew it was most likely he had placed the package.

"There!" she said, tossing the packet towards the group of hesitating men. "That is the parcel for which he would have risked his life. Open it, one of you."

A man stooped from his saddle, and grasped the little packet. It was carefully tied; and as his clumsy fingers fumbled at and then broke the string, all eyes were upon him. A few slips of paper, of the size and shape of bills, rewarded his efforts. He tossed them loose in the wind.

"Do you want my purse and Dalbert's?" asked Naomi coolly.

A savage oath was the answer.

"Come, Dal. There's no object in going to Jellico to-day," said Naomi. "I've mailed your money safely. You can send your letter another time. I wrote a few words of explanation.

He looked at her, and then at the men.

"I suppose it's no use explaining that I knew as little of this as you did," he said. "My sister was trying to save me from danger. A man is hardly grateful for that kind of care."

"Oh, I guess you've been abaout as well fooled as the rest of us by that witch gal," replied one of the party scornfully.

"Take care!" said Dalbert menacingly.

"Oh, let them say what they like," interposed Naomi. "Hard names won't kill. Besides, you are too angry with me to act as my defender." This in an undertone.

"How can I be other than angry?" he said.

"You couldn't. I don't expect it. But you may as well come now. I'm — getting tired."

He looked down at her. A tender light was warring with the anger in his eyes.

"I rode over the mountain where even Duke took me at the risk of his life," she said. "Duke deserves to get back and rest."

"The risk of Duke's life? How about yours?" he asked.

"That doesn't count," she said, and laughed.

The laugh was a little tremulous.

"Well, my men, will you go back to work? I did not mean to trick you; but in any case the money could not have been yours. I can, however, safely promise that the next shall be divided among you."

Dalbert spoke calmly, quietly facing the stormy group.

"You have lost the chance to be highway robbers," he continued. "On the whole, I think I am glad. I might have lost my life, but I should certainly have taken that of some one else."

Then he turned his horse's head to ride back to the mill.

"Stop a minute," said Naomi. "It is a pity to lose two good pistols."

She rode coolly up the hillside, dismounted, and picked up the weapons. Then she rejoined Dalbert. No one attempted to stop them as the brother and sister rode back to the mill.

CHAPTER V

THE mill-wheels were idle. There was no work for them to do. Mrs. Sutton moved her chair from the hearth to the window to gloat over the long, silent mill, the roof of which was a strong aid to her imagination in realizing the feelings of the mill owner as he stood in its empty spaces.

"Dal Mozingo may set and gnaw his finger nails for want of some better payin' business," she growled. "Hit hain't powerful unlikely he'll soon have nothin' else to gnaw. Him and his sister can starve for all Cedar Fork 'll work for 'em ary more. I'd be proud to see 'em laid as low as my man and my young un."

Cedar Fork had come to a decision. Since the proceeds of their labour had been sent out of the valley, the men would work no more for Dalbert Mozingo. There were some who doubted the wisdom of the determination. If they had been free to follow their own judgment, they would have kept at work until the mill owner could clear himself of his difficulties. They were not too much blinded by passion to see that their loss was coincident with his. But their lot was cast in Cedar Fork valley, and life in Cedar Fork valley was not uncomplicated. A man might differ from his neighbours there, as elsewhere, but, on a subject on which Cedar Fork felt strongly, for a man to differ from his neighbours to the point of upsetting their plans was a little risky.

"We-uns have got to live here," said Frank Sharp apologetically. "They-all have decided you-uns hain't goin' to run the mill till they-all have been paid. *I* know

they're fools; but hit hain't no good to say so, and anyhow one cain't work if the rest stop."

The young man had been one of the few whose mules had been kept working until the trees already felled were sawed and taken out of the valley. No more were cut down. Dalbert understood that his operations in Cedar Fork valley were ended.

"They might have given me a chance to pay them," he said bitterly.

It tried him sorely that they were putting it beyond his power to keep his promise to them — forcing him to fail in his compact because they had made up their minds he could not succeed.

"There's one comfort, they'll take the consequences of their folly," Naomi said vindictively.

It was no comfort to Dalbert. He would have cared less for the loss to himself if he could have had the satisfaction of knowing that he was the only loser.

"They will perhaps acknowledge their stupidity when they handle my money," he said.

His one object was to get away and earn enough to pay all claims. He would have moved mill and machinery to some other part, and started afresh, but the moving would cost more than it was possible for him to command at present. This — like the paying of the debts — lay in the future, only it was a more remote future than the other in his calculations. Naomi was of another mind.

"Let them wait till you have set yourself on your feet again," she said. "If they get their wages some day, it is more than they deserve. Go away and earn enough to send for the machinery. Afterwards, when you have worked things clear, it will be time enough to think of them."

He made her no answer, but she knew him too well to take his silence for assent.

"He'd send them the last cent if he knew he should starve the next day," she said.

There were changes already at the mill owner's house. Texas had been sent home, and the house was very still.

"I can do all that is wanted for me and Dal," Naomi said. "When the mill is not running, I want no help."

More than one among the friendly section of the valley women came in to condole with the mill owner's sister, and incidentally to see what they could see and hear what they could hear. Neither eyes nor ears were fully enlightened. None had reason to complain of want of friendliness on Naomi's part. She showed no oversensitiveness on the subject of her brother's difficulties, discussing the question freely enough with her visitors, but whenever one such added to her store of knowledge it was because Naomi distinctly desired that the addition should be made.

If every visitor did not go away satisfactorily enlightened, it was not for lack of direct questions. Those whose attitude had left them on visiting terms at the house felt themselves at an advantage. The other part of the community had to depend on them for information. They did not neglect their opportunities, but the outcome of the opportunities was not all that they could have desired. Such as it was, however, they made the most of it.

"Is Dal goin' to stay here foolin' round the mill?" asked one of the opposite party.

"I hain't sure," replied the neighbour addressed. "My woman was in thar yesterday, and Naomi said they warn't aimin' to lose time more 'n was necessary. If the mill didn't run no more, thar warn't no good waitin' round."

"The mill won't run no more: we-uns 'll take care o' that," said the other, grimly.

"Dal hain't cut down all the trees on John Sharp's

lot yit," responded the neighbour reflectively. "My Will seed him up thar yesterday. Maybe he's goin' at hit agin."

"He won't cut no more trees on John Sharp's land, not if he *did* buy 'em," was the answer. "I reckon thar hain't no buyin' whar thar hain't no payin'. John Sharp 'll fix hi-im if he tries cuttin' on *his* land."

One or two of the enemy, determined to attain to something definite, attacked Dalbert himself.

"What am I aimin' to do?" responded the mill owner, turning on his questioners. "Pay my debts. That's what I'm aimin' to do. It won't be the fault of ary one of *you* if you ever get a cent of your money. But you'll have it, in spite of your folly. What I can't earn in this valley I'll earn aout of it."

"Oh, you're goin' away, are you?"

The question was eager.

"I'm going where I can earn enough to pay my debts, whether that's here or elsewhere," said Dal, savagely.

Dalbert made more than one journey to Jellico, and came back with the cloud upon his face that had become habitual there of late. There was a day, however, when he sprang from his horse with more haste than he had shewn since the mill stopped running.

"Here, Naomi!" he called, and tossed her a letter as she reached the door.

The girl retreated into the house with her prize. She even took the precaution to go into an inner room before unfolding the letter. Half-friendly friends were very apt to stroll in when Dalbert returned from Jellico.

Naomi's eyes brightened as she read. She went straight through, and returned to the heading.

"Big Creek," she said reflectively.

Then her face changed.

"Dal," she cried, forgetting caution, and going out to

her brother, "it's from the place where father's last letter was written."

"Yes — I know," he said.

He saw that her eyes were shining.

"You are going to accept the position?" she questioned. There was more than a trace of eagerness in her voice.

"I should be a fool to refuse it," he replied. "It will keep us, and give me the chance to put something by every month.

"You had better send an answer directly," she said.

"I *have* sent it."

She laughed.

"You've lost no time about it."

"No. There was no time to lose. He wants a foreman who can be at work next week. If he does not have me, he will have somebody else."

"That's sure," said Naomi.

Then, after a minute's silence. "Dal, we *may* learn something of *him*."

"Yes — we will try," he said.

There had not been so much animation in Dalbert's manner since the shooting at the "church-house." An opening out of his difficulties was appearing in the shape of an opportunity to begin work again as foreman of a mill in a mountain valley in Tennessee. There was such a marked difference in voice and carriage that John Sharp, meeting the mill owner as he turned his horse out on the mountain side, stopped and stared at him.

"Goin' to start up at the mill agin?" he asked insolently, after that long stare.

Dalbert turned slowly round, and faced him.

"No, John Sharp; but I'm going to work through my difficulties, and come aout on the right side yet, in spite of you and all Cedar Fork behind you," he said.

"You won't work through 'em ha-ar," retorted the mountaineer, sneeringly.

"Perhaps not."

"You hain't goin' to git no more hundreds o' dollars outer this valley," continued Sharp. "We-uns 'll fix tha-at."

"You are right," replied Dalbert quietly. "You *have* fixed that. But I'm going to get the hundreds all the same."

"How?" inquired the farmer, with a savage sneer.

"By going away to earn it."

"When?"

The eagerness behind the short, sharp question warned the mill owner to be cautious. He looked at the speaker steadily for a minute.

"When it suits my purpose," he said slowly, and turned and went back to the barn.

Within the house Naomi was working swiftly and hopefully. To all appearance everything was as usual, but the more precious possessions were finding hiding-places in box and trunk. Naomi could not trust the temper of the Cedar Fork people.

Her thoughts were not all of Cedar Fork. They had gone on to that gap in the Tennessee mountains suggested by the name of Big Creek. The name was not unfamiliar. Back in the earlier stretches of memory it held a conspicuous place. Naomi had never seen Big Creek Gap, but connected with it was the troubled time which made a gulf between the old, free child-life of her first memories and the years of training that led on to to-day. A farm on the edge of the Kentucky mountain district; a girl and boy, regular mountaineers in miniature; a home, large, clean, cool, and fresh with the freshness of the mountain side, with law, in the person of Aunt Sally, and indulgence, in the person of the father himself, as conflicting rulers therein; absolute

freedom from care and infinite enjoyment of life,—these were the elements of those earliest days. The glorious hills and woods, the clear skies, and the wealth of flowers, the growing cattle, and especially the young mules, freer and more frolicsome than even the children themselves, were some of the features of the picture that belonged to those perfect days. And then came Big Creek,—a dawning consciousness of the possibility of ill, a first apprehension that the gladness of life *could* be snatched from the hand that grasped it.

It was only a name at the top of a letter written in "father's" big, round hand, when it first became a reality to Naomi and Dalbert,—nothing but the name of the place at which their father had arrived on his journey to Georgia with a drove of mules. But when no after letters came and that name became the one tangible thing in a mist of doubt and fear, when the father disappeared from the lives of the boy and girl as completely as if the Gap had opened its rocky walls and swallowed him up, Big Creek became a place never to be forgotten.

It was hard for the children to believe that this dead silence, this search for information that brought only disappointment, was the end of the undertaking which in their estimation had involved great and splendid possibilities. Their father had hoped for much gain from his journey southward. The war between North and South had begun, and mules were in request. The time had not come when the passes of those mountains were held first by one army and then by another. The way was clear when Dalbert Mozingo, the elder, went to Big Creek Gap on his road to Georgia. It was not many weeks before the tide of war flowed through the mountains, and swept away all trace of what had gone before. The traveller was lost sight of completely. Many droves of mules had passed through the Gap since

Dalbert Mozingo went that way. Inquiries at a comparatively early date had failed to trace him, and when the passes of the Tennessee Mountains were held by the Confederate army and life became a sharp struggle for existence for the sympathisers with the Northern cause, even Aunt Sally concluded that no more could be done. She sold the farm for what it would bring, and took the boy and girl to a safer place.

"I'll make sure of a good education for both on ye," she said. "What the farm don't do, I will. Then you'll hev to shift for yourselves."

So to the children who had known nothing but the free mountain life came the knowledge that is born of cities. When the brother and sister again found their way to another part of the Kentucky fastnesses, few would have recognised the crude little mountaineers of earlier days. Many of the memories of those days had faded, but the father's face was as clear as ever.

Naomi had always been "her father's girl"; and half the excitement that lurked beneath her movements to-day owed its force to the thought that in Big Creek Gap she might succeed, even after so many years, in obtaining information about him. She was not unmindful of present surroundings, however.

"Better keep your own counsel, Dal," she said. "We're not quite sure you and the Big Creek mill owner will come to an understanding, and if we were, — the less said, the better."

It was only two days later before they *were* sure. Dalbert had returned from another ride to Jellico, and by a peculiar coincidence had again encountered John Sharp.

"He hangs round as if he thought he could gain something by looking," he said angrily.

"How much more did he do than look?" inquired Naomi.

"Had the impudence to ask me when I was aimin' to start making the fortune that was to pay him and the rest."

"And you told him — what?"

"That I might be aimin' to start sooner than he bargained for."

Naomi did not answer for a minute. A peculiar smile was on her lips.

"Better tell him to keep his questions for them that will answer them," she said sharply. "The less clew you give hi-im, the better."

"I should think in his heart he'd be glad to know there was some chance of his getting the money," said Dalbert.

"Should you? You and John Sharp haven't much in common,— not enough to make it possible for one to judge of the other," replied Naomi.

Perhaps Lem Sutton found more within him to answer to the nature of the man round whom he hung quietly and persistently. Perhaps he had opportunities for character study not enjoyed by Dalbert. Whatever may have been the reason for his suspicions, however, Lem must have had them. If he had not believed that mischief was afoot, he would not have wormed his way under the floor of a certain old outbuilding where John Sharp's mules munched mountain hay in the winter and shivered when an extra heavy gust of mountain air, winter-chilled, swept through the gaps of their log shelter. The boy had barely wedged himself in between the earth and the floor above when rough voices were heard, and four mountain farmers lounged over to the log structure and propped their shoulders against it for support.

"I tell you hit's abaout time we put the stopper on. He's aimin' to go, and to go right smart. He's plumb crazy to be off."

The speaker was John Sharp. His companions slowly chewed the tobacco their mouths contained, and with wonderful unanimity aimed spurts of juice at the nearest tree.

"They're a-goin', that's sure," replied the nearest lounger, shifting his shoulder to a more comfortable position. "Naomi's gittin' shet of her dishes and fixin's. They're a-goin'. But when? That's the question."

"Goin', air they?" asked John Sharp, significantly. "They're aimin' to go; but goin',—that's another thi-ing."

"Whose fool enough to pay Naomi for her dishes?" asked a third member of the party.

"Naomi hain't lookin' for money," was the response. "That hain't what she's atter. She's lettin' her fixin's go to he'p pay off what Dal owes. They du say the cow hain't Dal's no more, though he milks her all the same. They're keepin' hit powerful quiet, but hit hain't hard to guess that them that he'ped Dal saw and haul the last o' them logs are goin' to git all the pickin's."

"Dal and Naomi hain't seed the end o' this valley yit," said John Sharp, vindictively.

"How's that?" asked a neighbour, leaning lazily forward to get a view of Sharp's face.

"Thar's law in old Kentucky," said John impressively. "We-uns don't trouble hit often, but nobody's goin' to hinder we-uns usin' hit when hit answers we-uns' ends."

"Law cain't make a man pay when he hain't got the money," retorted the nearest lounger.

"No, hit cain't," replied John.

"Then whar's the guede o' the law to we-uns?"

"Whar's the guede?" replied the farmer loudly. "If hit cain't he'p us, hit can hurt him. Hain't *that* some gue-ude?"

"I reckon," was the short, emphatic answer.

"How 'll hit du that, John?"

Another mouth was cleared of tobacco juice to give utterance to the question.

"How? Hain't he fixin' to leave the State?"

"I reckon."

"And hain't he aimin' to go without payin' his lawful debts?"

"Sure."

"Then I'm goin' to stop him. The law's agin him. He cain't leave this State while he's in debt, not without the law stoppin' of him, and askin' him a few questions. Hit 'll hinder him so-ome."

"That's so. Sure as you live, he cain't."

"No, sir. He's got to pay or stay. He's aimin' to go. That's agin the law. I'll soon stop his little game."

"How?"

The tone was eager, though the voice was choked in tobacco juice.

"Send the sheriff atter him, and clap him in jail. Thar hain't no difficulty abaout *hit*."

At this juncture an ear, fitted carefully to a hole in the foundation of the building, was tickled by the advent of a spider of exploring tendencies.

"Ugh! Git aout!"

The smothered exclamation was too low to rise beyond the floor. The ear was for a moment withdrawn, and a hand laboriously worked its way up to crush the venturesome insect. There was not much superfluous room in Lem's hiding-place.

"Whe-en?"

The word, drawled out by a loud, lazy voice, was the first Lem distinguished when his ear was at liberty to resume its ordinary occupation.

"Mighty soon. Thar hain't no sense losin' time. Dal and that gal's fooled we-uns onct. They hain't goin' to du hit agin. They hain't goin' to find hit so

plumb easy to git away. That Naomi thinks we-uns don't know nothin'. Hit hain't so. We know enough to make hit powerful uncomfortable for the-em."

A grim chuckle was the listeners' response.

"Hit hain't plumb certain thar's a sight o' danger," remarked one, when the silence had lasted so long that Lem's eye changed places with his ear in its relation to the friendly gap. "Dal Mozingo hain't the man to sneak off in the dark. He's got a right smart o' pride, has Dal."

"Sneak off? I hain't so sure," growled Sharp. "He useter wouldn't; but, when a man's in a tight place, thar's no tellin'. Dal's got to git away from ha-ar, and thar's that gal behind him. I tell ye, hit hain't safe. Hit 'll be a powerful sight safer when the sheriff hauls him off."

"How 'll you prue-uve he's aimin' to go away?" asked one of the party, reflectively.

"How 'll I prue-uve hit?" John Sharp stared savagely at the questioner. "Hain't he said so more 'n onct?"

"Maybe he's said he'd go off and earn money, but he hain't never said he was goin' now," responded the other. "You'd want to swar he was goin' right away."

"He's fixin', hain't he?" demanded John Sharp.

"Yes, he's fixin', if what the women folks says is true; but we-uns don't know when he's aimin' to go, and we don't know for certain he's goin' outer the State. He may swar he hain't goin' at all."

"Some men might. Dal won't," replied John, positively. "Dal's a smart sight too proud to lie. Thar hain't no fear o' *that.*"

At this point Lem gave a vicious kick at a rat that was investigating the quality of the boy's bare toes, with a view to a change of diet.

"Git aout!" he ejaculated in muffled wrath. "If I warn't a-listenin' to them, I'd larn ye."

He *was* listening, and listening so intently that the rat found itself at an advantage, and, acting in accordance with its character as an animal of low nature, set its teeth well into the grimy skin of that prominent great toe.

A squeal, for which the rat was not responsible, and another, for which the rat *was* responsible, was the immediate result.

"Thar's some powerful lively rats under this buildin'," remarked one of the men. "They're fightin' like the mischief."

"Let 'em," said John Sharp shortly. "I got somethin' more important to attend to than the-em. Rats hain't the only varmints that's got to be trapped."

A loud laugh, and "That's so!" greeted the words.

"When are you goin' to set abaout doin' the trappin'?" was the next question.

John Sharp hesitated.

"I hain't plumb sure," he said at last. "To-morrer or Friday, I reckon."

"How 'll you git the sheriff?"

"Go atter him."

"Well, I reckon I'll happen that away abaout the time you come along with him," remarked the interrogator, with a chuckle. "Hit 'll be a si-ight to see Naomi. She's a right sma-art hand at trappin' other people. Hit 'll be worth walkin' a step or two to see how she likes bein' trapped herself."

"You can happen thar, and all Cedar Fork can happen thar if they like," said John, impressively. "I hain't aimin' to du this thing in a corner."

He strutted off with his head held high in the air. Lem knew his head was higher than usual by the peculiar thud of his feet on the ground. His auditors slowly relieved the log walls of the weight of their heavy bodies, and moved off.

"Oh, my lor! What 'll Naomi say?" remarked one as he went. "John Sharp'll *du* hit."

Before the voices had died away, a pair of heels pushed themselves out of a hole that nobody but a small boy could have crawled into; and the body and head that were the necessary accessories of the heels followed quickly.

Lem was in a hurry. He scampered across a spur of the mountain, and almost tumbled into the path by Cedar Fork. With a flourish of his bare feet to clear them of dirt, he presently crossed Naomi's threshold, and poked his head into the kitchen.

"Naomi?"

"Well, Lem, what is it?"

It was the mill owner's voice; and the mill owner was, to all appearance, the only occupant of the place.

"Oh, I warn't lookin' for you," said Lem, backing a step or two. "I wanted *her*."

"Ain't I as good?"

There was a laugh in Dalbert's eyes. Hope was making another man of the mill owner.

"No-o. Whar's she?"

"*She's* here. What do you want with her? Stop, though. I've got lettuce to pick. Come aout with me, and help get it."

Naomi had sent one swift glance across at the face of her visitor. She gave him no chance to speak till the garden patch was reached. Then, when her hands touched the lettuce-leaves, she turned and looked up at the boy, her face a little lower than his own.

"What is it?" she asked.

"They're goin' to put him in jail!"

The words came in a shrill, horrified whisper.

The girl picked a lettuce-leaf and laid it in her pan. The colour had flashed into her face.

"Help me pick lettuce," she said peremptorily.

Her eyes had seen a figure not far distant.

The boy stooped over the lettuce bed.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"I heared John Sharp tell hit to some more of they-uns."

"When?"

"Jist now. I crawled under the old mule barn, and listened.

"How are they aimin' to do it?"

"Git the sheriff. Hit's 'cause Dal's goin' outer the State without payin' they-uns. He says he cain't."

"Who 'll stop him?"

"John Sharp."

"When?"

"To-morrer or the day atter."

"Tell me all you heard, and pick lettuce while you tell. Never mind how many you spoil."

The boy obeyed. The lettuce-bed suffered, but the knowledge of the listener was increased; and a passer-by who saw the picking went on none the wiser.

"That 'll be enough lettuce," said Naomi at last, straightening herself and looking down at the overflowing pan. "You go home now, Lem. There ain't anybody much more use than a boy when he's real smart."

Lem lingered. Naomi started for the house.

"Hain't you aimin' to du nothin'?"

The words came in a burst of disappointment and disapprobation.

Naomi turned and looked at the boy.

"I ain't aimin' to see John Sharp get the best of me-e," she said, with a smile on her lips.

Lem's face brightened.

"John was powerful sure," he said.

"John's been powerful sure more than once," she replied; "and he's been powerful disappointed, too. Maybe he ain't seen the last disappointment yet."

Lem went off whistling.

That day and the next were as one to the mill owner and his sister, for the gulf of sleep that should have separated them became a highway of labour. When the sun rose, the last chest was fastened and the last treasure secured.

"Well, it 'll be over the quicker," said Dalbert; but he looked nervous.

There was a smile on Naomi's face. She prepared breakfast, and when it was eaten paid two or three visits in different directions. On her way to the last calling-place she encountered John Sharp. Perhaps the encounter was not quite accidental. Naomi knew something of John's habits.

"Howdy," she said, in as matter-of-fact a tone as if no cause for unpleasantness existed. "I'm going up to Will Graham's to see if he can spare a team. Dal wants one powerful bad to-day."

John stared at her.

"Wants a team, does he?" he asked, when he had sufficiently recovered from his astonishment to be able to speak. "What does he want a team for?"

"Well, I don't know as it's any good to tell yo-ou," said Naomi, coolly. "You ain't seemed so friendly as you used to be, so I never thought I could get *you* to help. But the chests and things we've a mind to take with us have got to be hauled, and they've got to be hauled to-day."

"You're a-*goin'*, then?"

The words tumbled over one another in their haste.

"Yes. Didn't you know?" asked Naomi innocently. "I thought you'd kept a right good watch on all that Dal and I were doing. Going? Why, yes. I've been round to say good-by. We've got *some* friends in Cedar Fork yet."

She passed him, and walked on. He stood looking

after her, surprise changing to cunning delight on his face.

"I never thought she was sich a plumb fool," he muttered. "Well, thar hain't much time to lose."

Naomi had gone barely a hundred yards when she heard footsteps behind her.

"Air you aimin' to go to-day?"

John was not yet alongside, but he was in too much of a hurry to wait.

"Yes, to be sure," replied Naomi, without turning her head. "Why, you *are* in the dark, John Sharp."

She walked steadily on. She could hear him following still.

"Goin' Jellico way?"

"I reckon it's the nearest road to get a team over, ain't it?" asked Naomi.

"Depends on whar you're goin'."

"Over the line to Tennessee."

"You *air*."

There was triumph in the tone. Naomi noted it, and smiled. The smile was safe. She was still ahead of her questioner.

"And you've done made up your mind to go to Jellico to-day?"

"Well," said Naomi slowly, "Dal thought we might get a team to haul abaout to Jellico, or maybe a little beyond there to-day."

"I hain't sure you'll git much beyond," he said significantly.

"It 'll depend on the mules," replied Naomi; but the smile on her face broadened.

There was a longer pause. The footsteps dropped behind.

"Well, you won't git no team of me. I'm aimin' to go to Jellico myself to-day."

The voice had grown gruff again. John Sharp had acquired all the information he deemed that he needed.

"Yes? I thought likely you were."

Any one of a suspicious turn of mind might have imagined that Naomi's visit to Will Graham was purely a matter of form. Will was not a staunch friend to the mill owner, and he decided that he had no team to spare.

"Well, I ain't despairing of getting one yet," said the girl cheerfully. "Anyhow, I'll bid you good-by, for fear I shouldn't see you again."

She went back with a brisk step. John Sharp judged that she was in too much of a hurry to see him as he came to the door to look after her. He was mistaken, however. She saw him, and that amused smile crossed her face again.

An hour from the time of her arrival at her own house a mule wagon, piled high with the goods she had decided to take with her, was ready to be in motion. Duke and Charley, saddled and waiting, impatiently, pawed the ground. A neighbour was to drive the mules.

"Git ur-rp!" shouted the driver.

Naomi came out of the house, and locked the door. She bestowed the key in a hiding-place round the corner. There had been no time for the removal of many things which had changed owners, but had yet to change hands.

"Your wife will know where to get the key, Mance," said the girl, addressing her words to the driver of the mules.

"Lor, yes," he said. "Git ur-rp!"

The girl gave one backward look at the house. Her lips were not quite steady. She had put as much hope as labour into the arranging of that home for herself and Dal.

"Ready, Dal?" she called, turning from the building and springing into the saddle.

Her brother came in sight at the moment. He had been securing the entrances to the mill.

"Go ahead," he said.

So the little cavalcade started, taking the road to Jellico. It was not until it was well on its way that John Sharp saddled his horse and rode after. He had spent the interval between Naomi's passing and the present moment hanging round such elevations as afforded a view of the mill owner's premises.

"I thought maybe she might be foolin' me," he said.

"John Sharp's took the road," announced Naomi, looking back from the top of a long hill, the summit of which commanded a fine view of Cedar Fork valley.

Dal's lips were set. His face showed no reflection of the amused smile that set Naomi's all alight.

"There 'll come a time when I shan't have to sneak off like a thief," he said.

"Sneak off? Do you call this sneaking? My sakes! It seems open enough, with John Sharp riding behind to see you don't escape him."

Her laugh was loud and musical. It travelled back along the road towards the foot of the hill, where John Sharp rode by the side of the teamster and his mules. The worthy John was improving the opportunity by plying Mance with questions. He had ridden hard to secure the privilege.

"Goin' to Jellico, air they?" he asked, a little breathless after his quick ride.

"Hit lue-ukes like hit," replied Mance.

"I warn't sure they'd come this away," continued John.

"Nearest, hain't hit?"

"I reckon. But thar might be reasons for Dal's goin' another way."

"Thar mi-ight," assented the teamster. "I reckon

they're goin' this away, though. Naomi's a mighty good manager. Hit's her that's puttin' this movin' through."

John chuckled.

"Hit hain't through yit," he said.

"No. This load's powerful heavy. We hain't goin' to git there till atter noon."

"Is Naomi aimin' to stop in Jellico to-night?" asked John.

"That depends," was the answer. "She's a leetle inclined to git on a bit further 'n Jellico afore sundown."

"Is she? I dare swar she won't du hit," replied John.

"I hain't sure," returned the teamster. "That team 'll du hit if any mules can."

"Naomi Mozingo won't go no further 'n Jellico to-night, and no more won't Dal," said John confidently.

"Don't you be too sure," said the driver. "That girl don't stand contrairyin' well, and she's aimin' to go further. Not a smart sight, but over inter Tennessee."

"You goin' plumb thar with 'em?" asked John.

"Whar?"

"To the place whar Dal's goin'."

"Lor, no! I'm goin' jist over the line inter Tennessee. They hain't goin' to take these fixin's right on now. They're goin' to leave 'em some place a little ways over, and fetch 'em when they're ready."

"Air they?" said John Sharp shortly.

He rode by the side of the wagon until more than half of the journey was accomplished. Evidently he was intent on making sure that the mountain town was the real destination of the party. When noon was past, he pushed forward. Dalbert and Naomi were some distance ahead.

"Been taking it quietly, haven't you, John?" remarked Naomi.

Dalbert drew himself up a little straighter, and vouchsafed no word as the farmer passed.

"I've done tuk hit the way that suited me," was the insolent answer. "I reckon I know what I'm abaout."

"Likely," said Naomi.

He gave his horse a savage blow with a stick he carried, and made off in hot haste. The brother and sister saw his horse straining up the next hill. When he was out of sight, Naomi drew out a big, old-fashioned watch, and noted the time.

"He'll be there in an hour and a half at that pace," she said.

She leaned forward, and patted Duke's neck.

"Are you going to let him run away from you-u?" she questioned, in a sharp, clear voice.

The horse pricked up his ears, and mended his pace. In the next half-hour the pair left the wagon far behind.

"You turn off here," said Naomi at last.

Neither she nor Dal had spoken for many minutes.

"Yes," he said; but he still rode by her side.

"I wish it was safe to go right on to Jellico and brave him," he said at last.

"It isn't. And, if it was, I should lose some sport."

"It's no fun for me," he said.

"It would be if you could see John Sharp's face when I ride into Jellico alone," she replied.

"Well, if it's got to be done, the sooner, the better," he said, and turned and rode back to where a bridle-path led over a great spur of the mountain.

She reined in her horse, and watched him until he disappeared among the trees. The path he had taken would lead him out of the State of Kentucky into that of Tennessee. The usual route was through Jellico, for the little mountain town lay half in one State and half

in the other. The mountain path was rougher and longer, and led in a different direction; but it would take her brother out of Kentucky, and that was the object of Naomi's desire at the present moment.

The impulse to hasten seemed to have deserted her after Dalbert's departure. She let Duke take his time, and even stop now and again to snatch a mouthful of grass.

"John Sharp won't be expecting us yet," she said. "We're in no hurry, Duke."

It was two hours later, when she was nearing Jellico, that she saw the farmer riding back. He was not alone. The glimmer of a smile played upon Naomi's lips as she recognized the sheriff by Sharp's side.

"How I wish I was near enough to see John's face now!" she said.

He had recognised her, she was sure, and was looking for Dal. He came hurrying up, with the officer close behind him. She could see the disappointment on his face clearly enough now.

"Whar's Dal?" he shouted.

"Dal warn't aimin' to come this away," said Naomi, calmly.

"What? What's that?"

"Dal warn't aimin' to come this away," she repeated. "Howdy." This as greeting to the sheriff.

"He warn't?"

John Sharp glowered at her from the back of his horse.

"No. I'm aimin' to see after the team. Dal had other business."

"Whar?"

"In Tennessee."

Sharp brought his horse so near that he crowded Duke back.

"Whar's that lyin' sneak now? That's what I want to know," he shouted.

"I don't know anybody to answer to that description," replied the girl, looking calmly into the angry face.

"Whar's Dal?" shouted the mountaineer.

"In Tennessee somewheres, I reckon. I can't say exactly whe-ere," she said.

"Fooled agin, hain't ye, John?"

There was a laugh in the sheriff's eyes as he turned them first on the angry mountaineer and then on the girl.

"Fooled! Hit'd take the devil himself to git the better o' that gal; and he hain't likely to try, for the witch is in league with him."

"Well, I reckon thar hain't no good standin' here, is thar?" asked the sheriff. "We-all might as well git back to Jellico, unless you're aimin' to go right on home."

"Aimin'!" said Sharp savagely. "Whar's the good aimin'?"

The sheriff laughed, and turned back, riding by Naomi's side. John Sharp held his horse still upon the road, glowering after them. In the end he decided to go on to Jellico, "and see if that gal warn't lyin'. Dal was as likely to be thar now as not."

The mule wagon arrived at Jellico in time to cross before dark the boundary line that divided the little town between two States, and to go on further to a hamlet where the goods were to be left for the present. Naomi found Dalbert there before her. He was in a fever of impatience, fearing that she had met with annoyance at Jellico. He had ridden hard to reach the meeting-place early, and his horse looked hot and worried.

Naomi came in ahead of the wagon. When Jellico was left behind, she had hurried on to set Dalbert's mind at rest.

"We-el," she said laughingly, "we're he-ere."

"Has that rascal interfered with either you or the things?" asked Dalbert hotly.

"Who? John Sharp? I guess he's standing in the middle of the road, cursing me and fate. That's what he was doing when I saw him last."

Even Dalbert could not forbear a smile.

CHAPTER VI

"GOOD evening, friend."

The riders looked weary. For the last hour Dalbert had been seeking for a possible resting-place for the night. He thought he saw it in a double log house standing at a sharp bend in the road, so as almost to face the travellers as they looked at it from a distance. A man in shirt-sleeves, with a pipe in his mouth, was walking towards it. Dalbert greeted him.

"Good-evenin'. Won't you come in bye?"

The speaker stared in an openly curious but perfectly friendly manner at the strangers.

"Goin' on to the Gap?" he asked, before Dalbert could accept or refuse his invitation.

"Not to-night. We're played aout."

"Lueke like hit. 'Light, and come in?"

"Yes, if you've room to put us up."

"Room? Shucks! we've got plenty o' that."

They were opposite the house now; and Naomi looked sharply at the deeply shadowed space between the sloping roofs that, beginning at either end of the two distinct log buildings, dipped down till they met over the opening between, forming a cool, covered passage that separated, while it connected, the two halves of the house. It was the lounging-place of the household, and in it was gathered the family party, enjoying the coolness of its breezy shelter.

Naomi was engaged in a little mental calculation. The house was large; but so were the inmates in point of numbers.

"Come in and stay with me to-night?"

An elderly woman removed the pipe from her mouth to proffer the invitation. Three grown-up sons stared meditatively, while they puffed smoke into the air and waited for the answer.

"We should be glad," said Naomi; "but have you room enough?"

"Oh, lor! we've got lots o' rue-ume," said the woman, good-naturedly. "Go and he'p her 'light, Siles."

The young man who came forward at his mother's bidding looked with undisguised admiration into the face of the girl. It was a little whiter than usual with weariness, the effect of the excitement of the preceding day; but Siles found it irresistibly bewitching.

"Let me he'p you down," he said, not without a stammer born of bewildered admiration.

"Thank you, Duke will stand."

She sprang to the ground without touching the proffered hand, and gently stroked Duke's nose. Then she moved slowly towards the family party in the deep, covered alley. Five pairs of eyes other than those which belonged to the parents or the grown-up sons carefully followed her movements.

"Come right in," said the good wife heartily.

She led the way into the one room the left-hand wing of the house contained. It was large, and served the purpose of kitchen, dining, and living room generally. The fire had not quite died down.

"I'll keen hit ur-rp, and cue-uke ye some supper," said the woman. "My lor! you du lueke tired. Here, Siles, hump around, and git me some wood."

A panful of pork was soon sizzling over the cracking sticks, and the housewife was bustling about to attend to the wants of her visitors.

"I'll jist set the biscuit to warm," she said. "Thar hain't no sense makin' more when thar's plenty left. You-uns want to eat as quick as you can. Goin' through the Gap to-morrer, did ye say?"

"Yes. We stop at Big Creek."

"You du?"

"Is it far from here?" asked Naomi.

"Abaout six miles. Be you goin' to stay?"

"Yes," replied Naomi. "Have you" —

"And *him*, too?"

The woman jerked her thumb in the direction of the door, through which Dalbert's voice could be heard.

"Yes," said Naomi. "Have" —

"Is he your man?" interrupted the hostess.

"He is my brother."

"Is? Well, *I* de*clar!* And you and him's goin' to live at Big Creek."

"Yes. Do you know Big Creek?"

"I reckon. I've been thar more 'n onct. Are your parents livin'?"

"No," said Naomi, with a little frown. She was thinking of her father.

"Hain't? And you live with this brother?"

"Yes. Have you been in this" —

"Got ary other brothers or sisters?"

"No," replied the girl, once more leaving her question unfinished.

"*I* de*clar.* And you and him kinder keeps together, don't ye? I shouldn't wonder now if your parents left you both a little, and by puttin' hit together you can make aout tol'rable well."

The supposition was of the nature of an inquiry, but Naomi failed to take it as it was meant.

"How many years have you lived" — she began, but was again cut short.

"Does *he* du anything for a livin'?"

"My brother? Yes, he is on his way to take charge of the saw-mill at Big Creek."

"Well, *I* de*clar!* And you're goin', too? Be *you* goin' to do ary sort o' work,— school-teachin' or anything?"

"I look after things for my brother," said Naomi, somewhat wearily.

She saw no reason for refusing to answer the questions of her hostess, but she found them tiresome. Yet in spite of the weariness a smile of amusement grew broader on her lips as she saw her interrogator's mouth hastily forming another question.

"Aimin' to board somewhars, or to keep house?"

"To keep house. It is pleasanter."

"It is *so*. But you've got to hev some fixin's. Aimin' to bring 'em along, or buy 'em?"

"Both," said Naomi, the smile breaking into a laugh.

"Well, *I* de*clar!* Bringin' 'em fur?"

"From beyond Jellico," replied Naomi, pleasantly

"Well, *I* de*clar!* Come from thar to-day?"

"No. We started yesterday."

"Did? And you and him's goin' to Big Creek to keep house together?"

"Yes," replied Naomi, "like you do. How long have you been" —

"Then he hain't married?"

"No," answered the girl, a little quiver of laughter in her voice.

"And hain't he got no gal he's payin' attentions to?"

"He has never said so," responded Naomi, trying to keep her voice in character with the gravity of the occasion.

"Well, *I* de*clar!* And hain't thar no young feller a-comin' atter you?"

"I didn't see one on the road," said Naomi innocently.

The woman laughed with good-humoured loudness.

"Maybe you won't hev to lue-uke powerful long afore you du," she said. "Did you live thar, away back from Jellico?"

"Yes, right in among the mountains."

"Well, *I* de*clar!* And what did you and him du thar?"

"My brother had a saw-mill of his own; but his partner left, and he had to give it up," said Naomi.

"*I* de*clar.* Warn't you plumb sorry to come away? You made a smart sight o' friends among the men, I dare swar. They-uns don't see a pretty face like yourn every day."

Naomi laughed.

"I've been wondering how long you've lived here," she said, putting into words the question that had many times before attempted to pass her lips.

"Me? Lor! I was raised right har."

"Then you remember the time before the war?" said Naomi, a little eagerly.

"Remember? I reckon I du. You don't, though, I'll swar. How old might you be, datter?"

"I was seven when my father went away, and that was in the earliest part of the war," said Naomi.

"Was? Well, *I* de*clar!* And is your brother older or younger than you?"

"Older, by two years."

"Is? Did your pappy go to the war?"

"No. At least, I think not," replied Naomi. "Perhaps, as you lived here at the time, you could judge better what happened to him than I could. Did you ever see droves of mules driven through here just before the soldiers came to these parts?"

"Lor, yes! lots of times. They was goin' to Georgy."

"Yes, my father was going there. We heard from him at Big Creek, and"—

"And he kinder deserted ye, and went off to the war. Well, *I* de*clar!* You hain't the fust that's been left that away, though."

"No, you mistake," said Naomi sharply. "We had

no reason for supposing he went to the war. We never heard of him after, but" —

"Didn't? *I declar!* And you don't know whether he was killed or not."

"No," said Naomi. "We are hoping to find somebody who remembers him and his drove of mules."

"Hit hain't likely you'll du tha-at," said the woman confidently. "Lor! thar was heaps o' mules come through in them days, and people's minds was disturbed by the war that come soon atter. Thar wouldn't nobody remember *hi-im.*"

Naomi sighed. The prospect was not encouraging, and she was tired.

"What did your mammy du when she found her man had deserted her?" asked the hostess, stopping in the operation of dishing up the pork to put the question.

"My mother died years before," said Naomi coldly.

"Did? Well, *I declar!* And you and your brother was all alone, warn't ye?"

"No," replied Naomi. "My father's sister was with us. She took care of us."

"That was good. And did she du hit aout of her own pocket, or was thar somethin' left to keep you two young-uns?"

"She was very good," said Naomi, "but she had not to do it all."

"Hadn't? That was good. And she was kind to ye? Well, *I declar!* Come in, son." This to Dalbert, who stood in the doorway. "Your supper's cueked. Come and eat."

And, while they ate, a constant stream of questions poured from the good woman's lips. If she did not know all about the past and present life of her guests before supper was finished, it was solely for want of sufficient ingenuity to frame another question.

"Like to set and cool off a bit?" asked the hostess, when dishes and cups were disposed of.

"Git a light and bring it in the other rue-ume," suggested her husband. "Thar's fallin' weather comin'."

The patter of rain was already to be heard without. A shower was to be looked for.

The other room proved to be the whole of the opposite wing of the house. It was of the same size and shape as that in which supper had been eaten. The good wife had said she had plenty of sleeping accommodation. After a careful examination of that big apartment, Naomi concluded that she had — so far as beds were concerned. One in every corner was not the end of the story here, for the room was big enough to hold more; and what was a bedroom unless filled with beds? Accordingly, two stood boldly out in the middle of the floor, leaving a narrow passage between themselves and the four sleeping-places in the corners.

"Feel tol'rable satisfied now, don't you?" inquired the good woman, following Naomi's look with a satisfied glance of her own, and chuckling a little over what *must* be the outcome of the inspection. "You-uns was scart abaout thar not bein' beds enough, warn't ye?"

Naomi gasped. There was — well — perhaps a little too much accommodation.

"Do you *all* sleep here?" she asked.

"Lor, yes!" replied the hostess, proudly. "Hit's powerful warm and comfortable in the winter. Thar now, you jist take your choice. Fix on ary bed o' the six, and hit shall be saved for ye."

Naomi expressed due gratitude, and mentally vowed that it should *not*.

"Well, you *are* generously provided," she said. "I never had more than one bed in ary room in my house."

"Didn't? Well, *I declar!* Jim, du you hear tha-at? She hain't never seed so many beds in a rue-ume before."

Her husband laughed loudly.

"Lor! we hain't short o' beds," he said. "Sakes alive, if we was put to hit, we could find another yit."

"You couldn't put it in here," suggested Naomi, diplomatically.

"Lor! we don't want: hit's put a'ready," laughed the host. "You come and see."

She followed him into the covered passage, where the raindrops were being swept in by the wind.

"Thar!" said her guide, triumphantly pointing to a small, shed-like extension. "Hit's a real old-fashioned bedstead in thar. Ever sleep on one o' that sort?"

"No," said the girl, leaning forward into the rain to peer in at the door he opened.

"Wait till I fetch a light. Hit's plumb dark thar."

He went off in haste, eager to display all his possessions, and Naomi stepped across the intervening space, and took refuge in the shed. Its hinged shutter was at present closed, and but little light penetrated the interior. When the lamp arrived, the girl saw the most primitive form of the old-time Kentucky bedstead. Two large auger-holes had been bored in the log wall, and into each a pole had been thrust. At the other ends of the poles forked sticks reached to the puncheon floor. On this framework rested boards that made a firm, if not a soft foundation for the straw bed that Naomi forthwith appropriated as her sleeping-place.

"Ever see sich a bed as tha-at?" asked her host, complacently.

"No," replied the girl. "I'm going to sleep here, and see what it feels like."

"Hear that, mammy?" laughed the good man. "She's that tuk with the old bed that she wants to sleep on hit."

"Nary bit of hit," said his wife, coming hastily to the rescue. "With the other rue-ume plumb full o' gue-ude beds, we hain't goin' to let strangers sleep thar."

"But I want to try it. I've never seen anything like it before," protested Naomi.

"Hain't? Well, *I declar!* Hit's good enough to lue-uke at, but hit hain't as soft to sleep in as a goose-feather bed. Come and hev your pick o' the others. You're powerful welcome."

"I can sleep on a bed of goose feathers any day," persisted Naomi. "I'm going to stay here, and try a real old-fashioned bed."

"Lor! hit's so powerful lonesome. You can jist as well sleep on one o' them six."

The good woman looked distressed.

"If you offer me all the six, I would rather stay here," said Naomi. "You promised me I should have my choice."

"Lor! let her hev her own way," said the host, good naturedly. "Hit's a si-ight what tickles some people."

But the thought of her six beds yet troubled his wife.

"Oh, pshar! You hain't no call to think hit's ary trouble hevin' another one in that rue-ume," she said. "Why, gal, you hain't used to hevin' a plenty. One bed in a rue-ume's too poor for me-e."

"No. I ain't used to it, that's just how it is," said Naomi, gravely. "I shall feel ever so much more at home here."

"Let her stop, mammy," said her host. "Maybe she'll be drappin' asleep faster 'n she would in the other rue-ume. Folks feels a right smart more comfortable with what they're used to, if hit hain't as good as they might hev."

CHAPTER VII

"THINGS look a sight more hopeful in the morning than they do after sundown."

Naomi had shaken off the depression of Cedar Fork with the mists of the night. It was past. Let it rest until it could be redeemed by the future. She braced herself to meet that future, which, by some inexplicable chance, was connected with an earlier past.

Notwithstanding the "lonesomeness" of her chosen sleeping-place, the girl had made such good use of her time that Siles and the other sons were dumb before the vision that met them at early dawn. The wearied face of the evening before had been too fair for safety; but this — they succumbed silently. Not so their mother. Silence and the good wife had nothing in common, unless it were a compact to keep well out of each other's way.

"Well, *I* de*clar!* Thar hain't no call to ask whether *you* slep' well."

She stood and stared at her visitor.

"Which of your parents do you favour?" she asked, after that careful scrutiny.

"Both; but my father most," said Naomi.

"Well, *I* de*clar!*" ejaculated the good woman. "He must 'a been a powerful handsome man."

Naomi smiled and sighed. The neighbourhood of Big Creek Gap had brought the past out of the region of imagination into that of reality. Along this road her father had driven his mules.

"Think you should know your pappy if you was to meet him?" asked her hostess, her thoughts taking the route along which Naomi's were travelling.

"Yes," replied the girl quietly.

"Lor! you *think* so," responded the woman. "I hain't so powerful sure. Folks gits plumb changed in that time, and bein' in the war hain't calc'lated to make 'em no handsomer."

"I should know my father," said Naomi, waiving the question of the war. "I was always 'father's girl.'"

There was a softening of her voice that gave it a new tone. The woman looked at her curiously.

"Well, *I* de*clar!* You hain't got real over hit yit, hev ye?" she said.

Naomi shook off her abstraction, and in the next half-hour so effectually turned the heads of Siles and the other "boys" that things began to look dangerous. The mother watched the girl.

"If you hain't got a score o' fellers runnin' atter you, I'm powerful sure hit hain't the fault o' the fellers," she said at last. "Lor! hit's a si-ight."

Just what it was that was a "si-ight" she did not need to explain. She was looking from the face and figure of the girl to the three tall sons who lingered near her.

"Better be gittin' along, hadn't ye?" she said, laughing. "Hit hain't safe to hev *you* here ary longer."

She sent them away with many good wishes.

"Well, *I* de*clar!* They du look a powerful pretty pair," she said, gazing after them with admiration in her eyes.

Perhaps it was admiration that caused another pair of sharp eyes to peer down in a strangely eager fashion at the brother and sister as they neared the Gap. The face to which the eyes belonged wore a startled look, and if a face so wizened and seamed and hardened by the pressure of time could be relied upon to speak the truth, bore witness to another feeling also.

"Whar's *she* come from, and whar's she aimin' to go this away?"

The voice was hoarse, like the grating sound of a worn-out bell. It creaked angrily, too. No, there was no admiration in the eyes, for they were surely vindictive.

The great basket of roots and herbs that the old tough arm had carried easily was deposited hastily on the ground, and brown fingers adorned with long claw-like nails were lifted to shade eyes that were as keen as ever after a hundred years of wear.

The watcher was on a point of vantage. A big rock that cropped out of the hillside back from the road gave her shelter, where she could see without being seen, and a sharp curve lent additional facilities, for the travellers were for the moment facing her. Naomi had just broken a long silence, in which brother and sister had been looking at the scene with eyes that saw back through the years. The girl's face was lighted by a smile.

No, there was no admiration in the inscrutable old face that was poked forward as the two approached.

"Thar's no mistakin' that face. Thar's evil a-comin'!"

The lips moved nervously, and a light that was surely malevolent shot out from the aged eyes towards the young face below. Those eyes watched until the curve was passed and only the backs of the travellers could be seen. Then the brown, dried-up fingers began again their search for roots, and the hoarse voice muttered: "Thar's evil a-comin'; but we shall se-e. Thar *is* ways. Yes, gal, we shall se-e."

She peered over again as fresh hoof-beats sounded upon the road, and then turned away in disdain.

"Hit's only old Gid Paul."

The horseman, a tall, bony mountaineer, pushed forward until he was alongside of the brother and sister.

"Howdy! Goin' to Big Creek?"

Both turned at his greeting.

"It's where we're aimin' to go," replied Dalbert; "but that don't look like getting there."

He pointed towards the wall of mountain that in the distance seemed to bar the way. The musical ripple of water betrayed the fact that between the heights that skirted the road on the left and those which sloped away at what looked barely more than a stone's throw to the right ran Big Creek itself, half the time hidden by the trees and bushes which overhung it. Right ahead the mountains opened out, to afford room for a densely wooded hill that to all appearance stretched from side to side of the defile.

"A powerful wild-lookin' place, hain't hit?" responded the native, "and a mighty lonesome one from here clar through the Gap."

"Where *is* the Gap?" asked Dalbert.

"To the left. You'll see hit in a minute."

He watched the brother and sister with some amusement. In his case, time and familiarity had toned down admiration even for such a scene as lay before him. It was the girl's face that claimed most of his attention. For the moment she had almost forgotten his presence. She was peopling this wild region with other forms than those of to-day.

As the travellers advanced, a dark, narrow passage disclosed itself, running in close under the mountain which formed the left boundary of the road. The stranger extended his arm towards it.

"Thar!" he said. "That's the Gap, and that's the gateway that all the fust settlers in these parts come through; and nary one comin' this away but's got to go through hit still."

"It looked more like a wall than a gateway a little further back," said Naomi.

The old man nodded sagely. Then he laughed.

"Hit's proved a mighty tough wall for some, if say-

in's don't lie," he said. "Thar's been them that's found hit a plumb easy gate to git in and a powerful hard one to git aout of."

The startled eyes of the girl turned to meet his.

"Why," she exclaimed, "is it dangerous?"

"Nary bit," was the reply. "Hit hain't a powerful rough road."

"Then why should any find difficulty in returning?" she asked.

The old man chuckled.

"Lor! hit's powerful easy to ride in a mule-back," he said.

"And not to ride aout again?"

"Hit all depends on circumstances," replied the native, sagely. "Mules don't take kindly to a dead hand."

He leaned forward a little to watch the effect of his words. Evidently it satisfied him; for he chuckled gleefully.

"My lor! don't be scart," he said. "Thar hain't nothin' goin' to stop *you* from gittin' aout."

"Why not, if other people were stopped?" asked the girl.

"Lor, mercy sakes! Thar hain't nothin' o' that sort happened since the war, and thar's them as says hit never happened afore. Let 'em say. They don't fool Gid Paul."

"Did you live here then?" asked Naomi, eagerly.

"Depends on whar you mean by here," he replied. "I hain't never lived in Big Creek, and I hain't never lived so powerful fur away."

"Then you should know what happened," said Dalbert.

"Yes, I *should*—and I *du*."

He turned his head and rode forward. They were at the entrance of the Gap, which had to all appearance been widening at every step they took towards it. Now

it disclosed a passage girt by towering rocks, with the road running along a ledge on the least precipitous side and Big Creek flowing over a stony bed below. That first ride through the Gap was a blank to Dalbert and Naomi, so far as scenery was concerned. They had a dim consciousness of vast rocks rising castle-like across the stream, and green stretches towering above the ledge on which their horses' feet sounded strange and unnatural; but every distinct impression was swallowed up in excitement evoked by the stranger's words. Had they come so soon upon the explanation of the silence that had fallen with such suddenness upon the past?

"You're powerful unflattering to your part of the country," said Dalbert, in a tone loud enough to reach the horseman ahead. "Anybody would think it was full of rogues."

The rider turned.

"They'd think plumb wrong," he said, and turned back.

Naomi and Dalbert exchanged glances.

"Travellers don't change to dead men where the road's safe and the people honest," said Naomi, somewhat hotly. "Unless, maybe, your country's unhealthy."

"Hit's powerful healthy now. Hit useter wasn't— for some people."

Again there was an amused chuckle.

"Well, you ain't very communicative," said Naomi, diplomatically. "I don't know but you're ri-ight. It's a smart sight better to say too little than too much. What a person can't prove, and ain't plumb sure of, he'd better not te-ell."

The long drawl with which the words concluded was suggestive of satire. It brought the stranger's head round.

"When Gid Paul hain't knowin' what he's talkin' abaout, he'll shet his mouth and keep hit shet," he said.

"Why, ye-es," replied the girl. "That's just what I'm saying. You ha-ave shut your mouth. It's a si-ight how much wiser some people are than others."

"If you think I don't know what I'm talkin' abaout, young woman, you're plumb aout," said the stranger, his voice rising with the strength of his feelings. "Thar hain't a man in Campbell County knowed Kennedy Poteet better 'n me. Hain't I fit him up and daown this Gap, and him throwin' rocks at every step? Hit was a si-ight! He was the fightin'est man round, but he was powerful careful how he come near me atter tha-at."

"Then you weren't friends?" hazarded Naomi.

"Friends! *Me* friends with Kennedy Poteet!"

He turned, and pushed forward in disgust.

"Had Kennedy Poteet anything to do with making this valley dangerous for travellers in the old time?" questioned Naomi, after a breathless pause.

"If he hadn't, thar was nary one that had," said the stranger, his eyes looking straight before him, and the sound of his voice going where it pleased.

"And did he dare to injure travellers?"

The man laughed.

"Thar warn't much Kennedy Poteet darsn't du," he said. "Lor, bless ye, *you* mayn't believe hit, but thar *has* been some strange things done daown thar in Big Creek. Thar's stars that has seed quar si-ights, I *tell* ye."

"The stars, and not the sun?" questioned Dalbert, in a tone that he forced to be quiet.

"Yes, the *stars*," replied the stranger irritably. "Kennedy Poteet warn't sich a plumb fool as to du *his* deeds by daylight."

"What *were* his deeds?"

The older man turned on the younger quickly.

"Lor! don't ask me-e," he said. "Maybe I don't know. I warn't thar, that's sure; but, unless folks is

powerful big liars, his deeds warn't of the best. Go and lueke in the bone cave if you're mighty anxious to see what sort o' deeds *he* done."

"The bone cave?"

Naomi's voice was shrill with the tension of the moment.

"Yes, the bone cave. They *du* say hit was thar he put 'em atter he'd done tuk all they'd got — and the biggest thing a man's got is his li-ife."

The last words were spoken meditatively.

"Do you mean that this Kennedy Poteet killed men and hid them in a cave?" asked Dalbert, with a ring of horror in his voice.

"Hit lueked powerful like hit," was the answer. "I hain't sayin' for plumb sure he done hit. I warn't thar. Hit was afore the war. I'd fit him more 'n onct when we was young: he was older 'n me, though. But I lived up thar forenenst that peak in the mountain when Kennedy Poteet begun to grow rich sudden. If I'd been nearer, he wouldn't 'a found hit so plumb easy to put 'em underground. I warn't fur away, but I was too fur to keep track o' *him*."

"But didn't people interfere? Didn't anybody know?" asked Naomi.

The horror in her voice was very apparent now.

"Thar warn't nobody that jist knowed," said the stranger, "and thar warn't nary man that would go down inter that bone cave to see — not then. They darsn't. Hit had got a bad name. Thar was them as said thar was bones in hit afore his time, and thar was them as said they warn't thar till Kennedy Poteet begun to put up travellers at that big house o' hisn. They come powerful often afore the war, goin' to and gittin' back from Georgy. They druv mules and hogs down thar, and come back with the money."

"And he robbed them of it?" said Dalbert.

"I hain't a-sayin' that," was the reply. "Nobody cain't be plumb sure. Thar's them as say he didn't. I hain't one of 'em. Anyhow, Kennedy Poteet got rich, and them strangers disappeared. That's all thar is to hit. Yander's Big Creek."

They had come to the outlet of the Gap. Big Creek Valley, broad and open, lay before them. The wild grandeur of the pass was all behind, where an anomalous figure that wore a man's hat and coat over a short skirt of homespun stood upon a commanding height and looked down at the stream and at a bend in the road where the horses had not long since passed. The lips were muttering, as they had muttered as the three riders moved beneath; and the words sounded like an incantation.

It needed no unholy arts to cast a spell over the brother and sister as they stopped and looked out into the valley. The words of the stranger had proved sufficient.

"Whar are you-uns aimin' to stay?" he asked.

"I'm going on to the saw-mill," replied Dalbert, absently.

"Are? Calc'latin' to git work thar?"

"I have got it," was the reply. "I'm the new superintendent."

"Say so? Hit's *all* new then, hain't hit?" observed the stranger. "We-el, you-uns needn't be scart. Kennedy Poteet hain't in Big Creek. He's gone to meet them he sent on ahead."

He rode straight on towards a highway that crossed the main road of the valley at right angles.

"You go that way," he said, without looking back.

The eyes of the brother and sister met. Naomi's face was whiter than usual.

"Is there any truth in it?" she gasped.

"I doubt it," replied Dalbert, trying to shake off the

feeling of oppression. "There was plenty of malice, anyhow. That man and Kennedy Poteet were enemies. It may be that is all there is about it."

"I don't know," said Naomi slowly. "But I'm going to know; and, if what he says is tru-ue,"—

She left the sentence unfinished, but Dalbert read part of its ending in her face.

"It's no use taking it that away," he said. "Even if it is true, this Kennedy Poteet is dead."

"Yes he's dead—more's the pity," said the girl. "But men shall know him for what he was. Ay, and if there's any belonging to him left here in Big Creek, they shall bear the punishment."

The girl's voice was low, but the passion in it thrilled through the air and through the heart of the listener. He turned upon her in surprise.

"Why, Naomi!" he said.

"Would you leave *his* death unavenged?" she asked sharply.

"I wouldn't avenge it on the innocent," he said.

"Innocent!" The scorn in her tone spoke for itself. "Son or daughter of a murderer is like to be *innocent*."

"We don't know yet that this Poteet *was* a murderer," said Dalbert, thoughtfully. "I don't want to believe it. And it's not certain. Our friend was too hot to be reliable."

"We shall se-e," replied Naomi; and they rode on in silence.

Out upon the valley road, through the village, and beyond it, to where the houses, which were never thick, grew scattered, they rode without speaking, except in answer to greetings. Men and women came to their doors to look after the pair.

"A tol'rable pretty man and woman," was the general comment; and "Whar be they a-goin'?" the common question.

"Follow the valley road till you come to the branch," had been the directions given by the mill owner.

"Where is the branch?" asked Dalbert, when the houses grew far between.

His sister came back to the present with a visible effort.

"Yonder is water," she said.

They crossed it just where an old house, large enough to be noticeable among its fellows, stood in a hollow, its long piazza shaded by apple trees, its broad front presenting a respectable and not unattractive face to the world.

"We turn off here, if we are to follow the branch," said Dalbert.

It was a genuine mountain road into which they passed, steep, rocky, and shut in,— a bit of life all to itself. They were mountain boy and girl, and they thought nothing of taking to the stream for a path. For some distance there was no other, except upon the hillside; and that, from its nature, was more suitable for pedestrians. Right before them, built under an overshading bank steep enough to make a respectable hill, with the road running above, and the opposite ridge shutting it and the "branch" in like a wall, was the mill.

"Good evening. I reckon I'm speaking to my new superintendent — or superintendents."

There was a laugh in the tone of the voice.

They had been so busy looking at the mill that neither Dalbert nor Naomi had seen the figure upon the road above. Now the eyes of both turned upward.

A merry, handsome face looked down at them — the face of the mill owner, or rather of the son of the mill owner, though the distinction is unnecessary. The speaker was practically the owner of the building before them. Shorter and squarer built than Dalbert, he looked but a year or two older.

"You are speaking to Dalbert Mozingo," was the answer.

"Ah! I thought so. I'm Will Hollingsworth. I've been looking for my superintendent since yesterday — but I've got more than I looked for."

The last words were spoken reflectively. His eyes were fixed on Naomi.

"My sister rode through with me," said Dalbert, a little stiffly. "We are in the habit of keeping house together."

"Lucky fellow," replied the young man, with a smile that was not meant for Dalbert. "Won't you get off that animal's back and come in and see the mill? You must be powerful tired if you've come from beyond Jellico to-day."

The invitation was not intended for the new superintendent, though that young man chose to accept it as offered to himself.

"Yes, I'll come in and look," he said. "The sooner I get to work, the better, after I have seen my sister to some safe resting-place."

"Oh, you can come or stay, just as you like," said the mill owner, lightly. "It won't hurt *you* to sit a bit longer astride a horse's bones. I wasn't fretting about *you*, but ladies are different. Won't you alight?"

He came down the bank headlong, and was drawing near to assist Naomi. Her foot touched the ground as he reached her.

"Thank you, we have not come far to-day," she said. "You need not trouble about Duke. He'll stand."

They went into the mill together.

The mill owner was very thorough in his exhibition of the machinery. He led the way from one part of the building to another in leisurely fashion, taking frequent occasion to look back into the face of his superintendent's sister.

"I'm glad you came here first," he said, when he could find no further excuse for lingering; and again his words were not meant for his new superintendent. "It was quite the right thing; for since you belong to Dalbert, and Dalbert belongs to the mill, it's not hard to establish that you belong to the mill, too."

Naomi smiled.

"It's not powerful hard to make a claim," she said.

To all appearance the mill owner found that smile sufficient compensation for his trouble. He went back into the mill with a light step, and was observed to be unusually abstracted at intervals during the rest of the day.

CHAPTER VIII

"HAIN'T that gospel truth? Hain't that jist what my old man said?"

The speaker shifted one lean elbow from position on her knee, and vigorously nudged her nearest neighbour. The flame, dancing up into the waning daylight, threw a weird glow on the wizened old face poked forward towards it; and a rook in a tree overhead suddenly uttered a solemn caw. The elbow came into position again, and the wrinkled hand took a fresh grip on the twist of home-cured tobacco held in readiness to replenish the pipe that the lips grasped firmly.

Nearly a score of grey heads nodded assent to the proposition, and Big Creek winked knowingly from between its low banks. Big Creek was full of vagaries to-night. The stream twinkled and winked and tossed back the red glow of the fires, and then fled coyly to the deep darkness of some shadowed pool to rest and grow decorous again. A few hundred yards back it lay still and dark in a place where rock ledges on either side forced it into limits too strait for mirth. Cold and clear and free from all quips and quirks, it slid noiselessly past the perpendicular faces of its jailers in a grand, unruffled curve, and then, freed from control, flowed out gleefully to grassy stretches, and took to wild ways as it reddened and flashed and flirted with the light of half a dozen fires kindled along its banks, chattering and gurgling with laughter at the grotesque shadows it caught on its bosom.

Big Creek had known nothing of loneliness in this part of its course to-day; for a Baptist "Association"

was being held, and men and women from all the country round had come together in its neighbourhood. The stream gleamed and rioted like a young thing to-night. It was hardly the influence of association that made it send up youthful flashes into the lessening daylight, for the figures that moved on its banks had long ago lost the elasticity of youth. The eyes that peered into its waters were a little dim with age — well-spectacled, though, and sharp-sighted at close quarters. They were acting at close quarters to-night, staring into the fire or into their neighbours' faces. Weather-beaten, time-graven faces were those on which the fire-light gleamed. Wrinkles were plentiful, carved by the hard hand of character fully as often as by the relentless finger of time. Those old men in long, undyed jeans coats of the scissor-tailed pattern had a past — and it was a long one. It belonged to the day of the white-haired, spectacled women in homespun, who sat elbow to elbow with their contemporaries of the scissor-tailed coats, and smoked their pipes around the fires in peace and amity, while the daylight waned, and a few belated rooks cawed in unsettled fashion in a near-by tree, and Big Creek laughed in the faces of the talkers.

Among the company there were undoubtedly mouths that had not yet learned to drop into deep creases of wisdom; but they were babbling youthful talk back among the trees, where the shadows were more at home than the lights. The places of honour around the fires were filled by men and women well seasoned with age, old residents who knew the traditions of the hillsides, and could speak with weight and authority. Not an old man or woman — save one — within thirty miles but had come to the "Association" to listen to the sermons and to talk with old friends over old times and old beliefs. For the gathering was of a religious character, and Big Creek valley was staunch for religion and for the old "hard-shell" Baptist faith.

They failed to find the time long as they waited between the sermons for the coming of some minister who may have had to ride a hundred miles for the privilege of expounding to them the old-time Baptist doctrine. They found plenty to talk about around the glowing embers of the fires lighted on the shores of the creek. There was no fear of failing interest. Deep-set eyes stared through their spectacles into the fires, and old faces lighted and grew eager, as weird stories of witches and witchcraft fell on ears long accustomed to such recitals. With elbows squared on knees and heads bent forward, those veteran story-tellers listened, nodding grave assent to every proposition. As the daylight failed, a score of tiny points of light gave glowing evidence of pipes held lovingly between clinging lips.

"We-all know what witches and wizards is, and he hain't much less 'n a born fool that contrairies 'em," declared the speaker of the moment.

"That's plumb true."

"That's gospel truth, hain't hit?"

"That's jist what I say."

"Hit costs a sight more to contrairy 'em than to give 'em what they're atter," continued the speaker. "Thar *is* men so powerful determined though that they're plumb blind. Ever hear tell abaout John Powell's horse?"

One or two heads nodded sagely, but the rest remained non-committal.

"Hit was aout beyond Hickory Creek," pursued the speaker, "and hit happened a right smart while ago. I was nothin' but a little toad when John Powell died. Thar was a woman livin' aout thar named Emme*line* Ark. She had a sister called Eva*line*. Eva*line* was a good-sensed woman, so I've heared, but Emme*line*,—thar, hit hain't no good denyin' that Emme*line* was quarturned, rarl quar-turned. She'd come along and look

with them little black eyes o' hern right in at a door, and they'd hear her mutter as she passed, 'Thar'll be trouble in this house to-day'; and sure as noontide follers atter mornin,' afore the sun sot thar would be."

Grey heads nodded, and white smoke was puffed reflectively towards the fire.

"Thar was some that hadn't no likin' for Emme*line*," continued the narrator. "They useter shet their doors when they seed her comin'. John Powell was that away. He'd never hev her in his house. He'd drive her off sometimes. Hit hain't a lucky thing to du. Hit useter wasn't, and hit hain't now."

"Hain't that gospel truth?"

"Hain't that so?"

"Hain't that good-sensed talk?" commented the hearers.

"Hit was a day in March, if I hain't aout in my reckonin'," the old man went on; "and John was a-ridin' a black horse o' hisn that he sot a sight o' store by. Hit was a powerful windy day, and he was a-ridin' slow, when all of a suddent he saw Emme*line* Ark a-goin' on ahead of him. She'd done got by him without his seein' her, for thar warn't no place whar she could 'a turned inter the road without passin' him. As I was sayin', thar was a powerful wind blowin' that day, and hit was blowin' from plumb ahead of John. Well, he rode on, and Emme*line* she went faster 'n him. When she'd got a right smart away, he heared her mutter, jist as she useter mutter when she come past his door, 'You won't never git no more good o' that horse, John Powell!' She never spoke up a mite. She jist muttered hit low and angry-like. John heared hit, though. Hit come to him on the wind as plain as if Emme*line* was standin' thar by his side. Hit was powerful funny, but hit was *so*."

"I hain't doubtin' hit. Hit's strange enough, but

hit's gospel truth. I've heared my dad tell abaout hit years ago, and hit's sure as the grave."

The words came creaking out in hoarse, raspy tones, as if the voice that uttered them had grown rusty with age.

Heads wagged sagely at this corroboration of the story, and twenty lips ceased puffing smoke as the bottoms of twenty pipes were reached.

"I hain't denyin' that John was scart some," proceeded the story-teller. "Hit stands to reason he *was*."

"That's powerful true."

"Hit *does*, and that's gospel truth."

Twenty pairs of hands were busy with twists of tobacco, and twenty pipes were emptied of their ashes.

"John rid on to whar he was goin'," resumed the speaker; "but he hadn't no heart to stay. He thought a powerful sight o' that black horse, and he was plumb sure Emme*line* hadn't spoke for nothin'. And no more she hadn't. He rid that horse home; and, if you'll believe hit,"—here the speaker leaned forward, scooped up a hot coal from the fire, and deftly lighted the fresh tobacco,—"that animal wouldn't touch a mite o' food, not to save his life."

Nineteen hands reached forward to the glowing embers, and nineteen pairs of lips puffed silently; then twenty stars shone again in the darkness, and the listeners found their voices.

"Thar hain't nary doubt of hit."

"Hit's jist like my old man told, hain't hit?"

"Hit's a sight how sich things happen, but they du."

"The horse was sick for a mighty long spell," continued the old man, "and atter hit got well hit was that contrairy that John didn't know which away to turn. He done tried everything he knew, but he never got no more good o' that black horse."

"I hain't doubtin' hit a bit," responded a little old

woman with a small shrunken face entirely dominated by the eyes. "Thar's things I've seed myself that's plumb took my breath away. Lor, thar's the match o' that Emme*line* Ark left in more 'n one place yit."

"That's so."

"Thar hain't no doubt of hit."

"Hit wouldn't be powerful fur you'd hev to go to find *one*."

A dozen heads nodded significantly towards the mountains that lay over by the Gap, and for a moment silence fell on the group. It is safe to say that the thoughts of all the members of the party had travelled in one direction.

"No, I hain't sayin' thar's ary thing that sort cain't du when they're sot on hit," continued the little old woman. "But hit's a si-ight how some people are scart of 'em. Lor, hit hain't so plumb sure thar *hain't* ways o' stoppin' 'em."

A dozen elbows made comment in the shape of vigorous nudges.

"Thar was a man up to Laurel Fork that I heared my mam tell abaout," the little old woman went on, "and he and his woman was the determindest pair the sun ever sot eyes on. What he started aout to du was plumb sure to be done, and what she aimed at she was never knowed to miss."

"We-ell! Hear that now!"

Elbows moved eloquently, and the old woman proceeded.

"Thar warn't no wizard nor witch a match for the-em. Not that they was let alone. Thar was plenty that had a grudge agin' 'em. Thar mostly is, when folks is pretty prosperous. Thar hain't never no lack of ill wishers when a body's gittin' up in the world."

"Hain't that gospel truth?"

"Hain't that so?"

"Hain't that powerful sure?"

Nudging became energetic.

"Thar came a time," continued the speaker, "when the cow they was dependin' on failed 'em all at onct. They didn't git more 'n a quart at a milkin', and she'd been a givin' nigh upon a bucketful twice a day. They said nary word the fust time hit happened, but the next"—

She stopped impressively, and the elbows moved.

"When hit come home to that man that his cow was spelt," she resumed, "thar was a powerful time. Him and his woman was plumb put aout. 'I reckon I know who's to blame for hit,' he says. 'I'll fix *hi-im* afore he's a day older.' So he took the little bitty drap o' milk she'd give, and went inter the house. 'Thar's ways o' fixin' hi-im,' says he."

"And he was ri-ight. That's gospel truth," broke in a listener. "Thar *is* ways."

"I reckon," replied the narrator. "He warn't a plumb fool. 'What 'll you du?' asked his woman. 'I'll shoot him,' he says, for he was powerful worked up. 'But you hain't sure which on 'em hit is,' she says. 'Thar's more 'n one around here would powerful like to he'p us on to sorrer.' 'Then I'll find aout,' says he, loud and angry. '*I'll* draw him here, let him come from this away or that away.' 'I hain't a-blamin' ye,' says his woman; and with that he tuk the milk"—

"That you, Abner Poteet? Howdy! Goin' to wait for the preachin'?"

The interruption came from the oldest man in the company. He turned to greet a new-comer.

"Howdy. Yes, I reckon I will. Hain't the preacher come along yit?"

The speaker, a broad-shouldered, broad-chested man of thirty or thereabouts, stopped where the firelight shone full on his face. His lips smiled tentatively, as if the smile were not fully assured of its welcome.

"Come and set a bit," invited the old man who had interrupted the story. "He'll likely be here afore long."

"Well, I hain't sure that I won't. Hit's powerful lonesome aout thar in the dark."

The new-comer accommodated himself with a seat on the grass.

"We're a-settin' and talkin' a bit," explained the old man. "We had a check o' supper awhile ago, and now we're fillin' up the time till preachin'. We done found the fire the best company."

"Hit is that," replied the younger man.

"You'd oughter brought a horse-shoe along, Ab, to keep off the witches," said another of the old men. "Ab hain't powerful fond o' witches," he added.

"No, I hain't," said the younger man. "I hain't no reason to be, and no more hain't nobody. Thar hain't no call to make jokes abaout 'em. They du a sight o' mischief, and the trouble they make hain't no joke."

"That's powerful true. That's jist what I was a-sayin'," continued the little old woman, eager to take up the thread of her story. "That man and his woman that I was a-tellin' abaout thought jist as you du. Hit warn't no joke to them, losin' the milk o' their best cow. 'I'll fix *him*,' says he; and with that he put the drap o' milk she'd give right into a pot, and hung hit plumb over the fire. 'Go and git some holly brush,' says he, and his woman got hit. And them two stood and whipped that milk with the holly brush till they'd whipped hit clar outer the pot, and, when hit was all gone, he says, 'Thar, now we'll see who's the witch.'"

"That's so. That's gospel truth, hain't hit?" interrupted another old woman. "Hit's a gue-ude way to find aout, and I don't know as thar's a better."

"Well," resumed the story-teller, "they waited. And hit warn't long afore in come an old man that was neighbour to 'em. He looked all doubled up and tol'ra-

ble mis'rable, and, when the woman seed him, she hitched her husband. 'See that?' says she. And he hitched her back, and 'Keep still, don't say a word,' says he. And the man come in, and drapped on a seat. He was all done aout, he was that mis'rable and sufferin'. 'I want to borrer your nag and the meal-sack,' says he."

"Ah!"

"Hear that!"

"We-ell now!"

The comments over, the old woman resumed.

"'Git him the meal-sack,' says the man, and his woman got up, and give hit to him. They seed him ride away, all doubled up and sufferin'. 'Thar,' says the man, 'I knowed hit was hi-im.' 'We've done fixed him,' says his woman. 'He cain't du *us* no more harm now he's done borrered ary thing of ourn. Thar 'll be plenty o' milk to-night.' And thar was," continued the old woman. "Hit warn't more 'n an hour afore they seed that thar neighbour come ridin' back, whistlin' and comfortable. 'You thought you'd done a fine thing makin' me borrer your nag and your meal-sack,' he says; but he looked plumb foolish when he said hit. 'You let my cows alone atter this, or I'll du somethin' worse,' says the man, and he spoke gospel truth."

"That's so."

"That's powerful true."

"He could 'a done hit," came the response from different lips.

"Yes, he could 'a done hit; and he knowed hit. Him and his woman" —

"Look thar! Hain't that the preacher?"

The eyes of the little woman rolled round in the direction indicated.

"Hit's tol'rable plain that hit is," she said.

"Then we'll be gittin' ur-rp. Thar won't be a sight more time afore the preachin'."

Limbs grown a little stiffer than usual from long sitting stretched themselves, and their owners struggled to their feet. The men stuffed their pipes into their pockets, and the women deposited theirs in little bags hanging upon their arms.

"Here, granny, here's yer poke. Better be tol'rable quick gittin' yer pipe put away in hit. We'll set off when you're ready. Thar hain't goin' to be near enough rue-ume in thar for us-all."

The trembling fingers of the oldest woman of the party clutched the little bag held towards her, and feebly dropped pipe and tobacco therein.

"Yes, we'll be a-goin'," she said, fumbling at the strings. "I'd be awful proud to hear the preachin'."

She hung the "poke" on her arm, and started for the nearest house. It was not large enough to accommodate a quarter of the company assembled. Before many minutes its rooms were packed with old men and women and a sprinkling of the younger element. Of this latter there was a larger representation outside.

Abner Poteet was one of those who found a seat within the house. He took up a position near a window, where he could see the faces massed close to the opening. It was no new thing to see Abner at a preaching. There was not a sermon that had been preached in Big Creek Gap for years that Abner Poteet had not listened to,— listened to, not simply attended. The deep-set, honest eyes under Abner's shaggy eyebrows had a trick of fastening themselves on the preacher's lips and remaining immovable. It would have been possible, by watching those eyes, for a deaf man to inform himself of the trend of the sermon. Wistful and questioning when dogmatic teaching fell from the preacher's lips, they grew sad and solemn under messages of warning; and when the speaker waxed eloquent in denunciation, the eyes took to themselves an expres-

sion of trembling fear. They had been known to darken with horror under the vivid pictures of future wrath presented by some especially powerful speaker, and to melt with tenderness when a rare message of peace dropped from the lips of a more gentle herald of truth.

To-night they wandered a little, but that was before the preaching began. The wandering must have been caused by the proximity of the window, for it was in that direction they turned. Or perhaps it was not so much the window that was to blame as the heads that could be seen close to it, clustered outside in the light that streamed dimly through the open space. A dozen lanterns or more, and two or three lamps, illumined the interior, but outside the light shone faintly, putting the faces in half shadow.

Was it the old face or the young one, in a pair so close together that a glance at one necessarily included the other, that drew the eyes of Abner Poteet from the lighted room to the darker exterior, or were the faces in no way responsible, but the look one of mere curiosity to ascertain how many people were gathering about the building? Any man might have been excused for turning his head to look again at those faces, though one was the face of an elderly woman. A little, sinewy figure, with the grace of perfect proportion, was the foundation for a small, well-poised head that held itself fearlessly. Its owner had seen some fifty years of life, but, to all appearance, she had seen therein nothing to daunt her or to bring fear to those bright black eyes that looked mirthfully or wrathfully out on the world, as the case might be, but never looked helplessly or hopelessly thereat. The small, gypsy-like face wore the rich, dark tint more often seen in real southern climes, and the mouth, that looked as if fashioned solely for purposes of beauty, but that could open in forcible speech

on occasion, was warm with the hue of perfect health. It was hardly a wonder that Abner Poteet looked more than once at that face — or was it at the one held near, but a full head above? The same dark rich tint, the same brightness of colouring, the same perfection of form, were prominent in that younger face; but, though this lacked nothing in sprightliness, it gained something in stateliness. A veritable gypsy queen was this girl who stood by her mother's side, and looked in at the window when the preaching was about to begin.

An expression akin to contentment settled on Abner's face as he saw the two pressed closer to the window by the action of the crowd beyond. Was he blessing the fate that made it not quite easy for the pair to move away until the sermon was over?

There would in any case have been little fear. The preacher that night was a "powerful eloquent man," a light in the community where his name never failed to draw a crowd of listeners. A good, strong-voiced, strong-bodied, strong-minded man was this preacher of to-night, one who felt that he knew well the ways of the Governor of this world, and that those ways — as he knew them — were right. He had as little doubt of his knowledge as he had of the wisdom of the ways that to him were very far from being "past finding out." A whole-souled, determined man, whose preaching was calculated to disturb sinners and strengthen saints,— if they were not timorous saints, and were quite sure of their sainthood, — was this chosen speaker. And, before he had concluded his sermon, he felt that he had had a good time, and that his words had not fallen short of their designed effect.

He would have been still more sure, had he looked into the eyes of Abner Poteet. They were placid and satisfied — hopeful even — when he gave out his text. Then there came upon them a darkness as sudden as

the eclipse of the sunlight when the sky is over-swept by a thunder-cloud driven before a strong wind.

"Visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me."

In deep, sonorous tones the words rolled out through the crowded rooms. Old men and women settled themselves comfortably to listen; and one hearer, and only one, gave a start as of horror.

"The sins of the fathers!"

Abner Poteet turned from the speaker, and sent one quick, almost imploring glance at the face framed in the window opening. The eyes were not looking his way, and he turned back to the preacher.

That text lost no force in the hands of the exhorter chosen for this particular evening. He intended his sermon as a warning, and he meant that it should be profitable. He dealt in sorrow and doom, in the foreordained punishment of the children of evil doers. His thoughts were so full of the evil doers that there was no room left in them for the children — doomed to the visitation of wrath. He spoke of sin; and his voice rose and rose till it filled the room and overflowed it, and went ringing down to Big Creek itself, grown still now, and glimmering with but a faint, sad light from the dying fires. And still it rose, and the blackness of sin grew more apparent, till the strength of the preacher — long enduring — gave out, and the voice broke and needed the refreshment of the water placed conveniently near.

The speaker would have been more than ever assured that his sermon was a success if he had chanced to look into one pair of eyes, fixed as if in fascination upon him. Shame and horror mingled there with hopeless assent. The listener made no mental protest. His eyes acquiesced in the proposition of the exceeding evil of sin, and took the strong accusations of the preacher home as if by right.

But when the speaker came to the second half of his discourse, and turned to the fate of the children of evil doers, an expression of positive fear came upon the broad, open face of the listener. The hand that lay upon his knee shook. Visited on the children! The justice of such visitation was clear enough to the trembling heart of the hearer, as clear as to the brain of the preacher, where the doctrine of unmitigated but vicariously deserved punishment had been worked out in bold, convincing arguments. Visited on the children! Why not — except that the preacher showed no under side of love and tenderness present even in the visitation?

"What will you bring against the verdict?" cried the speaker, in a voice that would have brought the roof off that Big Creek cottage if the wooden pins with which it was secured had not been tied firmly in beneath. As it was, it only took away the breath of the speaker and the last ray of hope from the heart of a hearer.

"Nothing," whispered that heart, in patient acquiescence in sorrow.

"That's powerful convincin'," whispered a croaking voice, as an old man leaned forward to his "old woman" to express his appreciation of the sermon.

She nodded assent, and the room became expectantly silent again. The preacher was ready to proceed.

"To the third and fourth generation."

Abner Poteet started. To the third and fourth? What? Would the curse not stop at the heart that felt it weighing down within itself, heavy enough to sink all joy and bitter enough to poison all good? The third and fourth generation? Abner Poteet cast one long, despairing glance at that brightly tinted face by the window.

"Hit's got to stop right here — that visitin'," he whispered. "She hain't goin' to share hit, nor none that would be hers. The third and fourth generation!"

His hand went up and wiped drops of perspiration from his forehead and lips. The eloquence of the speaker remained unabated.

"Hain't that God Almighty's truth?" asked an old woman when the congregation dispersed; and she never doubted that it was,— and the whole of it.

As for one sore heart, it had no courage left to allow its owner to seek, even for a moment, the presence of the girl who turned away from the window and was quickly lost in the darkness. Abner Poteet went homeward alone, shunning the groups who were loudly discussing the sermon just ended. That solitary journey was sure proof of the engrossment of his thoughts. On any other occasion he would have sought the company of one of the parties that trooped behind a glimmering lantern carried by some traveller of forethought. To-night he avoided them all.

Down the steep rocky road that led past the new mill, and out into the valley road, to the hollow, where, backed by low hills, the old house that Naomi had noticed frowned dark and solemn, Abner walked, his thoughts still of the sermon.

"I knowed hit afore. Hit hain't as if hit was new," he said, and there were none to see that in the darkness his lips trembled. When he came directly opposite the big, silent house, from the windows of which no friendly light looked out, he stopped, and stood staring at its dark outline. It was years since Abner Poteet had stood before that house without the comfortable presence of daylight to reassure him.

"The sins of the fathers!" he whispered; and a deep shudder passed through his frame. His hands shook as with palsy.

"A life for a life!" he muttered, after a long silence. "That hain't the end of hit. That's only in this world, and man's visitin'. Thar's more 'n that. Thar's God's

visitin'. Thar's a many that 'll be shet aout, but thar's a special visitin' o' wrath on them that's the children of evil doers. Thar's a singlin' aout from among the rest to visit on 'em the evil their fathers deserved. Thar's their own sins, and their fathers', too."

He turned away with one last, long, shuddering look at the dark building that seemed in some mysterious way to be connected with the sermon of the evening.

Still along the valley road, but away from instead of towards the village of Big Creek Gap, Abner Poteet stumbled in the darkness. A single turn brought him in sight of a little log cabin standing back from the road. He pushed open a gate, latching it carefully behind him, and walked heavily up the path. No light greeted him here, any more than at the larger house he had just left; but he did not shudder as he stooped to fit the key in the old wooden lock. A faint red glow from the hearth met his eye as he came within the room. It brought with it a dim sense of comfort and safety. Hastily closing the door, stepping over the deeply burned impression of a horseshoe on the threshold, imprinted there for safety against the wiles of the witches, Abner came over and raked the embers together. Then he reached out, and took a handful of chips from a box by the chimney corner. In a moment a bright flame shot up, and showed the clean, bare room, empty of everything but the simplest necessaries of existence.

The owner of the dwelling stood and looked round it, with a dazed expression on his face. Gradually, as his eyes fell on familiar objects, the lines softened. He dragged an old wooden arm-chair to the hearth, and sat down on it. His foot touched a hot horseshoe kept in the embers to insure the safety of the chickens against hawks.

"They're he'pless things, and cain't fight with a hawk. We've done got to he'p 'em," Abner had said when he

put the cold iron on the hearth. "Thar's nary hawk can swoop down on 'em while that's thar. Hit may hover, and hover, and lueke tol'rable like swoopin'; but hit cain't never hurt 'em while the horse-shoe's warm on the hearth inside."

His eyes were not on the horse-shoe to-night. He had forgotten it was there. His thoughts were of warding off evil; but before his mind's eye was a beautiful girlish face, quivering with life. He looked round on the room and its furnishings.

"Hit hain't like she's got, but she could 'a made hit 'most as good as hern," he said wistfully. "I'd 'a built another rue-ume or two, and we-uns could 'a gone away to the store and got a right smart o' things" —

His voice dropped into silence, and left the picture unfinished. The wistful look deepened, and became one of positive pain.

"The third and fourth generation!" he said at last. "Hit 'll stop afore hit gits thar. Thar shain't be more 'n the one generation to bear hit."

He dropped his head on his hands, and the room was still as death.

CHAPTER IX

BIG Creek Gap had become a reality to the son and daughter of Dalbert Mozingo the elder. And the mystery of the past had resolved itself into a wild, horror-laden suspicion, that took hold of the brother and sister and refused to be shaken off. Naomi made no effort to be rid of it. Strong of courage and of passion, the girl's heart afforded a dangerous resting-place for hints such as those dropped by the stranger of the Gap. They had set her brain and soul on fire. The spirit of the mountains in their fiercer mood was strongly incorporated with the gentler phases of the Southern character in this maid of the Kentucky hills. She found in her heart no shrinking from a knowledge of the truth. Pity for the fate of the father she had loved with all the passion of a child's tenderness was so mingled with the fire of fierce wrath against his murderer that its pain was scorched out of recognition. Her heart was sore, but it was as much with anger as with grief.

Not so her brother. With Dalbert every filial feeling protested against this solution of the mystery. It had been bad enough to think of his father as the victim of some terrible accident, but to believe that he died thus— He recoiled from the thought with horror. He would have been glad to shake it off, to believe the whole story a fabrication of the old man's who had acted as guide through the pass. Perhaps he would have succeeded but for his sister. She said little on the subject after the first day of their arrival at Big Creek. But he knew she had not forgotten.

For the present there was much to be done in the

way of establishing themselves in the village. The mill owner proved a zealous assistant in the matter of finding a habitation and settling his new superintendent — or rather his superintendent's sister — therein. His good-humoured laugh rang out through the empty house; and, when the household goods arrived, he turned his hand to furnishing with a readiness of resource that amused Naomi.

"You can attend to the mill, Dal," he would say, with amazing coolness dismissing his assistant to his duties. "You understand that business better than I do. I'm no hand at machinery. I'll stay with your sister here, and see she don't get lonesome."

And he did see. Between his assistance and the amount of work to be done, Naomi found the days anything but long. The life at Big Creek Gap was wider than that at Cedar Fork; and the mill owner, though comparatively a new-comer himself, could give much information regarding it. Already Cedar Fork was assuming the mistier forms of the past, as Big Creek and its possible tragedy grew fuller and clearer in Naomi's sight.

In Big Creek Gap tragedy was surely not all of the past. There was trace of it, even to-day, in the wrinkled, determined face pressed close to the window-pane of Naomi's kitchen. For a moment a pair of old eyes and a pair of young ones met. Only for a moment. Then the old eyes went down; and the figure stooped till the hands, with long claw-shaped nails that had been untrimmed for years, scraped the ground as if in search of roots. Those deep-set, angry eyes had looked into the girl's face before,— looked leisurely, from the shelter of a great rock upon the other side of Big Creek Gap. They were nearer now, and the gaze was of necessity more hurried. There was nothing but the window between the old face and the young one, and that would not

intervene long. Naomi's hand was already on the sash.

"Who is she, and what does she want?" she asked, startled by the gleam of those fierce eyes.

Naomi had not been present at the meetings of the Baptist "Association" the day before, or those eyes might have recalled to her stories of witches and witchcraft. The face pressed close to the window glass was the only old face for miles around that had not been seen in that gathering of the ancient representatives of Big Creek Gap and its neighbourhood.

The sash for a moment resisted the girl's efforts. Then it yielded.

"Were you looking for me?" she began, and stopped. The space without the house was empty.

"She must be a witch," exclaimed Naomi, with a half laugh. She did not know how unanimously Big Creek would have echoed her words.

She went outside, and looked round the corner of the house. Unless her gaze had penetrated a dense clump of bushes some hundred yards away, she could not have found the figure she sought. Strange and unlike the community about her was the woman who crouched among those bushes and peered out at the girl. From the brogans that covered her feet to the limp, unkempt hair beneath the man's hat upon her head, she was an object peculiar enough to warrant the awed curiosity with which Big Creek regarded her when she passed. Her brown wrinkled hands were suggestive of a mummy, but the curve of the lips told of a spirit very much alive within that dried-up outer case of flesh.

"No, hit's plumb sure. Thar hain't nary place for doubt. Thar's no mistakin' that face anywhars. Thar'll come evil aout of hit — to somebody."

There was a sinister gleam in the eyes; and the lips that had opened to disclose two solitary, tusk-like teeth,

set in the upper and lower jaw respectively, shut with a snap.

If Naomi had seen that mouth and those eyes just then, it is possible she would not have gone back into the kitchen so contentedly, nor have left it as readily a few minutes later to run across to the nearest house. She had hardly disappeared when a tall, bent form came boldly out of the bushes, and walked into the kitchen the girl had just left. The old woman glanced curiously round the room, and passed on. Was it by some occult means that she divined the direction in which to turn her steps? Possibly there were signs by which she recognized a maiden's chamber, but of a certainty she did not hesitate. Her feet carried her unfalteringly into the room which the girl had appropriated as her own.

"Thar *is* ways," she said, and advanced to the bed, covered with a wondrous quilt of elaborate design.

Was she studying the workmanship of that quilt, that she bent over it so assiduously, the dry, wrinkled fingers of one hand clutching it tightly as those of the other moved over its surface?

"Thar *is* ways," she repeated, as she crossed the threshold again; and she said the words aloud.

She was hardly out of sight on her way to the Gap when a boy darted into the house where Naomi was talking to a neighbour.

"Lor me! you've had a visitor," he shouted, interrupting the conversation with the assurance of the bearer of news.

Naomi turned to him with a smile.

"Who was it?" she asked with some indifference.

"China Partins. Lor! you don't know he-er. She's a *wi-itch!*"

The shock head of the boy wagged with importance. He looked from one to the other of his hearers.

"What was *she* doin' thar?"

The woman's voice rose with excitement. She could appreciate the situation better than could this girl who was a stranger.

"I hain't plumb sure," responded the boy. "She was in thar a right smart while."

"Better go and see, girl," advised the woman, and she manifested her appreciation of her own advice by following it herself.

"Lor me! China Partins don't go inter no house for nothin'," she remarked, as she hurried along by Naomi's side. "Thar wouldn't many welcome her, and she knows hit, though thar hain't one in twenty dare shew her she hain't wanted. You mark my words, darter, she hain't up to no good."

The house was as Naomi had left it, or appeared to be so. It was not until they went into Naomi's room that sign of the visitor was discovered. It was the neighbour who stepped hastily over to the bed, and stood for a full minute silently contemplating the quilt, a magnificent specimen of the lone star pattern.

"Lor me! Mercy sakes!" she gasped at last. "Hain't that jist what I said? I knowed she warn't here for no good. Look a-thar, girl!"

Naomi's eyes followed the direction of the extended finger, and lighted upon the quilt. What strange freak was this, for an old woman to come sticking needles and pins in her bed? Naomi counted them hastily,—eighteen in all, nine of a kind. Then she stood staring at them in blank astonishment.

"Nine new needles and nine new pins," said the neighbour, in awed tones. "They're plumb new, every one of 'em. Lor! hit's awful."

Naomi looked down upon them. Yes, they were surely new, every one of the eighteen. She was too thoroughly a mountain girl herself not to understand that their appearance there was a threat of evil.

"Hit's a spell, that's what hit is," said the woman, impressively.

Naomi laughed, but the laugh was not quite easy.

"Why should she have a grudge against me?" she said. "The old woman must be crazy."

"No, she hain't," was the response. "China Partins hain't crazy, though she's a hundred if she's a day. She's a wi-itch, that's what *she* is. Lor! everybody's scart at her. Thar hain't nobody been inside her house this ten year and more. Thar was old A'nt Riley 'lowed she'd go thar and visit. Mercy! She sot aout, but she never got thar. No, she didn't. China Partins met her in the Gap, and she muttered words that started A'nt Riley's teeth chatterin', and afore she knowed hit she was turnin' round to come back this away. She didn't git home so easy, though. Gin she'd got nigh upon clar o' the Gap, thar come up sich thunder and lightnin' as warn't never seed this away neither before nor since. Yes'm. And A'nt Riley was shocked by the lightnin'. She warn't killed, but she was shocked powerful bad. She didn't come to herself for hours atter, and when she did, she 'lowed it was all along o' China Partins. Yes, she's a witch, sure enough. Hit hain't safe to contrairy her."

Naomi was at a loss to know how she *had* "contrairied" this old woman whom she did not even know. She would have denied the possibility altogether, but the memory of those fierce-looking eyes that had gazed in at her through the glass arrested the denial as well as the laugh that was on her lips. How she had "contrairied" her she could not tell, but the fact seemed fairly evident.

As she drew the needles and pins from the quilt, the girl was wondering whether danger still lurked in this Tennessee valley as it had lurked when her father came here years before.

"The old hag!" said Will Hollingsworth, when he

came in with Dal that evening and heard the story. "We shall have to teach her better manners."

Dalbert took the matter more seriously.

"She resents our coming here, for some reason," he said. "It looks mighty like trying to drive us away."

"Let her try," responded Naomi, with the slightest possible access of colour in her cheeks. "It will take more than old China Partins for tha-at."

Dalbert had not much time to spare for witches. He was throwing his whole heart into his new work. Will Hollingsworth smiled, a little satirically, at the amount of energy expended by the new superintendent. There was not as much to do here as at Cedar Fork, for the mill owner confined his attention simply to the working of the mill, leaving the cutting of the timber in other hands.

"You look as if you might pick up the mill and carry it away in your arms one of these days," laughed the owner. "You are too desperately in earnest for this little venture."

"I feel like running away with something," replied Dalbert. "It's all very well for you to take things quietly. You haven't to make up for your own folly and another man's dishonesty."

Will shrugged his shoulders. The motion said that it would take more than a few debts to disturb the even tenor of *his* way. He watched with amusement his superintendent's feverish eagerness to pay off old claims.

"He's a young idiot who will learn better as he grows older — or perhaps not even then," he said with a laugh.

However it might be with the superintendent, the superintendent's sister met with the mill owner's entire approval. By a certain law of gravitation his feet turned often in the direction of the Gap, for it was at that end of the village that Naomi had established herself.

"Lucky fellow, that Dal," he said with an openly appealing glance at Naomi. "Why don't all men have sisters?"

"They do,—most of them," said Naomi, demurely.

"Sisters! Yes,—too many of them. But a feller wants the right sort."

"The sort depend on the feller—mostly," she said. "It makes a powerful difference what kind of man a girl is sister to."

"And I'm not the right kind?" he asked, his eyes laughing into hers.

"I'll tell you when I see you with your sister," she said. "Hasty judgments are powerful dangerous."

"They're not the only things that are powerful dangerous," he said, looking again into her eyes.

More than two weeks had gone by since Naomi and Dalbert rode through the Gap, when a pair of vindictive eyes again peered down into the pass from behind a rock. They shone just as they had shone when the brother and sister passed beneath them. Old China Partins was not in a serene state of mind,—had not been in a serene state of mind since that day when she looked down from beyond this gateway of the mountains and saw the two travellers approaching. As a rule, the comings and goings of the inhabitants of Big Creek Gap troubled her little. For some inexplicable reason these new-comers stood on a different footing.

"I hain't carin' abaout the boy," muttered the old woman. "He's safe enough. He's got his work to attend to, and he'll attend to hit. But the gal—thar's no accountin' for he-er. What's that?"

The long, shrivelled neck reached out till the eyes could look down—down—over the precipitous slopes. The ears were listening for a repetition of the sound. It came, the thud of feet upon the hillside, followed by the rattle of falling stones. Whatever was approaching

was beneath an overhanging rock, and could not yet be discerned. China Partins waited.

"Hit's the horse *she* was a ridin'. Hit hain't throwed her, though,—more's the pity."

A smile that was as uncanny as the lurid gleam of fire from the heart of a thunder-cloud greeted the appearance of Duke's head round a projecting rock. The absence of saddle or bridle presently confirmed the old woman's statement that the horse had not thrown his rider.

If Duke had seen the smile on those thin lips, he might have taken warning; for Duke was a wise horse. As it was, he came on, going upward because it was easier than going downward. Was it a memory of Cedar Fork, a hankering after the old pastures, that had induced the horse to leave the lower stretches of unfenced land where he had been feeding, and take to the mountain? Duke had lost his bearings, and wandered into the Gap. Then some impulse of the moment or some memory of the past set him climbing, and his climbing brought him beneath the eye of China Partins.

Duke was sure-footed as a rule. Many a steep hillside had he surmounted, with Naomi on his back. The spirit of the mountaineer was in the horse. Yet he gave a snort of disapproval or fear when a big stone gave way under his feet, and almost precipitated him to the jagged rocks immediately below. He had not altogether reckoned on the steepness of the way when he began the ascent. Still, he went on, planting his feet cautiously upon the loosening stones, and springing forward. He did not see the figure that drew itself to its full height, sheltering behind a projecting rock. It was in the most slippery and precipitous part of the ascent, when the top was almost gained, that those bright, steely eyes looked straight into his from over a boulder, and a harsh, discordant voice broke into a laugh.

The eyes and the laugh were responsible for the sudden swerving aside of the horse, and the swerving aside was responsible for what followed. When Duke lay, a quivering, shuddering body, bruised and battered upon the jagged rocks half-way down the mountain, that laugh went out again upon the air.

"She hain't goin' to ride you-u through the Gap any more."

Yes, Duke was a wise horse, in spite of the mistake he made that morning. He heard the voice above him; but, while his great, pathetic eyes swept the hillside for a possible rescuer, he uttered no whinny of appeal to that presence upon the top of the mountain. It was not until footsteps were heard below that his first cry of distress broke the stillness of Big Creek Gap. It came before the girl's voice called his name in the distance, or her musical whistle vibrated through the air. Duke did not wait for the voice of his mistress. He had heard her footsteps long before.

"Duke! Duke, my beauty!"

She was by his side upon the mountain, her face close to his. The great, despairing eyes looked into hers, and the horse slowly and painfully raised his head. Then it fell back heavily as he gave up the attempt with a low moan of pain.

"Duke! Duke! why did you come here? There's evil in this valley," said the girl, in a low, sorrowful tone, her hand the while caressing her favourite's nose.

She was so intent upon watching Duke that she did not see that another was watching her from above, nor know that a heavy lump of rock was held at full length by a powerful arm. Was there no sixth sense to warn her of the moment when that messenger of death hung fairly over her head?

"Hit's abaout as safe as ary way," whispered a voice that trembled with something more than age.

The parchment face of China Partins worked convulsively, as her arm — stronger yet than that of half the men of Big Creek — straightened itself out to hold that murderous lump of rock in a position from which it could best crush the life out of the lithe, girlish form below.

"Thar's evil got to come — to somebody," muttered the old woman. Hatred, hesitation, anger, determination, passed in turn over her face. Then the arm was stretched over the mountain side a little further, the fingers began to relax, and — stopped. In the old face hatred had given place to fear.

There was no change in the position below, except that a pair of dark eyes, with tears in them, had turned upward, not to the mountain ledge, but to the blue sky over the heads of watcher and watched.

"I cain't du hit — not with them eyes a-lookin' up. Curse her! What right has she to them?"

The hand was drawn back, trembling. The stone dropped harmlessly to the ground. And the girl below never knew how near she had come to sharing the same fate with Duke,— death upon the mountain side.

"Duke, dear old Duke, good-by."

She had been looking into the animal's eyes and seeing the suffering there. Now she put her trembling lips down upon his nose, and felt the quiver of pain and longing. The next moment her hand had sought and found a remedy. She applied it unshrinkingly. There came the sharp, ringing sound of a shot, one low moan, and Duke's pain was over.

The girl watched till the supple limbs began to grow cold, and then, with lips pressed tightly together, and eyes that were unseeing, made her way down the hillside, oppressed with a sense of ill. Many minutes before, an old woman had moved hurriedly away up on the mountain top, rage and disappointment making tumult in her

heart. Whatever the impulse that had caused her to spare the girl, a diminution of hatred had nothing to do with it.

"Thar 'll evil come — to somebody," she said, as she struck across the mountain top.

"There's a curse on the valley," asserted Naomi, as she told the story of Duke's death to Dalbert that evening. He made her no reply. The thoughts of both brother and sister had gone from the loss of the horse to an earlier and greater loss. Dalbert was wondering, as he had often wondered before, how long Naomi would be content to let the past rest in its uncertainty. For himself, he had already made some inquiries about the man Kennedy Poteet — with conflicting results.

"Thar warn't no rarl harm in Kennedy, outside a pretty stiffish temper," declared one of the residents of Big Creek Gap, voicing the sentiment of many. "Thar was a powerful unpleasant thing happened in that big house o' hisn onct, and folks hain't never forgot hit. Hit was that led to talk, and to sayin' more 'n anybody could prue-uve.

"When was hit? Hit was when Ab was a little bitty feller. Ab was the only child Kennedy Poteet had, and he hain't never been the same since. They did say he was thar in the room when old Kennedy and a feller that was stoppin' at his house had some words abaout money, and Kennedy sorter got his temper het up, and thar was bloodshed. Hit was told how that Ab's little bitty hands was red with blood, a-pullin' his daddy away. We-uns never knowed the truth of hit. That thar traveller was dead, that was tol'rable sure; and thar warn't nobody never come to look atter him. Whether hit was much money or little they come to words over, we-all didn't find aout. The man warn't in no condition to tell, and thar was an end of hit. Kennedy swore hit was done in self-defence, and thar warn't

nobody to say hit warn't. We-all hadn't nothin' to say about hit. Kennedy was a good neighbour enough. Thar *was* folks that said that warn't the only traveller old Ken fell foul of. Them as said that warn't his friends, though. Hit's ill gittin' your tale out o' the mouth of a man's enemies."

Big Creek Gap was divided on the subject of this dead and gone rich man of the valley. There were those who shook their heads mysteriously when his name was mentioned.

"When a man's son cain't be brought to stay in his house, thar's a screw loose somewhars," asserted this section of the community. "Ab couldn't never be kep' at home more 'n a month or two together. His father had to send him to a sister of hisn, a powerful good woman. Lor! the boy useter turn white as a ha'nt if he had to stop in that house alone. Ab was tol'rable easy scart. Not but thar was reason enough for fear. Spirits that's sent outer the body afore their time hain't likely to rest well."

Dalbert knew as little what to think when his inquiries had been made as before he made them. He thought he knew what would be Naomi's conclusion, and he waited rather nervously for her first attempts at a solution of the mystery.

The girl had said she would wait and see. She was waiting. She had long since learned that the big house in the hollow had been the home of Kennedy Poteet. That house no longer appealed to her with respectable pride. She thought of it as the scene of old Kennedy's crimes, and the house and its former owner became as one in her estimation. She had a vague feeling that the story of Kennedy Poteet's life was shut away within those solid log walls, together with a conviction that those same walls had hidden the tragedy of a life that was dear to her.

Perhaps it was the restlessness of grief at Duke's loss, or a sense of mysterious evil lurking in this valley, that on the following day caused Naomi to walk along the valley road, and stop beneath the shadow of the big house. Standing in the place where Abner had stood on the night of the preaching, she looked up at the windows upon which his gaze had been fixed. Was it in that long, shallow balcony above the piazza that her father had sat after he had penned his last letter,— sat and thought of his boy and girl upon the hillside farm, until the shadows crept across the valley, and he turned back into one of those rooms with the small window-panes — to meet his death?

The girl grew hot and cold at the mere suggestion. The quick, irregular beating of her heart was index of the emotion stirring within. She did not for a moment doubt that her father had sought shelter within that house, since it had stood for village inn in the absence of any regular place of entertainment for travellers. The story told by the guide through the Gap had taken a firm hold upon her imagination. She could not help associating it with her father's disappearance. Now, as she stood by the old dwelling, imagination took up the story; and she lived over again the events of that night as she pictured them,— the cowardly attack, the short, desperate fight for life, the cruel moment when resistance ceased, and the silence of death. Her face had grown white as the clouds that hung high in the summer sky, but her eyes shone like burning coals as she kept them fixed upon the windows above.

"If he did — *that,*— justice shall fall yet, though he *did* cheat it by slinking out of the world like a coward!"

The low-spoken words pulsated through the hot air, and to the girl's excited fancy seemed to go on and out till they struck against the solid, resisting walls. They were the outward expression of the strong will that had

set itself to bring vengeance to that house and to all whom it represented. The words were of the nature of a vow.

"Plumb foolish to keep hit shet up, hain't hit?"

The girl started violently. It was a wrench to come back to the present. The old face that was turned up to hers belonged to the past as fully as did the old house. For the moment it seemed to Naomi that it had stepped out from those other days at the call of her own fancy.

"Lor me! you du look scart. Didn't you hear me come?"

"No," said Naomi, in a voice altogether unlike itself. Even yet she could not quite bring herself back to the present.

"Who lived there?" she asked after a moment's silence, anxious to say something. The old woman was staring at her curiously.

"Lor! don't you know?" was the answer. "That's old Kennedy Poteet's house. He's been dead this nine years, and buried. And, since the day they carried him outer that house, thar hain't nobody never lived in hit."

"Who *should* live in it?" asked Naomi.

"Who? Why, Ab, of course. My lor! you hev gone white! You lueke as if you'd been sick and jist got a backset. Better come in bye, and rest a bit."

"Do you live near here?" asked Naomi.

"Lor, yes! hit hain't a great ways."

"Then I *will* rest, I think," said Naomi.

"You better," replied the woman. "You're the sister of the new superintendent at the mill, hain't ye?"

"Yes," said the girl. "You ought to have been in to see me before this."

"Lor! that's true," was the answer. "But I hain't one to go round a smart sight. You hain't learned yit — you're too young to learn hit — that legs grow old a

sight quicker 'n heads and tongues. Thar hain't much that's happened in my time that I cain't remember, and tell, too; but, when hit comes to runnin' round, my legs soon lets me know I hain't as young as I was."

She hobbled along by the girl's side, looking curiously at her companion the while.

"Here we are," she exclaimed, as, the "branch" being crossed, they came to a cabin by the roadside. "Come in, and set down."

From the threshold a part of the big house could be seen, half shut in by the hills and its own encircling trees.

"Did you know Kennedy Poteet?" asked Naomi, seating herself where she could see the building about which her thoughts were yet centred.

"Know him? Lor me! how could I he'p knowin' him?" ejaculated the woman. "Hain't I lived less 'n half a mile from his house ever since I was married? Know Kennedy Poteet! Oh, lor!"

The girl looked at her for a moment with the colour coming slowly back to her cheeks. Then she rose suddenly and stood before her.

"Did you ever see anybody go into that house that looked like me?" she asked, and stood still beneath the gaze of the old curious eyes.

The woman looked at her, hesitated, pulled out her glasses, and deliberately fitted them on her nose. Naomi stood before her, motionless.

Old eyes are slow, and those particular eyes meant to be sure. They took their time. The girl did not stir.

"Yes, I *hev.*"

The words came out like a shot from a gun, and the woman removed her spectacles. The next moment she put them on again.

"You can set down," she said triumphantly. "I've recollected him. Thar don't nobody beat me at recol-

lectin.' They useter couldn't; and they cain't now, if I *am* old, and weak on the legs."

She nodded her head wisely, and stared at the girl.

"You favour him consid'rable, but you hain't jist like him," she said after an appreciable silence. "Hit's more pertic'ler abaout the eyes."

"When did you see him?"

Naomi's voice was carefully restrained.

"Hit was,— lor me! let's see,— hit must 'a been abaout fourteen year ago. He come through here with a drove o' mules."

Naomi nodded.

"Was he your pappy?"

Again there was a nod of assent.

The old woman wagged her head complacently.

"I hain't surprised," she said. "You du favour him consid'rable. I hain't one to forgit faces. Thar was a sight o' people come through this away abaout that same time. Some of 'em drove mules, and some hogs, goin' to Georgy. Thar was a powerful many I never tuk no account on; but *hi-im*,— lor! thar was no passin' him over, he was that powerful tall and handsome. I *declar* hit was a sight to lue-uke at hi-im."

"Did he stay at that house?" asked the girl, her voice breaking a little.

"Kennedy Poteet's? Lor, yes! They all did. Hit was a better house than ary o' we-uns had. Thar was a sight o' ruemes in hit."

"Do you know how long he stopped?"

The question was eager

"I cain't jist say that," responded the old woman, reflectively. "I never knowed for certain. I seed him more 'n onct, owin' to his stayin' here longer 'n one night on account of a sick mule. They useter go on the next day, the most part on 'em; but he was forced to stay. He seemed a powerful kind man to his animals."

"He was kind to everything."

The voice faltered at the last word. The old woman looked at the speaker sharply.

"Lor! he hain't dead, is he?" she asked.

Naomi nodded. It would not have been quite easy to speak.

"Oh, my lor! Well, I hain't surprised. I useter say I was sure somethin' had happened to him."

"Why?"

The question came sharply.

"We-el," replied the woman, "hit was along o' my seein' his live spirit."

"His *spirit!*"

"Yes, his *live* spirit," repeated the old woman. "Thar's some believes in dead spirits,— ha'nts they calls 'em. Lor! hit hain't dead spirits that disturbs *me*. I reckon them that's dead has got a right smart better to du than to be comin' back that away. Hit's the live spirits that scare me,— the spirit that comes aout of a man when he's a-settin' thar by your side or layin' sleepin' on the bed. And I see that man's live spirit as clar as ever I see a live spirit in my life. I warn't afraid. I knowed thar warn't no harm meant to me that time, for hit was a-comin' right on *towards* me. If hit had been goin' away, I should 'a been scart. But hit did give me a kind of a turn, for I'd seed the man a-settin' in one of them downstars rooms not ten minutes afore."

"Are you sure?" gasped Naomi. "Are you certain you remembered his looks?"

"Oh, lor! mercy me! Remember him! I should jist think I did. Why, gal, I couldn't 'a forgot him if I'd a mind. He was a-settin' at that thar winder on the further side o' the door, nearest to the jog thar; and his face showed powerful plain through the glass. His eyes had a sorrowful look in 'em, as if he was a-thinkin' o' somebody dead and gone."

"I know," whispered Naomi; and there were tears in her eyes.

"He was so powerful handsome that I looked rarl hard," continued the old woman; "and he nodded, and said, 'Howdy.' I heared him, part with my ears and part by seein' how his lips moved. Remember him! Lor!"

She stopped with an expressive snort, and then resumed.

"Mercy! hit was a si-ight. I hadn't more 'n jist got home when I seed his live spirit a-comin' along the road from the Gap. Thar hit was as plain as daylight, and him a-settin' in the house not many minutes afore. I looked at hit; and then I jist squeezed my nose agin the glass, and who should I see but the very man a-puttin' his head outer that upstars winder you can see thar. He'd opened the winder, and stuck his head aout. And thar was his spirit a-comin' straight on down the road. Lor me! hit made me all of a cold sweat!"

She looked triumphantly at her listener. The colour had again left the girl's face. The narration was so circumstantial that she had forgotten her present surroundings, and was looking through those sharp old eyes, not at the things of to-day, but at those of the past. She saw her father's face again, with the far-away, wistful look upon it that had always turned her thoughts to the young mother she could barely remember. Moreover, the old woman's certainty of the reality of the happenings of her weird story was not without its effect upon her. She was a Kentucky mountain girl, born in an atmosphere of strange beliefs and unexplainable stories. The supernatural seemed, in those mountain regions, far removed from the unnatural.

The narrator interpreted the almost breathless silence to her own satisfaction, and continued: —

"Hit wouldn't 'a been a minute afore hit would 'a

turned right in at that door. Lor, gal! I tell ye I run powerful smart to shet hit afore hit was too late. And, as I come from shettin' the door, I seed hit go clar past that winder thar, and round the corner o' the house. Mercy sakes! I thought hit was a-goin' to try the back door, and I recollected I'd left hit a leetle open. My lor! hit didn't take me ary time to git from the front to the back of this house. I run tol'rable quick, I tell ye; and when I come back, it was nowhar to be seen. Hit was as clean gone as if the ground had opened and swallered hit up, and I never seed hit no more."

"And my father?" asked Naomi, her breath coming quickly.

"I hain't never been sure what become o' him atter," said the old woman, regretfully. "Thar was another drove o' mules passed through the same day I seed his live spirit, and the next thar was soldiers here; and I never heared what become o' hi-im. Thar *was* talk that he done sold all his mules to the other feller. I hain't sure. They'd 'a fetched a powerful lot o' money if he did, for thar was a sight o' mules in his drove. I hain't sayin' he didn't; but if so be that he did, hit was a right smart o' money he must 'a tuk home."

"He never came home," said Naomi, in a voice that had grown hard and strained.

"Didn't? Well, I *declar!*"

The girl rose slowly, and stood straight and stiff before her companion.

"This Kennedy Poteet?" she said. "Would you have trusted him with the money those mules must have brought?"

The woman looked at her with curious, wondering eyes.

"My lor! I wouldn't 'a trusted Kennedy Poteet with the head of an old rusty nail, if so be he had ary use for hit, he was that graspin'."

She was staring at the girl as she spoke.

"Ah!"

The word came in a short, hard gasp.

"And my father was in his house," continued the girl. "There was Kennedy Poteet, and all the money for those mules, and only my father's life between that money and the man who wanted it. My father was never heard of again. Tell me what became of him."

She stood towering above the old woman, who sat with her elbows on her knees, peering up into that white, working face.

"Tell you! I cain't, and nobody cain't. O lor!"

"*I* can," said the girl, still in the same hard voice. "Kennedy Poteet murdered him."

"Mercy sakes!" said the old woman. "I thought somethin' had happened to him atter I seed his live spirit. Kennedy was powerful graspin'. I hain't a-sayin' he done tha-at, but hit's tol'rable cur'ous. I hain't a-sayin' he done hit."

"I am," was the answer, in clear, decisive tones. "My father was seen in his house before he sold his mules. He was never seen again."

"Lor, no! Hit's rarl quar!"

"It's clear enough to me," said the girl, her eyes shining from out the whiteness of her face. "Kennedy Poteet's dead,— more's the pity!"

"Lor me!" said the woman, still peering into the face above her.

"This Abner of whom you spoke,— where is he?" demanded Naomi, after a minute's silence.

"Lor! he hain't fur off. But Ab don't know nothin' abaout hit. He"—

"Isn't he Kennedy Poteet's son?" interrupted Naomi.

"Lor, yes! He lives in the log house beyond his father's place,— a little bitty house. Quar, hain't hit,

that he wouldn't never live in old Ken's house, nor yit let ary other person?"

Naomi did not answer. She went to the door, and passed out. On the threshold she turned.

"He shall come into the inheritance of his father," she said.

"Mercy sakes! hit's a si-ight," muttered the old woman, as the girl turned away.

Naomi had set her face again towards the big house. Was she going to look in at the window where her father had sat? Hardly; for her feet passed the gate in the hollow, and went on along the valley road. The girl was walking with a settled purpose. To her the mystery of her father's disappearance was a mystery no longer. The vague past had taken definite shape.

The little log cabin beyond the turn in the road was tenantless when she reached its door. Only the embers on the hearth told of life. She knocked, and got no answer. Then she pushed open the door, and went in.

A strange light was in the eyes that looked round that room. The bare floor and the pots and pans stared back at the intruder. Was this the home of the inheritor of stolen wealth? The little tin mill by the fire had an ear of corn yet sticking out of it, bearing witness to the fact that the owner of the cabin had but lately rubbed his corn on its diamond-holed under-surface, laboriously grating it into meal for his dinner. No feature of that interior suggested the presence of the son of a wealthy man. The cottage showed poverty in every detail.

"He has inherited his father's greed already," said the girl, in the same hard voice. "The curse is to come."

She sat down to wait. The minutes passed, but she showed no impatience. It was nearing the time when Dalbert would return from the mill. To-day it troubled Naomi little that supper would be unprepared.

It was past six when Abner Poteet turned towards the little cabin. He was in no hurry to go in. Since the night of the preaching the bare room had lost its charm. Visions of a dark-eyed, dark-haired maiden coming there as mistress had faded. They had glorified that bare interior for many a day — they would come there no more, except as memories of what might have been. The house was home to Abner still, but a home swept of its one bit of romance.

He came in with slow, heavy step, and eyes that did not lift. And then he stood still. In a moment the room had become luminous. There by the hearth sat —

"Abner Poteet, there is a door out of this world for the murderer; but the murder remains!"

Startled eyes were raised, and over the face where a wistful light had crept passed the evidence of a great horror.

"I know hit," he said, looking straight at the speaker.

"You may rejoice in the gain," she continued; "but the curse will not be cheated. It will fall on the son of the murderer, and rest there till it crushes him to the earth."

Her eyes, that could be soft and liquid on occasion, were ablaze with wrath. She drew herself up to her full height, and stood looking at him, the impersonation of vengeance. Abner's gaze was held fascinated.

"I know hit," he said again in low, sad tones. "The sins of the fathers visited on the children."

"Ay, to the third and fourth generation," she said. "You may brave it aout as you will, Abner Poteet; but the curse will stick."

"Not to the third and fourth generation," he said in tones lower yet. "Thar 'll be nary more generations to bear hit."

"While there is a man of your race left, it will not stop — it *shall* not stop," she said, in her hot anger fail-

ing to observe the stricken expression on the face before her. "*You'll* not escape it if *he* did."

"No, I shain't escape hit," he said. "I hain't expectin' to escape hit. The visitin' will come."

"Yes, it will come," she said, and swept past him into the daylight.

And, in the blindness of her anger, she mistook the sorrow upon the man's face for sullen defiance, and went away with the anger yet blazing.

And Abner stood in the bare room, with head bowed.

"The visitin's comin'," he said after a long, horror-filled silence. "The sins o' the fathers! Thar hain't no countin' how many thar is of 'em."

When darkness fell upon the cabin, he was standing there still.

CHAPTER X

THE old house in the hollow was far out beyond one end of the village of Big Creek Gap; and the home that Naomi had prepared for herself lay at the other extremity, only slightly removed from the mountain pass itself. Nearly two miles of road were between, but distance was annihilated to-night. As the girl passed from Abner Poteet's gate, she knew nothing of time or space. Heart and brain were full of the past. The pity of it filled her with horror as it had never done before.

"He had years of life in him," she said; and there was a sob in her voice.

Every feeling within her rose up in indignation against the big house and its owner. To her that long, solid building seemed the impersonation of the violent wickedness that had robbed her father of his life, blotted out a noble, useful manhood, and left in its place a great, silent, ghostly thing that stood for nothing but greed and the triumph of evil over good.

"And he was never punished," she said, with the bitter feeling that the deed was the more cruel for the escape of the perpetrator.

Human nature is weak. The smart of a sore heart is a little eased by the knowledge that the hand that dealt the blow is itself a partaker of the pain. And, if no such weakness existed, there is yet an innate sense of justice, a rebellion against the triumph of wrong, that calls for the punishment of the evil-doer. Justice utters her protest against letting the violent man carry out his evil designs with a high hand; and, if vengeance adds

to the volume of the outcry, the fact is not altogether strange.

To Naomi there was something unnatural, something that savoured of treachery towards her father, in letting the crime lie buried, unacknowledged and unpunished. The overflowing life of which he had been defrauded could not be wrested from the hand of the murderer and given back to its owner, but justice could at last be allowed to speak.

"Why should the memory of Kennedy Poteet be spared, and his son enjoy unhindered the fruits of his blackest crimes?" she asked herself. "His name can at least be dragged through the mire of his own making."

She had no longer the shadow of a doubt that she had traced her father's life to its last step. There only remained the finding of definite proofs of the guilt of the innkeeper. This might or might not be a difficult matter. It was in any case the next point to be aimed at.

And when that should be accomplished? Naomi asked herself the question, and left it unanswered. Only into her face there came a look that few, perhaps, had seen there before. It was as if every feature hardened into stone, and the whole became an image of wrath. Forgiveness is a virtue not easy of cultivation by the fearless, self-reliant, passionate nature; and there are times when the need of it is not quite self-evident.

Naomi did not know whether her feet lagged or hastened over the stretch of dusty road that presently brought her to her own door and to a waiting figure without it. In truth she had come quickly.

"Has Big Creek Gap transgressed beyond forgiveness that you leave it in blackest night by turning your face away from it?" asked the mill owner. "I felt the chill

before ever I reached the house. Dalbert was more prosaic. He went to work to rekindle the fire, which had died out."

"On the principle that ary light is better than none," responded Naomi, looking at the mill owner with eyes that were uncomprehending.

"The fires are not *all* dead," said the young man, significantly, returning the gaze.

The girl passed him, and went into the house.

"Was anything amiss?"

Dalbert snapped a dry bough across his knee, and looked up at his sister.

"I've been to Kennedy Poteet's house," she said.

"Oh!"

Answer and exclamation were full of meaning.

"He *did* it," continued the girl, in a low, tense tone. "We have come to the end of our search. I was right"—

"That's tolerable certain. You always are. I'll swear to that."

The mill owner had followed Naomi into the kitchen. He had failed to catch the suppressed excitement in the low-spoken words. He had only heard the last of them.

"Of course I am," replied the girl, struggling to throw off her oppression and speak lightly, "even when I let the fire aout at supper-time."

"Even then," answered the young man, drawing nearer. "Miss Mozingo, Dal asked me to share that supper. It was a real charity."

"Or will be when you get it," retorted Naomi.

"I can wait," he said complacently. "And I don't care how long — now."

He did not add that Dalbert had had little choice about the asking.

Neither the brother nor sister had afterwards any clear recollection of the preparing of that supper. It is

safe to say that, if the mill owner had not been there, it would never have been prepared. Visions of the past were crowding in Naomi's brain. Anger and pity and sorrow struggled together, but the anger was ever uppermost. For the first time since she came to Big Creek Gap she was impatient of Will Hollingsworth's presence. She wanted to talk to her brother, to be left to decide upon the next step. She was in a hurry to take that step. She wondered how she could have waited so long before making inquiries.

She was conscious that Dalbert's eyes were following her, but she refused to meet them. The young man watched her anxiously. He felt his own heart beating irregularly. In spite of the strong curb his sister had put upon her excitement he heard it in every tone of her voice. What had she found in the old house to put that dangerous light in her eyes?

Dalbert's was not the only gaze that followed the girl closely. The mill owner watched her with curiosity and satisfaction.

"Do you know I'm powerful jealous of Dal," he said. "He isn't plumb forced to say 'Miss Mozingo' every time he speaks. I want his privileges."

Naomi stopped in her walk across the room, and looked at him coolly.

"There is nothing to hinder you from enjoying them — with your own sisters," she said.

"You are robbing the privilege of its attraction," he laughed. "I'm not powerful tempted in that direction. It's somebody else's sister who is the temptation."

"Temptations were made to be resisted," she said.

"Are you plumb sure?" he asked. "It takes a sight of self-control to resist some of them."

"Self-control is a tolerable useful virtue," she replied gravely. "I believe you need exercise one form of it no longer. Supper is ready at last."

It was when the meal was fairly in progress that the mill owner turned to his hostess.

"Miss Mozingo," he said, "*did* you contemplate leaving Big Creek to its fate? My first glimpse of you was from the hill yonder. You were coming along the road with haste suggestive of repentance."

"I was later than I knew. I had been as far as the big house in the hollow," said Naomi, in a tone that was drier than usual.

"What? The old inn? And did that ghostly place prove so plumb attractive that you forgot everything else?"

"Attractive?" she said, lifting towards him eyes that shone with a peculiar light. "Is there ary attraction in the house of a murderer?"

He looked at her curiously.

"Old Kennedy Poteet hadn't ary too good a character, so they say," he responded meditatively.

"He was a murderer who cheated justice by dying before a rope could be got round his neck!"

The words came with slow, measured force, that thrilled through Dalbert's brain and set his nerves vibrating. The mill owner was differently affected.

"Did he? That was powerful mean of him," he said.

His laughing eyes were seeking those of the girl. When they met them, the laughter faded out.

"He sneaked aout of this world unpunished because there was not a man in Big Creek Gap who had courage enough to unearth his villany," continued Naomi.

The young man leaned over suddenly, and touched her hand. It was shaking.

"His punishment or escape doesn't make a sight of difference to u-us," he said. "The old sinner is gone."

"Doesn't it? It would make a difference to *me* to

know that he would hang for his crimes. If he had killed *your* father, you would think differently."

The low-spoken words acted like a shock of electricity.

"Naomi!"

She did not notice that the same word fell from both lips. Dalbert did.

"It is true," she said passionately. "He killed him."

"Are you sure?" asked Dalbert, in a low voice.

He was still reluctant to believe that his father had met his death through foul play. Naomi's words fell on his heart like a blow. He could not lose the horror in indignation against the perpetrator of the outrage. Vengeance was in his case no easer of pain.

"Sure?" she said impatiently. "What more do you want? He came to this place — he was seen in that house. He sold his mules there, and was never seen again."

The hand that had chosen to remain in contact with Naomi's gave sympathetic pressure.

"Who told you?" asked Dalbert.

"An old woman who lives opposite," replied the girl. "She saw him, and remembered him well. He stayed longer than the rest of them because a mule was sick. She heard that he parted with his mules to a man who was travelling south. Up to that point all is plain. After that — when the money was in his possession, when he and Kennedy Poteet were alone in that house — he disappeared from Big Creek Gap — and from the world."

The low, vibrating voice broke at the last words. There was an answering pressure from the hand that touched hers.

"But how do you know that he was killed?" asked Dalbert, hoarsely.

"Do live men vanish without cause? Would *he* desert his children and *live?*"

She turned scornful eyes upon him. He shook his head. He did not want to believe, but conviction was forcing itself upon him.

"She may be wrong," he said after a short, painful silence. "Has she ary reason to suppose that he was — murdered?"

The last word came reluctantly.

"She did not suppose it," replied the girl impatiently. "She had not sense enough. Nobody supposed anything. There was nobody to suppose — if there had been, Kennedy Poteet could not have carried out his rascality. If there had been man or woman in Big Creek Gap that had either sense or care, *he* would have been alive to-day."

This time Naomi became conscious of the touch of the mill owner's hand, and drew her own away. He looked at her reproachfully.

"I wish I had been at Big Creek then," he said. "But now? What can I do to help you?"

She did not notice the slight stress on the "I." Her thoughts were going beyond the mill owner.

"The first thing is to prove it," she said. "*I* know he did it, but it must be proved beyond a doubt. And then"—

"What then?" asked the young man. "The old rascal has made himself secure by taking himself off the scene of action."

"He didn't take his name with him — nor his family," said the girl.

Will Hollingsworth caught the fierceness — only half suppressed — in her tone.

"Family?" he rejoined reflectively. "Why, the old thief hasn't a family — unless you count Ab."

"He has a son," she replied coldly.

"Yes,— Ab. But nobody thinks of Ab as belonging to the old man. He's a powerful harmless feller, is Ab."

"He's his father's son," she said.

"Yes, and a plumb bad job it is for him."

"And a plumb bad job it is likely to be!"

Both men started at the passion in her words. Neither quite understood how deeply she had been stirred by the old woman's recital, and by the proximity of the house where to her excited imagination the deed of cruelty almost visibly lingered. It was Dalbert who answered her words.

"I don't think you'll find that this Abner Poteet had ary thing to do with it, even if — what you think is true," he said. "I've seen the man. He doesn't seem to me to be one who has either committed or profited by a crime."

"How could he help profiting by his father's rascality?" retorted Naomi. "His father was a murderer and a thief — and he is his father's son. What right has he to expect that men will not visit his father's sins on his head?"

"I reckon he don't expect anything," laughed the mill owner. "Ab ain't the sort to have expectations in ary one way."

"He knew better than to deny his father's guilt," said the girl quietly.

"What? You have seen him?"

Something approaching consternation was in Dalbert's voice. He was still indulging the hope that there was a mistake, that the old woman's story could be refuted. His sister's prompt measures looked to him rash.

"Yes. I have seen him," said Naomi, and there was a challenge in the words.

They sat looking at each other; that is to say, Dalbert and the mill owner were looking at Naomi, and her eyes met theirs, though it is doubtful whether they brought her any clear impression from without. As for the mill owner, he saw nothing but the girl whose eyes

flashed and kindled and grew cold only to light up again with indignant passion. He had never seen her face more beautiful than now, with the passion and the sorrow disturbing its calm. It had hitherto been too well under control, too impregnable to satisfy him. To-night he saw it in a new light.

"Well?" said the girl at last; and the word was a challenge.

"We have got to prove that he did it," said Dalbert, in quick answer to that questioning word.

"Yes — it may not be easy," she said. "But it would be a sight harder to prove that he didn't."

"There's a powerful lot of truth in tha-at," broke in the mill owner, with a short laugh.

His eyes were searching Naomi's. He waited until his gaze drew hers to meet it. Then he echoed her word.

"Well?" he said questioningly.

"Are his children to leave his death unavenged?" she asked, and there was a break in the rich, low voice. "Is nary thing to be done to bring the punishment where it ought to fall?"

"Where is that?" demanded the young man.

"On the kin of the murderer,— on those who profited by his crimes," she said hotly.

"Whatever Naomi Mozingo says, *I* will do," he answered.

She looked at him for a moment in silence. "It's Dal's work," she said coldly. "It's his boy and girl who should avenge him, not strangers."

"*Am* I a stranger?" he asked reproachfully. "There is plenty for Dal to do. But you want an outside helper."

She did not answer. His eyes were looking into hers. Her own did not change from their passionate glow, though they met the other's squarely.

"Is it a compact?" he asked after another silence.

"What?"

"That you will give me the privilege of being your agent, and that I will carry aout your behests, let them be what they will."

"Don't be a fool, Will!" broke in Dalbert impatiently. "My sister is upset by what she has heard. She doesn't know what she *does* want. This is not a thing to be entered on hastily."

"Then I will wait till she finds aout," said the mill owner, and this time he did not laugh.

Dalbert rose hastily.

"Naomi is right," he said. "This work is for me, if for anybody. And, so far as finding aout the truth of the old woman's tale is concerned, it has got to be done. For the rest, there is time enough to decide when we have proof."

Will Hollingsworth ignored the words. He was still looking at Naomi.

"Is it a compact?" he asked again.

She hesitated, and then stretched out her hand.

"If you will," she said.

He held the hand for a minute, and stood looking at the girl.

"Did you ever hear of the bone cave?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes," she said, drawing her hand away. "What do you know about it?"

"It figures in stories about Kennedy Poteet," he replied. "Ary search into the doings of that dead and gone sinner ought, plumb sure, to be begun there."

"Have you been in it?" asked Naomi.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I had no interest in the doings of old Ken — until now," he said. "Shall I take you down there? I'll be accountable for the spirits that keep the place select."

"What shall I find there?" she asked, looking into his face.

"Bones — so they say," he replied.

She hesitated barely a moment.

"Is it too late to go to-night?" she asked.

"It's tolerable late — considering the character of the place," he said, and there was only a glimmer of a smile about his lips.

"Then I will go in the morning, at daybreak," said Naomi. "And I will go alone," she added, with a glance that was not without defiance.

"Better not," he said gently. "If ary thing should be found, you will need a witness. And it will be tolerable lonesome down there. You must not go alone."

"My sister will not be alone," said Dalbert curtly.

"The more, the better, in that place," replied the mill owner. "Put it off till eight o'clock. The grass will be wet so early, and whatever is there will wait."

His last words were addressed to Naomi.

"Where is the bone cave?" she asked.

"Over from the mill a smart piece, — within easy reach from the old reprobate's house."

"We will go in the morning," said Dalbert. "I don't believe we shall find anything to pay us for our trouble. I don't *want* to believe it. It makes the loss ten times worse to think it came so."

There was possibly hardly a resident of Big Creek Gap who would have been willing to enter the "bone cave" after nightfall, there were not many who would have been willing to enter it at all. The place had an unpleasant reputation. A farmer who had lost a sheep down the uncovered hole that formed one of its outlets had told of bones, ghastly and white, strewing the floor in the low, almost inaccessible passage in which the cave terminated.

"And they warn't the bones of no four-footed ani-

mal," he asserted, when he reappeared at the surface of the earth with a face that rivalled in whiteness the bones reputed to be mouldering in the secret recesses of that underground place.

One or two venturesome spirits had since entered the cave, and brought out bones,— human bones, they averred; but these were few in number, and not easily recognizable. Nobody had possessed courage to crawl to the end of the low, damp tunnel that to all appearance formed the extremity of the cave. Tradition said that Kennedy Poteet had more definite knowledge of the contents of that cavern than had any other human being, but no one was sure that back of tradition there lay any certainty on which to ground the belief that had nevertheless become somewhat general in Big Creek Gap.

It was not fear that made Naomi's hand a little less steady than usual when, a strip of woodland above the mill having been crossed, she stood in the early morning looking into the "bone cave." The thought of the discovery that might be before her was sufficient to account for the under-current of excitement. The cave itself boasted of nothing imposing in the way of entrance. A well-like hole, dipping straight down into the earth, enabled her to see into the depths of this cavern with an ill name. Rough, precipitous sides promised little help in descending, nevertheless, Dalbert was about to lower himself into the darkness when the mill owner's voice stopped him.

"Hold on!" he said. "That ain't the way old Ken got in, if he ever did creep into this uncanny place. That's only a peep-hole for the free exhibition of the wonders underneath. You stand plumb still, Miss Mozingo. I'll get in, and be showman."

A yard or two beyond, half hidden by bushes, he came upon the real entrance to the cave,— a narrow, steeply

sloping opening, down which a man could slip more easily than he could walk.

"Old Ken must have held his head a powerful sight lower than usual when he went in he-ere," said the mill owner, as lantern and person disappeared between the earth above and the rock below. "They say he knew how to keep it up high enough at other times."

A few seconds later he stood beneath the vertical hole, swinging his lantern around and looking up at Naomi.

"It don't look powerful-ghostly," he said. "It's nothing but a little bit of a cave, that runs off into a mere burrow in the ground."

He walked on, the glimmer from his lantern growing fainter as he went further from the opening.

"Are you going down?" asked Dalbert. "There's no need. You might just as well stay here. I'll search the place."

"I'm going myself," said Naomi; and without a word Dalbert preceded her into the opening, crouching low and turning to help her.

"Go on," she said with a short laugh. "I'm not afraid of that slide."

She was at the bottom almost before he had lifted himself up.

"I'm afraid the ghosts have been back, and gathered up all their belongings, Miss Mozingo. There isn't so much as a bone left to contend for."

The mill owner's lantern was returning, accompanied by the mill owner. Even as he spoke, however, his foot loosened a white object on which the rays of light fell full.

"Mercy sakes!" he said, stooping to pick it up. "One of 'em will be short in some part of his person. He's left one of his bones behind him."

He held the white object in his hand, and looked

laughingly up at Naomi. After that look the laugh died on his lips.

"Miss Mozingo," he said, "there is nothing to prove that that bone was not some cherished part of a sheep's anatomy. I don't believe you will find anything in here to disturb you — or to help you."

All the laughter had gone from his voice. It was grave and sympathetic.

"Perhaps not," she said. "But we will go in further, and see."

They made their way to a point beyond which locomotion was only possible in its most primitive form. Dalbert, on hands and knees, was already pushing on.

"You cannot go further," said the mill owner to Naomi. "You had better stay here while Dal and I make investigations."

His own investigations, however, had got no further than into the expression of a girl's face, when a pair of heels came into sight.

"Here's Dal beating a retreat," he said. "The spirits of the cave have proved inhospitable."

Dalbert emerged, very much the worse in appearance for his short journey.

"There's water in there — deep pools, and a shallow running stream," he said. "Looks as if it might be the effect of the rain the other day, but it's in the way. The roof gets lower as you go in. There's nothing to be seen that is of any use to us."

"No bones?" asked Will, with a quick laugh.

"Yes, there are bones, but only odd ones. Nothing that could serve as proof either one way or another."

"Did you bring any?"

For answer Dalbert set down his lantern, and carefully deposited upon the floor of the cave a double handful of spoils from its inmost recesses. Mud, rock, bones, — one of the latter looking uncommonly like a part of

the finger of a human hand,—a scrap of woollen cloth, and a rusty nail made up the collection.

"I found them in a mud hole. There was nothing else near," explained the young man.

They were all down on their knees, examining the spoils, the suspicious-looking bone resting in the palm of the mill owner's hand.

"Better carry 'em up, where we can wash 'em," he said. "The spirits keep their belongings powerful dirty. There's too much mud on 'em to distinguish—What is it, Miss Mozingo?"

The girl's lips were parted, and her eyes riveted on an object which her fingers gripped tightly. It was hardly yet free from the clinging mud from which she had rescued it. Nothing but a bit of mud-covered rock had been visible when she first took the lump into her hand. Now the mass had resolved itself into its elements, the sight of one of which had sent the blood from the girl's face, and brought that awed look into her eyes.

"Look, Dal!"

She held out the little circlet.

A thin band of gold, with one insignificant gem set in it, it was not yet sufficiently free from its mud coating to show the beauty of stone or metal. But as Dalbert's glance fell upon it his face changed. Some of the horror in Naomi's eyes was communicated to his. He took the ring and rubbed it in his hands till it was free from dirt. Then he handed it back to his sister.

"I'm going in again," he said, and his voice was hoarse.

"My father wore it. It belonged to my mother," said Naomi, in answer to the inquiring look of the mill owner.

Dalbert had already disappeared. The face of the mill owner was grave.

"Then there *was* truth in the tales they tell of Kennedy Poteet," he said.

She did not answer, and they stood listening to the rattle of falling rock detached by Dalbert's contact with the low roof. Listening thus, with thoughts centered upon that passage, it was easy to mistake the direction of a sound, as it had been easy to overlook such sound in the last few minutes, when every thought was absorbed by the discovery that had been made. It would not have occurred to either of the three that any inhabitant of Big Creek Gap was interested in the contents of the "bone cave." Perhaps the keen eyes that peered out from the darkness were more interested in the visitors to the cave than in the cave itself. China Partins could move cautiously when she chose, and she *did* choose to-day. She had come very close without being suspected. Those sharp eyes were near enough to see the little gold circlet as it was held in the girl's fingers, and her ears had not missed a word that had followed the discovery.

There was complete silence now in the cave. It was too dark in her hiding-place for the fact to be evident, but the old woman's face had grown excited. Her breath came quicker than usual. She drew further back in the shadow of a rock, and waited.

"Here's Dal!" said the mill owner, in a tone of relief. The strain was becoming intense.

"There's nothing else there," announced the young man, emerging again from the low passage. "I've searched every inch of the floor around the spot where these things were buried, and there's nothing more. Further on, big lumps of rock and earth have fallen, and the passage is filled up. I'll go back yet."

The last words were uttered as his eye fell again on the ring. The sight of it affected him painfully.

"No, let me take a turn," said Will. "I may have better luck."

They searched for hours, coming up in the daylight

at last with a dazed look on their faces. On her way out of the cave Naomi unknowingly brushed past a figure crouching in the shelter of a rock. Was it simply the effect of the shadows, or had the keen old eyes really lost some of their animosity?

No one attempted to joke as they found themselves again at the surface, and stopped to look back into the gloomy hole. The stories of crime associated with that cave had for them moved out of the legendary into the real.

"Miss Mozingo, I think I wish I had not advised you to come."

The mill owner stood by Naomi's side, looking with grave kindness into the girl's face.

Out in the daylight the articles recovered from the mud were being examined with minutest care. The bit of cloth was water-soaked and rotted beyond recognition. It *might* at one time have formed part of a man's coat. Naomi's face, as she bent over it, was full of sadness. With the more certain knowledge of the terrible wrong done to her father, all tumultuous anger was swept away. The fierceness of yesterday was gone, effaced by a deep grief. But if the mill owner were in doubt as to whether the girl's attitude meant any softening of sentiment towards the house of Poteet, her words as she turned to him set that doubt at rest.

"The deed cannot be undone," she said, "but the name of Kennedy Poteet shall in this valley rot like that scrap of cloth, till men tread it, and all who bear it, under their feet."

There was no passion in her eyes, nor anger in her voice. It was the cold, calm utterance of judicial decision. One of those who heard it must surely have been satisfied, for a pair of thin lips actually smiled.

The mill owner looked at the girl admiringly.

"The fury's plumb gone," he said, as he walked

towards the mill; "but there's an avenging goddess in its place that won't be nary bit the easier to deal with."

"If you du that, you've got enough on hand to keep ye aout o' mischief for one while, gal," said old China Partins, standing among the trees and looking after the brother and sister.

CHAPTER XI

"HIT'S spelt, that's what hit is. Thar hain't no use beatin' abaout the bu-ush. That thar cow won't be no more gue-ude till you shoot the one that's got a grudge agin ye."

Abner Poteet stared into the ancient face of the speaker, and shook his head.

"Thar hain't nary one got a grudge agin me — or thar useter wasn't," he said. "I hain't so plumb sure now."

"And you hain't no call to be," replied the woman. "You hain't all a fool, Ab, if you hev done more 'n one powerful fool thing, and *you* know thar's them that's plumb set agin ye, and that through no fault o' yourn."

Abner sighed.

"I hain't denyin' hit," he said, stooping to touch soothingly the head of the cow that lay in the old log cow-barn, refusing food, but every now and again lifting wistful eyes to the big, kindly face above her.

The cow was sick,— very sick. She had every reason to know it herself, and Abner did not doubt it. That was why he had stayed up all night to watch her. It was morning now, and there was no improvement. His nearest neighbour, the old resident who had communicated to Naomi her recollections of Kennedy Poteet's guest, stood in the doorway.

"She's powerful sick, Abner Poteet," she continued. "Thar hain't a smart sight between her and death. And that cow hain't a-dyin' no natural death, don't you persuade yourself she is. She's spelt; and, if you don't he'p her afore long, you won't hev no cow to he'p."

Abner shook his head.

"O lor! Mercy sakes!" ejaculated the woman. "What's the guede o' tha-at? You got to stir yourself, Abner Poteet. You got to git shet o' the witch or the wizard that's spelt her. You got to fix *hit*, or you won't never see that cow on her legs agin. O my lor!"

Again there was that positive shake of the head.

"I cain't," said the man, the patient sadness in his eyes answering to that in the animal's gaze. "I hain't goin' to du nothin' at all."

"You hain't! O lor me! Well, *I* de*clar* you *are* a plumb fool! Mercy sakes!"

She stood with hand uplifted, surveying the interior of that log barn,— the central forms the prostrate animal and the big, strong figure standing above it.

"Why hain't you goin' to du nothin', Abner Poteet?" she asked impatiently. "Hit hain't so powerful hard to du. If you cain't guess who's done spelt that cow, I can. Lor! you've only got to dror *hi-im* — git his picture as near as you can. Hit's plumb certain to du for hi-im. You must make a picture of him, and set hit up somewhars, and git a piece o' silver money and melt hit for a bullet. Lor! hit's powerful easy. And then *shoot* him. He cain't escape ye if ye shoot him with a silver bullet. He'll be tuk with mortal pain jist whar that bullet goes through him in the picture. Lor! I know hit! I've done hit. He'll be a-moanin' and a-groanin' in his bed, sicker than that cow inside o' twelve hours. I hain't a doubtin' hit. But you got to hurry. The cow's powerful bad. Lor! she looks like dyin' plumb directly."

"Yes, she's dyin'," said Abner sadly.

"Dyin'! Lor me! Hain't you got a mite o' sense, Abner Poteet? Who's fault is hit she's dyin'? Who's to hinder her from dyin' but you?"

"*I* cain't hinder her," said Abner quietly.

"Mercy sakes! You're enough to drive a woman crazy," was the response. "Git a piece o' paper, and

I'll dror him. I done got powerful good understandin' of who's at the bottom o' this. Cain't hinder her! Lor!"

Abner did not stir.

"Hain't you goin' to du nothin'?" asked the old woman, her voice rising shrilly in her indignation.

Abner shook his head.

"Well, *I declar!* You're the plumb biggest fool I ever seed. *I declar* I feel like gittin' some silver money, and meltin' hit down, and shootin' him myself."

He turned to her with a look of alarm.

"No, I won't have him shot," he said; and he spoke with decision. "Let the cow go."

"Then you *du* know him, du ye?" she retorted. "I hain't powerful surprised. And you won't shoot him? Well, I didn't think you was so easy scart, Ab Poteet. O lor!"

There was a scornful ring in the shrill voice.

"He's a powerful sight more likely to hurt ye if ye let him alone than if ye shoot him," she continued. "He'll go on layin' spells on other things beside the cow. Mercy, you've *got* to stop him. Thar hain't no tellin' what he'll do else."

"I hain't denyin' hit," said Abner.

"And you hain't a-stoppin' hit," she retorted contemptuously. "Why hain't you goin' to shoot him, Ab Poteet?"

For a minute there was no answer. Abner was looking down at the cow. He turned suddenly and confronted the woman.

"I hain't aimin' to make no more sufferin' in the world," he said. "I hain't no call to make hit. Thar's been enough."

He turned away again.

"O lor me!" said the woman. "Hit warn't o' your makin'."

"No, hit warn't — and hit hain't goin' to be," he said. "Thar's a sight o' pain, and thar's them belongin' to me that's made a powerful lot of hit. I hain't no call to make no more, and I hain't aimin' to make hit. The cow cain't die more 'n onct, and she's got to die onct."

His hand fell softly on the animal's head.

"O lor me! Mercy sakes!" said the old woman, and went out.

Abner Poteet's cow died at noon. It was not until after then that the man broke his fast. He had not left the animal since the previous night. There was an added gloom on his face when he went into the silent house. Abner did not doubt that his cow had been "spelt." He had never doubted that he could remove the spell. He was in no uncertainty as to who was the enemy. But he let the cow die — and he felt that he had lost a friend.

"Thar's been pain enough," he said, as he stumbled over the threshold. "Thar's them belongin' to me that's made consid'rable more than I can reckon up. I hain't aimin' to make a mite more, not if he *is* powerful set on hurtin' me."

Abner Poteet was four months older than on the night of the preaching. It might have been four years, to judge from his looks. The mouth had settled into sadder lines since then, and the eyelids more often covered the eyes. Men who met Abner now found it necessary to be first ready with the "howdy." If they waited for his greeting, he was apt to pass them with eyes fixed on the ground.

Not that Abner was morose. But circumstances had changed since he listened to the most "powerfully convincin' sermon" that was ever preached in the neighbourhood of Big Creek. The renunciation of that night had been complete. Only once during those four

months had Abner found his way over the pasture lands to a certain little house nestling almost beneath the shadow of the mountains which form the long, straight boundary of the valley. To Abner Poteet, Big Creek Gap meant the environment of that cottage where Norah Felps lived with her mother in the neighbourhood of the old mines, to which men still went occasionally to take out iron ore. That unpretentious dwelling under the mountain could not claim to be as commodious as many another habitation in the village of Big Creek Gap, but Abner was not the only one to whom it was more luminous. For others besides the son of Kennedy Poteet those flashing eyes and that queenly face lit up the cottage with a brightness not to be found elsewhere.

The gypsy-like beauty of the girl had not ceased to appeal to Abner Poteet, but there was something that appealed more strongly. He would stand in the day dawn gazing wistfully across the space that lay between his own house and the mountain, his heart heavy with longing, and then turn quietly away to his work and let the day pass as other days had passed, without a sight of the face for which he was thirsting.

"She hain't never goin' to hev no part in that visitin'." It was a decision that was confirmed every time he turned away.

Circumstances had altered for Abner Poteet in other directions. The old friendly relations which had existed between him and his neighbours of Big Creek Gap had undergone a change. As the weeks wore on, Abner began to feel the difference in the attitude towards him. The "howdy" grew off-hand rather than cordial, and in a few cases was omitted altogether. Men stood and looked after him when he passed, talking in low, confidential tones. The easy, friendly intercourse through which Abner had felt himself one with the community around him was broken. Ab did not ask how or why.

He felt the severing of the bond, and the world grew more lonely. He accepted the loneliness, as he accepted all the consequence of his father's sins, without questioning. It was no new idea that he had less claim than others upon the world's kindness. It was not until his cow sickened and died that he realized the full force of what had seemed but occasional manifestations of an alteration in public feeling towards him. The only difference the knowledge made was that Abner withdrew more persistently from the sight of men.

He did not know that the change dated from the day when a certain ring was found in a cave. From that time the strength of a girl's will was set for the undoing of the son of Kennedy Poteet.

For Naomi Mozingo there were now two objects to be attained at Big Creek Gap,—the earning of sufficient money to start the mill again, and the avenging of the death of her father. The last was the most important. That it appealed less strongly to her brother than to herself did not weaken its hold upon the girl. To Dalbert, Abner Poteet appeared the harmless descendant of an evil sire. As such, he found within himself no desire to persecute him. Naomi, however, saw in the man the son of his father, and nothing else. She had no personal knowledge of him, and she desired none. It was enough for her that he was the representative of Kennedy Poteet. That he was worthy of the name she never doubted. She set herself to put that name in its true light before the people of Big Creek Gap.

Though it was a fact that what Naomi Mozingo undertook seldom failed of accomplishment, she had in this case the advantage of an efficient ally. Will Hollingsworth was very much in earnest when he pledged himself to his superintendent's sister to carry out her wishes with respect to Kennedy Poteet. He had no personal feeling against Abner Poteet, but he had a very

strong personal feeling in favour of Naomi Mozingo. If the securing of Naomi's favour meant the undoing of Abner Poteet, then so much the worse for Abner Poteet. The discomfiture of one who was comparatively a stranger was a small price to pay for the friendship of a girl whose eyes could wake from their slumberous beauty, and darken and deepen as did the eyes of this girl while he told her some story of the old days when Kennedy Poteet was yet a power in the valley. He had a right to look into her face and read the expression of those eyes. He had earned the right,— was earning it every day.

There is an old book, much despised and explained away and criticised in the present day, that has in it some strangely far-reaching truths. Those five words, "Seek, and ye shall find," which to a few old-fashioned folk still form a very star of promise in a spiritual sense, are an exceedingly truthful statement of a fact in practical, every-day life. It is indisputable that the objects which men seek — with downright earnestness — in this world, they rarely fail to find. It was in dependence on this principle that the mill owner set himself to work out of the chaos of rumour and public opinion in Big Creek Gap a vindication of Naomi's attitude towards Kennedy Poteet and his family. Not that Will Hollingsworth deemed that the girl's indignation called for apology, especially after the discovery at the "bone cave"; but he justly concluded that all details which would make more conspicuous the evil character of the man or his family would be useful as weapons in the hand of Naomi or himself, and would rob the indignation of that suggestion of revenge which might cause zealous justice to be misjudged.

It was not hard to piece together the life and characteristics of this dead-and-gone rich man of the village. Old men and women remembered him well in his youth-

ful strength. They were not averse to airing their recollections for the benefit of an appreciative listener. Wonderful stories of his fighting days, when it "didn't take a powerful sight to git Ken's temper up, and he'd as soon fire rocks at a man as lueke at him," were poured into the mill owner's ear. Bit by bit the picture of Kennedy Poteet rounded out, and the man lived again,—grasping, overbearing, money-loving, good-naturedly jovial when not angered, spasmodically generous to his friends, and consistently dangerous to his enemies, —a man to be courted and not opposed, a violent man when aroused, but a man with a streak of gentleness in his nature, or he would never have dealt as tenderly with the boy Ab as report gave him credit for doing.

Unscrupulous, without doubt, was this former owner of the big house in the hollow. His contemporaries did not deny that there were ugly rumours afloat about old Ken; but "thar warn't no bein' plumb sure whether thar was ary truth in 'em, and if thar *was*, hit warn't no business o' nobody's. They warn't Big Creek Gap folks that was missin',—if so be thar was anybody made away with at all,—if they had been, thar'd 'a been a row. No, Kennedy Poteet warn't always so powerful rich, and nobody was plumb certain how he come by his money. He was mighty well off when he died, and the most part of his money went to Ab."

Naomi's eyes darkened when Will repeated the words to her. Her lips made him no answer, but the mill owner understood. Perhaps his next remark drew inspiration from the depths of those eyes. He was studying them as he spoke.

"A harmless fellow enough one way, that Ab," said the mill owner reflectively, "but old Ken over again in another. There's John Kisselbaugh,—lives over the valley towards the mountain. A mighty unfortunate circumstance for John that his furthermost fields and

Abner's join. A pretty overbearing feller is Ab sometimes, or the fact that John once refused to unhitch a pair of mules from a wagon when the other asked him wouldn't have been enough excuse for wrenching the great murderous-looking whip from John's hand, and laying it about John's shoulders. The mules come aout of that wagon tolerable quick, so they say, and the load was tossed on to the ground; and the strong arm of Kennedy Poteet's son and heir was responsible for both. Sure enough Ab must have inherited something more than his father's wealth, or such things wouldn't happen. According to all accounts, he'll never be as smart as the old man, though. Ab's powerful like his father, so they say, in the swing of his arm and the uncertainty of his temper; but, when it comes to brains,— well, everybody says old Ken knew himself that his boy was a failure."

It was no proof of an excess in Naomi Mozingo of the least pleasant side of human nature that Will Hollingsworth read satisfaction in her face. Abner Poteet was Kennedy Poteet's son. As such, the consequences of his father's sins must fall upon him, *should* fall upon him. But it made the retribution easier of carrying out to believe that the son was a worthy descendant of the father.

That her father's death should go unavenged seemed to the girl a monstrosity. No proper judicial punishment could reach the man now; but the minor punishments, the consequences that follow in the train of avenging law when she lays her hand on a transgressor,— these need not be remitted. If Kennedy Poteet had paid the legal penalty of his crime, and hung between earth and heaven, as fit neither for the one nor the other, the stain would never have been washed from his name. Men would not then have received the son of the murderer on a footing of equality. That they did so now was a proof that the murderer, and not the victim, stood

highest in the esteem of the community. Until the position was reversed, and men acknowledged the enormity of the crime committed in their midst, until they shrank in horror from all connected with the family of Poteet, Naomi's task was not even begun.

While a representative of the house in the hollow was allowed to live in Big Creek Gap, there was no need to question whether moral feeling had been properly aroused. When public opinion was fairly convinced, brought to an adequate sense of the responsibility resting upon it, neither Abner Poteet, nor any other connected with Kennedy Poteet's family, supposing such were to be found in the valley, would need urging to put the strong wall of the mountain between himself and an outraged community. Until then Naomi would never rest.

That she had not rested, but that in her own person, or through Will Hollingsworth, her ready ally, she had made a fairly successful assault upon public opinion in Big Creek Gap, was proved by Abner Poteet's altered position in the community. In the past time it was Abner himself who was most fully conscious that he was Kennedy Poteet's son. That fact seemed now unmistakably present in the minds of his neighbours. They had hitherto looked upon Abner as a weak-handed descendant of the determined, money-grasping old man whom they still remembered as a power in the valley.

"Abner warn't up to his pappy, neither this away nor that away," had been the general opinion. "He was honest enough, was Ab, but — well, thar, he was cur'ous, tol'rable cur'ous. He warn't never jist the same atter the upsettin' he got along of his dad comin' to bloodshed with them as was strangers in the valley."

They had looked leniently upon what they considered Abner's inferiority, partly because he was Kennedy Poteet's son, and partly because, being his son, he was unlike the father. Of late all this had changed. The

valley had come to regard Abner more particularly as the son of the innkeeper,—the representative of the old man about whom discreditable stories had been told.

Moreover these stories were assuming definite shape. It was one thing to listen to rumours about the disappearance of unknown travellers, and another to have those rumours solidify and take actual form, to make the acquaintance of the victims, so to speak, in the persons of the son and daughter of one of those missing travellers. Kennedy Poteet, the rich innkeeper, who might or might not have been responsible for the depositing of the suspicious bones in the "bone cave," and Kennedy Poteet, the probable murderer of the father of Naomi and Dalbert Mozingo, were two very different men in the eyes of the Big Creek Gap village folk. For Dalbert and Naomi were no longer strangers in Big Creek, and no longer, especially in the case of Naomi, without influence there.

"A powerful fine girl, and as handsome as a picture," was the verdict of Big Creek Gap.

The story of the finding of the ring had gone abroad, aided by the mill owner's tongue. It was a tongue that possessed facility in the art of speaking a word in the right place, and the word spoken was apt to be a telling one.

To Abner Poteet the air of Big Creek Gap had grown chill.

"It's part of the visitin'," he said, and went less among his fellow-men.

There was one house in the village where he would have met with no change, but to that house Abner carefully abstained from going.

"Thar hain't goin' to be no shadder of hit fall on her," he said.

It might have been presumption for him ever to have hoped that his life and the life of Norah Felps would

blend. The girl's brilliant beauty brought her many admirers. She was a village girl by birth and education, and the valley was proud of her. From the time when she gained her first taste of knowledge in the village school, and in concert with her companions shouted long rows of spellings at a pitch that spoke well for the lungs of the future men and women of Big Creek, the village had watched her with a sense of pride. Norah had won the distinction of being put early into the writing class, an honour accorded only to those who "could read good." A student might be as old as the teacher and as ambitious as he pleased, but he would not be placed among the privileged few who took writing lessons until the reader and the speller were mastered.

The village curriculum opposed no unscalable heights to Norah's progress. Her black eyes had sparkled and danced at the discomfiture of many a youth who essayed to rival her achievements at school. They had had the same sparkle in them more than once since that time, presumably at the discomfiture of those same youths, when, grown too big for the narrow seats of the rural hall of learning, they followed the girl to the house by the mountain, and again dreamed of conquest. There had been no lack of wooing, but the winner had not been proclaimed.

Abner had made no claim to rival these more daring spirits. In his own eyes he had little to recommend him; but he went often across the pastures, and Norah and he were good friends. She never used her tongue to Abner's undoing, as sometimes happened in the case of more aggressive suitors. And he was content to be near her, to watch patiently till there was a want he could supply, to rejoice in the light of her presence, and dream happy, foolish dreams of a future in which the rest of the company was missing, and only himself and Norah occupied a world that was all good for her sake.

He knew they were foolish, those unreasoning dreams. How could they be otherwise? There was no such world of unclouded brightness for him while he was Abner *Poteet*. But though the cloudlessness should turn out a myth, there was Norah still,—and she was good to him. Not unvaryingly good, but comparatively good at all times. She never drove him to distraction as she did some of her other suitors, or sent him home all but resolved to shoot himself—or her.

There were not lacking those who suggested that Kennedy Poteet's money had something to do with the girl's kindness to Kennedy Poteet's son. But everybody knew that the only part of Kennedy Poteet's wealth that his son had ever consented to use was that which belonged to his mother,—the little log cabin, and the fields pertaining thereto. He had "nary wish to handle more of hit," he said; and when the big house was shut up, and Abner went to live upon the small farm, men shook their heads over his obstinacy, and gave him credit for sincerity, As for those who suggested the money theory in explanation of Norah's kindness to Abner, they were village maidens mostly, and not quite impartial in their judgment.

They had left off speculating now. There was nothing to speculate about,—*had* been nothing since the night of the preaching. Abner had given up his journeys across the pasture lands and his dreams by the cabin fire. That was all, except that there was an empty chamber in the man's heart, and the yearning memory of a girl's face that would not be put out of his life.

CHAPTER XII

IN spite of the discovery made in the "bone cave," Dalbert's face had brightened in the months since he came to Big Creek Gap. It looked very young and glad to-night; though, when the pile of letters by his side was despatched, he would be as poor as when he turned his back on Cedar Fork valley. Those letters were going where, just at present, it would not be advisable for Dalbert himself to go; and every one of them contained that which was calculated to soften the verdict of one resident of Cedar Fork valley. The letters drew the young man's gaze with the attractive power of a magnet.

"You're as plumb glad to part with your last cent to that threatening, discontented crew as if there was nary a man in Cedar Fork valley but was your most devoted friend."

Naomi's hand came lightly down on her brother's shoulder as she spoke. She, too, was looking at the letters.

"Yes, I'm powerful glad to send it," he said, with a smile and a sigh. "Two more batches like that, and John Sharp will have his mouth shut."

"Are you plumb sure?" asked the girl. "It'll take a smart sight more than paying every dollar you owe him to shut John Sharp's mouth. It was neither reason nor justice that opened it, and it ain't going to be either reason or justice that will shut it. When John Sharp shuts hi-is mouth, it'll be a si-ight."

"Well, he'll have no cause to open it against me," said Dal.

"A right smart of difference tha-at 'll make," drawled Naomi.

Dalbert looked up at her with a smile.

"You're hard on John," he said, "but there 'd be less in that envelope going to him if you hadn't helped earn it."

"That's a tolerable big stretch of the truth," retorted the girl. "I'm plumb ready to prove that nary cent of my earnings went into that letter. John Sharp may whistle for his money for all me, or swear for it, as he did the day I left him on the road outside Jellico. That 'll suit hi-im better. He's a master hand at tha-at, but he'll never swear dollar or cent aout of me. All mine went to the others."

"The pile was bigger for it, though," he said, with another smile.

She laughed. She was almost as glad as he was to feel the burden of debt lifting. Her courage had never failed her in the darkest time. But it was pleasant to see the light.

It was pleasant, too, to know that she had had a share in bringing the good time nearer. If old China Partins had to-day pressed her nose against the window-pane of the house in the neighbourhood of the Gap, the face that had awakened her anger would not have met her eyes. That house stood empty now, and it was a very new structure, but a few hundred yards from the mill, that owned Naomi as mistress. The mill owner experienced much satisfaction at the change, and Naomi was the richer. It was the mill owner who brought it about.

"Miss Mozingo, I'm powerful hungry and desperate," he said, as he seated himself at Naomi's table. "There's inequality in things. Here's Dal here hoggishly monopolizing advantages that other men would give their eyes to share. I haven't had a decent meal since — well, since you let me come here last."

"Which was a right smart ago, wasn't it?" asked Dalbert, reflectively.

"A right smart! It was an eternity," asserted the mill owner.

"Why, didn't Dal bring you home with him yesterday?" asked Naomi innocently.

"Yesterday! Miss Mozingo, I'll swear it was as far back as the day before," he said tragically.

"Was it?" she replied. "I thought Sally White was a good cook."

"I'm starved," he repeated. "Sally White ain't to blame. She lives up to herself. And it's plumb sure her punkins ain't. Miss Mozingo, there's heaps of 'em. There's punkins under the beds, and punkins overhead, punkins hanging in strips to dry, and punkins in pokes with the drying already done. It ain't the punkins that's going to fail: it's the man to eat 'em."

Naomi's eyes lighted with mirth, though they tried to look grave.

"I'll never give you punkin pie again," she said.

"I'm plumb ready for punkin pie or anything else — here," he asserted.

He returned to the attack later, when the johnny-cake was removed from its shingle before the fire.

"Miss Mozingo," he said gravely, "Sally's johnny-cakes are made of quarter kernels of corn, and so is her corn bread. Sally's that powerful saving that it would send her into a fi-it to take her corn to the mill. Years ago she made her a tin mill, and on that mill Sally grinds up all the corn for her corn bread and her johnny-cake. I ain't plumb sure which comes nearest to being worn aout, the old mill or the old hand that rubs the corn up and down inside it. I was that put about at last with the fineness of her meal that I got me a piece of tin, and punched it full of holes. Then I bent it over a board in approved fashion. I was tolerable sure it was going to

be a surprise to Sally — and it was. 'Sally,' I said, 'I've made you a new mill that 'll grind tolerable fine.' Miss Mozingo, the pity of it! The old witch took that new tin mill, turned it over in her hands, felt of it, and — dropped it into the fire. 'If my grindin' hain't fine enough for ary two-legged critter that comes trottin' inter this valley from nobody knows whar, and settin' up to find fault with cue-kin, gue-ude enough for them that's a plumb sight better 'n him, he can get his victuals somewhars else,' she said. And I'm getting them," added the mill owner, tragically.

Naomi laughed.

"The case is sad — and desperate," she said. "Sally is — well, of a tolerably remembering disposition."

"She *is*," replied the mill owner, with a long sigh. "Miss Mozingo," he added, "you took pity on the men at Cedar Fork. On your own showing, you fed them, and fed them well. I've a mind to put up a boarding-house in connection with the mill. I wish you would come and take charge of it. You and Dal shall have the best rooms in it, and I'll see it's made profitable for you. I want a boarding-place where the cue-kin' ain't so powerful fine; and I know two or three men, at least, who will be glad enough to get nearer to the mill. If you'll come and take possession, I'll have the house up in two weeks."

And he kept his word. Naomi hesitated a little, and Dalbert more. Dalbert had no fault to find with the mill owner; but the arrangement would bring him into closer contact with Naomi, and it did not please Dal to see the young man grow daily more intimate with his sister. Expediency, however, settled the business.

"It 'll take less time for two to earn the money than for one, and it's money we're after," said Naomi.

So the brother and sister removed to the boarding-house, and Will Hollingsworth was happy. The change

made the carrying out of his compact with Naomi so much the easier. The two had something in common beyond the ordinary life of the boarding-house. He did not forget the fact himself, nor let Naomi forget it.

It was not a small task the girl had set herself, but she was strong in will and in the justice of her cause. Also there were in Big Creek Gap, as in every other community, internal elements that could be brought to bear. Furthermore there was the mill owner, who was anything but a small force in this siege of public opinion. Already he had attacked the outworks. At the very moment when he was gaining corroboration of his own and Naomi's judgment, he was undermining the foundation of the enemy's standing. His hearty laugh at the account of some high-handed exploit of the rough-and-ready great man of the valley had hardly time to tickle the vanity of the story-teller before the listener had labelled the deed and the doer with an appropriate epithet, that would not fail to stick by reason of its suitability. Suggestions, carefully worded and lightly thrown out, took root. The story of the cave, and of Naomi's discovery there, was told with skill and effectiveness. People began to see Kennedy Poteet in a light that was more penetrating than any that had yet shone on his character. It was one thing to think of him as the possibly responsible party in the disappearance of certain strangers who might or might not have provoked attack, and quite another to see in him the almost convicted murderer of the father of the handsome girl whose face grew stern and sorrowful when the subject was mentioned in her hearing.

"That girl was plumb fond of her pappy, and hit was a powerful shame not to let him go back to his young uns," said Big Creek Gap.

Men began to remember that they had always entertained something more than suspicion about the doings

of the innkeeper, and to persuade themselves that it was rather kindness of heart than dimness of vision that had kept them from openly denouncing their neighbour.

And there were not lacking in the valley men who had entertained a grudge against Kennedy Poteet or his son Abner. Among the best claimants to long life and indestructible vitality, a good grudge takes high rank. Circumstances cannot kill it, and suppression only lends it extra force. There was more than one such grudge ready to come to the surface in Big Creek Gap, and more than one man in the neighbourhood who hailed the times as propitious and Will Hollingsworth as a friend. These grew virtuously indignant over the wrongs of Naomi and her brother, and shook their heads when Abner's name was mentioned. They agreed with the mill owner that doves were not to be looked for in eagles' nests, and that the talons would show themselves sooner or later.

"Thar warn't a more cur'ous-turned man in Big Creek than Ab," they asserted; "and thar was no bein' plumb sure jist what he was up to, shet away in that house o' hisn."

The mill owner shook his head, slapped the speaker on the back, and expressed his conviction that there were some men who couldn't be fooled. Then he went his way, and left internal forces to work in Big Creek Gap.

If they had not worked effectually, Abner Poteet would not have felt the chill of loneliness wrapping in his life as it had never done before. If they had not worked, the cow that had been like an old friend would still have been watching for his coming in the barn; for the hand that dealt the blow at her life and Abner's comfort would have hesitated to strike.

Abner fully believed that his cow had been "spelt,"

and if his feet had been at liberty to follow their own leading, they would have carried him unerringly to the perpetrator of the deed. He thoroughly appreciated the force of his old neighbour's argument that he who had worked this harm would work more. But he would not take the suggested revenge. "The son of Kennedy Poteet had no call to make ary more pain. Thar 'd been enough." He withdrew more persistently from the sight of men, and the weeks drifted into a new year.

"A tol'rable dark night" was making it evident that there was rain in the wind. Big Creek men-folk were cleaning their guns. Those who worked at the mill decided to take the guns along to-morrow. "If hit come on to rain, hit would be a powerful good time for squirrel-shootin', and the work would hev to wait." Men who did not work at the mill prepared for a good day's sport.

Abner's gun stood in its accustomed place behind the door; that is to say, it would be behind the door when the door stood open. To-night it was shut, and the gun in full sight. There was no temptation to leave the door open. Neighbours were scattered and few, and still fewer were those who would be likely to brave the darkness to seek speech with the innkeeper's son.

A bright fire blazed on the hearth. In all Big Creek Gap there was not a man as lavish as Abner in the matter of firewood — for use after dark. While daylight lasted, Abner was as frugal as his neighbours; but, when darkness drifted down upon the fields and dwellings, Abner's fire sent up a spurt of flame. "Hit was company," he explained, "to hev a plumb good fire atter dark."

A cheery fire and a bolted door stood between Abner and the grim darkness without. Grim without relief was the dark, mystery-haunted outside world after sunset to the big, simple-hearted man shut within the log house.

It would have taken a strong arm and a fierce nature to make Abner quail before any of his fellow-men, though a keen sense of his own ill-desert as the son of Kennedy Poteet could make him over-modest in their presence; but the forms and forces with which, for him, that unknown, unexplainable darkness was filled, were powerful with horrible possibilities. Weird stories of witches and ghosts had haunted his memory from childhood. The natural — meaning by that the seen and partially understood world around him — was not one bit more real to him than that which normally was unseen, but which, in his belief, might at any moment appear, and, seen or unseen, was always past understanding.

The unseen, but never unfelt world beyond his common, every-day life, was to Abner a pressing reality. A nature morbidly sensitive to every suggestion of another world, a mind stored with the thrilling traditions of the mountain sides, a conscience sleepless and exacting, a heart that craved after the eternal goodness, which to Abner took the form of eternal justice, left the man trembling in the conscious presence of the unseen. Other men believed passively in spirits and in witches and in supernatural manifestations: Abner's belief lived. For him the darkness was peopled, and the terrors of a future world and the terrors of that which was present blended. Above him was the God of whose purposes and government he had but a distorted knowledge, and whom he yet believed that he knew, around him the influences of which he had heard, but which he could neither understand nor escape from. And between them was the man, filled with a tender personality, permeated by a boundless humility, dominated by a desire to serve God and men, but overwhelmed with a sense of vicarious guilt and personal helplessness.

Night, for Abner, represented the power of darkness. He fought it with the glowing firelight, and with every known charm that could keep evil at a distance.

At the present moment the firelight shone on a tenantless interior. Abner was in the barn, ministering to the needs of his mules, and talking to them in low, caressing tones that never failed of appreciation. Perhaps it was the sound of Abner's voice in the barn that stayed the footsteps of a stranger, and made him pause in the shadow cast by the log cabin. He must have been intent on assuring himself that the owner was away, or he would not have gone softly up to the uncurtained window and peered in. He seemed as fond of the darkness as Abner was of the light, for he crept back into the deep shadow and listened. In the barn he could hear Abner walking from place to place, and by watching the different positions of his lantern could even follow his movements. It was when the light had gone farthest away that the stranger stepped out from the shelter of the building, and boldly opened the cottage door. The blazing logs burned merrily, throwing a gleam across the imprint of a horseshoe upon the threshold. Abner had heated to redness the shoe of which it was the impression, and laid it on the door-sill, that, when it had burned a deep mark into the wood, the foot of witch or wizard might never dare to cross it. Was the foot that pressed the threshold now less to be feared than those which the charm was meant to restrain?

The man was evidently not disposed to await the return of the householder, for his movements betokened haste. Moreover he held his head stiffly, as if his ears were on the alert. A hasty glance round the room possibly revealed to him the object of his search; for he stepped behind the door, and then closed it. Immediately after, his hand drew towards him the gun,—a cherished possession to Abner Poteet. The firelight shone upon the weapon and upon the face of the man who held it, and a couple of minutes passed. The stranger was well in the light now, and his face was plainly visible. It was

a coarse face, with more of animal life and passion than of manly vigour in it, one that to the eye of ordinary men acquainted with it would display no prominent alarm signal, but that to children and animals would serve as a warning. Its owner was engrossed in his examination of the gun. He came nearer to the fire for the benefit of more light. Evidently the weapon interested him.

There was a sound outside. With a quick movement the man replaced the gun in the corner, and walked over to the fire. It was a false alarm, however. Abner was not coming.

The stranger waited to assure himself of the fact. Then with three strides he reached the door. Once there, he paused long enough to allow of a deliberate, satisfied glance at the gun, and a smile came to his lips. A minute more and darkness covered him, as it had covered him once before — weeks ago — when he crept into Abner's barn in the dead of night. There was a cow in the barn then. There was none now.

When Abner returned to the house it was as still as if it had known no visitor in his absence. The companionable fire could have told a story that Abner would have understood, but it was dying down. He drew the bolt of the door, and came over to throw more wood on the embers. Then he sat down to wait for the reviving light, looking into the fire's heart the while. He was thinking of Norah.

The men of Big Creek Gap were right. The next day was wet; and when it cleared there was a time of slaughter among the squirrels. Every man in Big Creek took his gun, and went out. Abner Poteet took *his* gun from its corner, and went too.

"I may shoot me a turkey or a deer," he said, "but I'm plumb sure to get me some squirrels."

It was not altogether strange, perhaps, that his search led him into a stretch of woodland upon the mountain

slope, within the shadow of which a man, coarse of face and surly of mien, had just passed. The farms of Abner Poteet and John Kisselbaugh were contiguous; therefore it was no real wonder that both went to shoot in the same wood, for it lay conveniently near. But it was not quite so evident why the feet of John Kisselbaugh lagged till Abner approached. His "howdy" was surly enough. He had never forgiven Abner for coming between the strength of his arm and the quivering, straining mules, harnessed to a load a third too heavy for them and deep set in a mud hole, from which he was trying to extricate mules and load by the torture of his whip and the terror of his voice. The "howdy" was insolent as well as surly to-day. John had never forgiven Abner, but he had hidden his animosity, until lately. There was no need to hide it now. Big Creek Gap had turned, or was turning, its back on the innkeeper's son.

Abner's answer was civil, but he passed on in another direction. Presently a squirrel scampered across his path, and stopped a few yards away to look at him. He raised his gun, and pulled the trigger. The squirrel sat and stared, and no harm was done. He tried again, and the result was the same. What was amiss? The gun had never failed him before. He let the squirrel escape while he examined the weapon. He was so fully engrossed that he did not hear footsteps behind him until they were very close. Perhaps the huntsman to whose approach the footsteps were attributable did not mean that he should. As John Kisselbaugh passed his neighbour, he turned with a savage leer on his face.

"Missed fire, didn't hit?" he said mockingly. "You'll never shoot nothin' more with that gun, Abner Poteet. Hit hain't no manner of use for you to try."

He passed on, and Abner stood looking after him.

"Hain't hit?" he said at last, in a low voice. There was a doubtful ring in it.

Many times that morning Abner tried to prove to his own satisfaction that the words of his neighbour, John Kisselbaugh, were wrong. Sometimes the gun missed fire, sometimes the charge went wide of the mark. At noon Abner Poteet returned to his home. He carried no game. Slowly he deposited the gun behind the door, and stood looking at it.

" Hit's spelt," he said, and went to the fire to prepare his dinner. Once he looked towards the corner, and sighed. The gun was almost as real a friend as the cow.

CHAPTER XIII

NATURE is accommodating in her more southern domains. Man being there somewhat wanting in energy, she sets the streams to hew out store-houses for his benefit, and to make natural covers for his water supply. In the locality of Big Creek Gap men were in the habit of going to the caves the water had hollowed out for them to fill their buckets and to store their butter and meat, as well as, on occasion, to help themselves to nature's surplus of ice waiting on the floors and roofs of these same caves, and refusing to melt long after the air outside had grown soft and warm.

Not far from the house of Abner Poteet, but in the direction of John Kisselbaugh's farm, there was a cave that afforded cold storage for all the meat and butter of the immediate neighbourhood. The stream that ran through it bubbled over high, broken rock in such a way that the water was scattered, and near the mouth of the cavern big ice cakes and pendants formed in the colder nights. These remained for weeks, and so lowered the temperature within that meat could be kept longer there than in any spring-house in the vicinity.

Though the cave was not on his own land, Abner Poteet had been in the habit of storing his butter there. Several months had passed since his cow died; but he had yet some three or four jars of butter made in the summer, standing in a niche in the rock. It was February, and the air was warm and pleasant as Abner went to the cave to fetch one of those jars. He had not yet made up his mind to replace the cow by another. Where should he be the forwarder? he asked himself.

The same evil genius that had laid a spell on his gun and his cow might work again. When his store of butter was exhausted, he could buy more. As for milk, he did without it.

He was not surprised to find John Kisselbaugh within the cave. John had long kept his butter there, but it did not often happen that Abner encountered him. To-day the man was standing a few yards in, talking to two or three others. They moved further back as Abner entered, but from neither one nor another was any greeting forthcoming. Abner looked at them for a moment, and then passed them and turned to the recess where his butter was kept. As he did so, the men came up behind him.

"Whose butter have you got there beside your own, Abner Poteet?"

The voice was John's, and the insolent ring in it arrested Abner's hand as he stretched it out to draw a jar of butter towards him.

"Thar's none too much of my own, let alone ary other person's," he said, facing round and fixing his eyes on the speaker. "Thar's no cow at my place now, John Kisselbaugh."

"More fool you for not buyin' another, then," said John. "You've come in for enough o' the old man's pickin's to git you as many cows as you've a mind to want."

"I hain't wantin' another," said Abner quietly. "Hit'd be powerful unwise for a man to buy cows when he hain't sure jist whar his enemies are aimin' to hurt him next."

He faced round towards the rock again, and put his hand into the deep recess.

"Don't be in a hurry," said John, in a slow, insolent drawl, laying his hand on Abner's arm as he spoke. "We-all are aimin' to see fair play. Hit don't foller because a man's lost his cow through neglectin' of her that he's goin' to draw on his neighbours for butter."

"What's that mean?" asked Abner, the angry colour coming into his face.

"Mean? That's what hit means!"

John swung a lantern into the recess, and disclosed two jars of butter pushed behind the others. In size and make they differed slightly from those in front.

"Are you aimin' to tell we-uns them butter jars are yourn, Ab Poteet?"

"No, I hain't," was the reply, spoken in clear tones.

"Oh, you hain't?" sneered John.

"No," repeated Abner, in a louder voice, "I *hain't*. But I'm aimin' to tell you, John Kisselbaugh, that if you stick your butter jars behind mine, and want to make me aout a liar, hit hain't surprisin' me. I hain't sure thar's ary harm you *wouldn't* du me if you could."

"I hain't makin' ye aout a liar," sneered the other. "Hit hain't lyin', hit's thievin', to take things that belongs to ary other person. Hit's a thief I'm callin' ye, Ab Poteet; and hit hain't the fust time you've done stole my things."

"What?"

Abner took a step towards him, his face white with anger. Then he drew back.

"You're a-lyin', and you know hit," he said quietly.

"Lyin', am I?" shouted John, who had retreated hastily upon Abner's forward movement, but was bold again now that it became evident no personal attack was meditated. "Hit's likely I'm the liar, hain't hit? Hit's tol'rable likely ary one would believe I stole my own jars, and set 'em behind yours jist to make you a present of 'em. Hit's powerful likely folks are goin' to take me for the liar and allow you're speakin' the truth. Hit wouldn't take long to fix his character on Ab Poteet, the son of old Ken, that all men know was a thief and a murderer."

There was a moment of eloquent silence as the man's

loud, coarse voice died away. Those who were present saw Ab's face grow red and then pale. He pressed his lips together.

"He's dead," he said, after that momentary silence. "I hain't answerin' for him one way or the other. I cain't." Then after another breathless pause: "I hain't tuk your butter, John Kisselbaugh, and you know hit. If you-uns want to call me a thief because I'm *his* son, thar hain't nary one to hinder you."

"Hain't thar? John Kisselbaugh, look this away!"

He did look. They all looked. How could they help it? The girl's voice and words and person all combined to *make* them look.

She stood within the mouth of the cave, her finger pointed towards John, her splendid eyes fixed on him.

"John Kisselbaugh, say that agin," she commanded.

He was silent.

"Say hit agin, or else unsay hit," she repeated, like an offended goddess of justice. "Say what you said afore Abner spoke last. Hit's a coward that dassen't stick to his words."

John looked at her apprehensively. He had not reckoned on a skirmish with Norah Felps.

"Thar hain't no call to say hit agin," he replied. "I've said hit, and I stick to hit."

"Hit'll stick to *you* more like," she retorted scornfully. "Lor, John Kisselbaugh, you'd better 'a kep' *your* mouth shet. We-all know what you've got agin Ab. Hain't forgot the sore shoulders he give ye yit, hev ye? Lor me, if Ab likes to rouse himself, he'll soon hev *you* daown on yer knees, prayin' for mercy. *You* wouldn't be no more than a babe if he tuk ye in hand. Castin' up dirt at his pappy, was ye? Lor, thar wouldn't be no need to go back to *your* dad, John, to find a thief. Nary one would want to search so fur. Touch a sneak and you've got a thief six times aout of

half a dozen. Hit's plumb easy to fling ill names at a dead man. *He* cain't answer ye. My lor, if he was *here*, hit hain't John Kisselbaugh that'd dare show his face. He'd fix *you-u*, John, and send ye home cryin' to yer mammy. Ab's too powerful big to deal with *you-u*. He's afraid of breakin' your mean little neck. I hain't sure but I could fix you myself. Hit would be safer for *you* to be gittin' aout o' this. Now then — march!"

The last words were spoken in a different tone. The drawl went out of the girl's voice. She half turned, and pointed her finger in the direction of the mountain.

A shout of merriment went up at John's expense. The girl stood derisively contemplating the man, in the way in which she would have viewed some strange, loathsome animal. Her finger still pointed towards the mountain, and her lip curled.

He looked at her for a moment, as if weighing his chances of resistance, hesitated, moved a step towards the opening of the cave, and then turned on her savagely.

"Standin' up to the old man's money, hain't ye?" he said. "We-uns hain't fools enough not to know what *you* see in Ab. You hain't aimin' to hev ary harm said o' the old murderer while you've got the son and the money in hand. Nary bit would *you* look at a great fool like Ab if thar warn't the old dead sinner's hoard at the back of him."

He turned precipitately, making for the outside world as fast as his legs could carry him. Those who were present said afterwards that the legs shook painfully. It might have been true — for they had reason. The face of the girl grew still with passion.

"Stop, John Kisselbaugh!" she said, in a voice that rang like coming vengeance in the culprit's ears. "You hain't goin' that away"—

Her voice ceased. The words died on her lips.

There was no need to tell John Kisselbaugh to stop. He had *been* stopped. A hand with a grasp of iron was on his shoulder, shaking him back and forth like a cat worrying a mouse. It stopped, took a deeper hold that went to the bone, and then lifted the coward from his feet, and held him kicking and swaying above the ground as in vigorous jerks it almost shook the teeth out of his head. Then with a thump it set him on the floor of the cave in front of Norah.

"Now, you sneak, unsay that! You can call *me* what you've a mind to: I hain't aimin' to stop ye; but, if you set your lyin' tongue agin her, I'll"—

Abner stopped short, with his hand yet on John's shoulder.

"I warn't aimin' to say nothin' agin her," said the man sullenly.

"Unsay what you said!" roared Ab, giving the shoulder a shake that so nearly upset John's equilibrium as to cause him to stretch out his hands, wildly clutching at space.

A shout of laughter met the anguished grasp at nothing.

"I — I — wa-ar-n't — meanin' — no — harm. I — I — hit warn't true!" blurted out the unhappy John, between the shakes.

Ab released his hold.

"She told you to go," he said, with an outfling of his arm.

John gathered himself together and went, as quickly as his shaking limbs and gasping breath would let him.

There was silence within the cave. It was Abner who made the first movement.

"Thar hain't no call to take account of every snake that thrusts aout hits tongue at you," he said; and he came a step nearer, and looked appealingly at Norah.

"Hit's a tol'rable crushed snake," she replied scorn-

fully. "Hit's gone off with bleedin' tail and draggin' head. Hit hain't powerful creditable to be led by a snake, I reckon."

The last remark was addressed to the company in general. The three men replied by an uneasy laugh.

"Well," she said, looking at them with a thoughtfully contemptuous smile on her lips, "like gits with like everywhars, don't hit? Better be runnin' atter your friend. He's powerful lonesome, gallopin' across the fields to git home afore Ab chances on his track."

"I hain't so plumb sure he's sich a mighty friend," began one of the men apologetically; but the girl cut him short.

"Hain't ye?" she said, in a tone of surprise. "I am. Why, lor! thar hain't no hidin' hit. You and him's as good as one. Meanness is ketchin' as the measles. You've done tuk it bad. Ketched hit along o' John, and got hit powerful thick."

She turned her back on them as she spoke, and went further into the cave. With a shamefaced grin, and a barely hidden scowl, the man addressed walked away, followed by the others.

Abner stood by the cave's mouth. He did not speak nor move. He had not seen the girl for weeks, and his eyes searched the semi-darkness hungrily for a sight of her face. And yet, with the eagerness of a starved animal in his mien, he was minded to go away. Once, twice, he tried, and failed. Then he stood and waited. Her figure was only dimly to be discerned beyond a point where the passage narrowed. His gaze pierced the gloom with the greed of a miser excited by the glint of gold. His breath came in short gasps. Not as a result of his efforts to mete out a measure of justice to John Kisselbaugh. It was another and greater effort that quickened the beating of his heart and made his breath irregular. It was easier to keep a grip on his

enemy's shoulder than on those words that rushed to his lips and struggled there for utterance.

"I hain't goin' to say hit. There's *her* to think of. She hain't goin' to bear none o' that visitin'. Hit's got to be stopped — poured aout plumb on me."

The words were low, only half audible. His eyes still scanned the interior. When the face he was looking for appeared, coming nearer now, but softened and etherealised by the subdued light, he uttered a low cry.

"Norah!"

Entreaty, excuse, and yearning were in the one word.

She came to the mouth of the cave,— came up to him, and looked into his face.

"Hit hain't plumb through my fault," he said apologetically; "but hit's rough,— hit's rough for you."

"Du you think I'm carin'?"

She looked at him defiantly, but with a smile on her lips.

"Maybe not," he said; "but *I* am."

"For what *he* said?"

"For what he said — abaout *you*."

"He knew he was lyin'," she said, "and so did I. And so did you," she added slowly; "and, if ary other didn't, hit warn't makin' much difference."

"No," he said, looking into her face with a yearning, sorrowful gaze. "Hit cain't make ary difference *now*. Thar hain't nothin' can make ary difference. Hit's what *is*, not what people says, that's matterin'."

She looked at him for a moment doubtfully.

"Ab," she said, "thar's things you ought to know, and you hain't the one to find aout. Thar's people sayin' things agin you and agin your pappy."

"I know hit," he said, in a tone that told of evil accepted and taken home to the heart.

"They ought to be stopped," she said sharply.

"*I* cain't stop 'em," replied Abner gently. "I hain't the right."

"Who has then?" asked the girl.

"Nobody," said Abner sadly. "I hain't knowin' how much of what they say is true. Norah, he's my pappy, and I hain't knowin' jist how many sins thar *is*."

The weird mournfulness of tone and statement struck to the girl's heart.

"You take it too serious," she said, half in anger at his attitude. "I don't believe a quarter of the tales they tell. Why, they say"—

She stopped short. The pain in his face and in his whole bearing arrested the words. What was the use of telling him? He would believe it all. She put her hand on his arm.

"Ab, you're a plumb fool," she said. "He was your pappy, but he wasn't *you*. And I hain't so powerful sure he was what *they* say. If hit was my pappy, I'd give 'em as good as they sent. Thar never was none o' this talk till Naomi Mozingo and her brother come along. And hit's her more 'n him. He hain't so plumb certain of what nobody cain't know for sure. But she —well, if she made up her mind thar was a rotten egg in the moon, hit'd hev to *be* so."

"Hit hain't matterin' what they say," he replied sadly, passing over her last words. "Hit's what *he* done, and me bein' his son—and hit's *you*. Hit hain't goin' to fall on you."

"I hain't carin' what they say," she replied, with a little disdainful toss of her head. "Hit hain't makin' no difference thar. But if hit was *my* pappy, I'd stop *her* talk. Hit looks powerful like hit was the money she's atter,—the money she says she's lost."

He looked at her with sad wistfulness. The last words went into his ears, but were not at the time comprehended.

"Hit *does* make a difference,—hit *must*," he said. "Not what they say, but what he done. I hain't

knowin' jist what it was. I hain't expectin' to know. Hit's all got to be visited. But hit shain't come on you."

He bent suddenly forward, took both her hands in his strong grasp, and looked in her face, his eyes hot and dry, his gaze so sorrowful and yearning that it brought an answering tenderness to her eyes. For a minute he stood thus, then gently released her hands and turned away.

Without once looking round he left the cave and the girl standing where she had stood when he let go of her hands. He had forgotten his jar of butter, forgotten John Kisselbaugh and his charges, forgotten everything but the fact that he was Kennedy Poteet's son, and the visiting of his father's sins must fall on him, and should fall nowhere else.

The girl stood within the cave till he had disappeared. "He hain't no match for ary one of 'em," she said. "He's a-takin' his father's sins on his own shoulders, and bearin' all they like to heap up inter the bargain. Hit's powerful foolish, but hit's — hit's *Ab*."

The brain of man is a strange machine. Somewhere in its mechanism it keeps account of impressions of which, when made, the mind barely takes cognizance. Words, heard but not heeded, come back, freshened and strengthened by their sojourn in some dim recess of the brain where they were stowed away unwittingly. It was long before there was room in Abner's mind for any other thought than the one of Norah's personality and his renunciation. Whether the dream of a world *with* Norah and *without* anybody else had been a foolish one or not,— and on that point he had never been assured,— it was over now. He had given her up, and she knew it. He could never dream again — except of what *might* have been.

But slowly, so slowly that he did not know when it

came, another thought began to engage his attention. The past involved money as well as life. There were sin and sorrow and suffering back there; but there was money, too. And somebody was laying claim to it.

Abner's brain was not of the rapid-working order. He thought the subject out slowly and painfully, piecing together the words that Norah had let drop and hints that had come to him before. He had never forgotten Naomi, and the visit she paid him at the close of the day. But that visit had been associated in his mind with the indefinite wrong of the past. He thought she was reproaching him for his father's sins, those vague, terrible transgressions, of which one, witnessed in childhood, had taken such a firm hold of his imagination that after it nothing of horror or of shame appeared impossible. Now, into this past came the question of money. Had this girl any claim that he could satisfy? Was there a wrong that could be righted, one out of those sins of the fathers that could be blotted out by restitution?

Abner had inherited the greater part of his father's wealth, though a portion of it had gone to a nephew of whom old Kennedy had been fond. So far as Abner was concerned, the wealth was wasted. He had never used it, preferring to live in the little log cabin that had been his mother's property. For him there was a curse on Kennedy Poteet's money. But if any of it could be given back, restored to its rightful owner? The thought presented a new possibility.

Abner did not know how the day went; but he knew that the night was long, for it brought him no forgetfulness. Norah's face, the beauty of the girl he could never claim, haunted him, tortured him with a desire to possess it, with a yearning sense of loss, with the hopelessness of renunciation. At the earliest dawn he was outside his door, looking with sad, searching eyes at the familiar things.

Breakfast was well over, and the men had gone to the mill, when Naomi saw a stranger approaching the house. She had seen Abner Poteet by his own fireside, and occasionally since, but his figure was not familiar to her. It was not until he came near that she recognised the innkeeper's son. Then face and form stiffened. The hand that opened the door at Abner's knock was steady, and the eyes that looked at him, cold. The girl's heart was not cold. It burned with a sense of outrage. How dare this man come here, when he knew that his father's guilt was discovered! She stood with the door in her hand, waiting for him to speak.

"I'm the son of Kennedy Poteet," he said slowly and sorrowfully. "They say that he — that you claim you have suffered loss through him. The past is dead — with *him*. I hain't denyin' that what you say is true, and I hain't acknowledgin' hit. I hain't no right. I'm willin' to pay anything you like, fourfold if you've a mind to ask hit."

He was waiting for her to speak. He saw her eyes darken and her face kindle.

"You offer *me* money?" she said in slow, measured tones. "You!"

"Yes," he said simply. "I never used hit. Thar's enough. You may be right or you may be wrong, but hit'd be the safest for you to hev it."

"I don't doubt it would — for *you*," replied Naomi. "Abner Poteet, if you brought all the money he sold his soul for, all he took from those whose bones he left to moulder and whose children he left to mourn, I would not touch a cent of it. If you think it will buy silence from me, or stop the retribution that is as surely coming on every one who bears the name of Poteet as the night is coming after the day, you're powerful mistaken. Keep the money. It is the price of blood. It shall cling to you, like the curse that goes with it."

His eyes were fixed on her face. The ringing, measured tones sent the words eating their way into his heart.

"I hain't expectin' to git shet o' the curse," he said. He turned away, and left her standing by the door.

CHAPTER XIV

THE point of view has almost as much to do with what men see as the actual object of sight. Violent difference of opinion would be eliminated, and heart-burning and clashing of judgment reduced to a minimum, if everybody could look upon the same thing from the same point of view. Unfortunately for the peace of the world, the moral hill-top, on which men can gather and look out upon life's duties and relationships from an entirely equal view point, has yet to be discovered.

Naomi and Dalbert Mozingo were experiencing some of the difficulties attendant upon antagonistic points of view. To both the loss of their father had been an equal sorrow, but it had presented itself to them under different aspects. Dalbert had always looked upon it as a loss to be mourned, Naomi as a mystery to be explained. Hitherto the difference in the point of view had troubled neither. Such difference was habitual to the brother and sister. Naomi had always laughed a little ironically at her brother's attitude towards the world and towards circumstances. His readiness to see the adverse side of every question affecting himself, and to shoulder the evils fate showered upon him, and his unreadiness to perceive faultiness in others, by which unreadiness he courted fresh attentions from fate, were, in her estimation, characteristic of Dalbert. But in her heart she admired the stalwart honesty and manly kindness of the brother whose depression she set herself to charm away when the load grew too heavy for him, and whose misfortunes she patiently shared or boldly removed by some daring exploit.

And Dalbert admired and trusted and depended upon the girl whose nature was to him somewhat of an enigma. Lighter than his own at some points, it disclosed at others depths that he could not fathom. He had never seen eye to eye with his sister, but he loved her and rested in her, so that until now differences of opinion had been of little consequence. With the advent of the mill owner there had come a change.

The brother and sister had reached a point where they not only failed to see alike, but where each felt the blindness of the other a moral wrong rather than a moral incapacity. To Naomi, Dalbert's slowness to acknowledge the duty of avenging the death of their father was a want of fealty that amounted to positive weakness. To Dalbert, his sister's eagerness to seek the vengeance for which her conception of duty to her father called seemed a soul-hardening desire for revenge, a vindictive pursuing of the helpless for the satisfaction of her own anger. He did her a partial injustice, but he did not know it. His mistake arose from failure to understand the aspect in which the matter presented itself to her, and not from failure to love.

The breach would have been less wide but for the presence of the mill owner. Naomi had grown very confidential with Will Hollingsworth of late. He was essential to the accomplishing of the end upon which she had set her will and her heart. The mill owner did not envy Dalbert now. He had come into a brother's privileges with something a little different from a brother's position. He appreciated his good fortune, and made the most of it. And in proportion as his intimacy with Naomi increased, Dalbert's indignation at what he termed "the savage pursuit of Abner Poteet" grew more pronounced.

Not that Naomi had, directly, anything to do with the treatment Abner received, beyond the fact that her

words, sometimes spoken personally, sometimes through Will Hollingsworth, had brought into being, and were daily quickening into vigour, feeling inimical to him in Big Creek Gap. For John Kisselbaugh's attacks, covert and otherwise, she was not responsible, except in so far as public opinion was responsible for them, and she was responsible for public opinion. John had hated Abner even before the strong arm of the latter had delivered the tortured mules from his power, but his was not the character to embody its hatred in open injury until the man he hated lay under the heel of fate.

It chanced that Dalbert heard of Abner's visit to his sister indirectly, instead of from herself. She had kept it no secret that the innkeeper's son had tried to buy her silence with respect to one of his father's victims,—for this was the light in which Naomi viewed the effort Abner had made to restore what *might* have been wrongfully taken,— but she had not spoken of it to her brother. The knowledge, when it came to him, pleased him ill. If Naomi's view of Abner's action were right, it proved that her attitude was at least open to misconception: if wrong, it afforded somewhat conclusive evidence that she was persecuting an innocent man. It did not add to his good temper that the knowledge had come to him through the chance remark of a man at the mill. He walked home in a perturbed state of mind, and in the same state of mind encountered his sister.

"Naomi, when is this worse than folly to stop?"

She was standing by the door when he accosted her, her hands hanging lightly down by her sides. She stood there when he had finished speaking, and not a finger had moved.

"You look wa-arm — for the time of year," she said, "powerful wa-arm."

There was a sarcastic smile on her lips. It did not tend to cool him.

"Naomi," he said angrily, "this is no time for fooling. You're in the wrong, and you know it."

She looked at him fixedly, and there came to her eyes a depth that made them darken and glow as with some half concealed fire.

"In the wrong, am I?" she said in a low, ringing voice. "And where are you, Da-al? It's powerful right and powerful creditable, isn't it, for *his* son to take sides with his murderer?"

"Take sides?" he said impatiently. "There *were* no sides till you made them."

Her eyes grew deeper still. They looked at him in a way that was not comfortable.

"You're plumb ri-ight," she said slowly. "There were no sides, or rather there was only one side the-en; and that was the murderer's. There was none to be on the other side but hi-im, and *his* mouth was shut. No-o, it's powerful true that there was but one side till I put myself in the wrong by making another,— *his* side."

"What good have you done *him?*" asked Dalbert, his irritation in no wise diminished by the fact that her words had the appearance of turning the tables and fixing the faultiness on himself. "It is nothing but a wild fancy of your own,— this idea of revenge on another than the man who did the deed,— a scheme of yours and Will Hollingsworth's. And speaking of Will, I wonder you don't see that people will talk. He might be your brother, judging by the way you take him into your confidence."

"Yes, he *mi-ight* be my brother," said Naomi, with those great darkening eyes of hers still fixed on his face. "He behaves a tolerable sight more like it than you-u do. It's my brother's place to do his duty towards my father and hi-is. But he preferred to leave it to Will, and Will did it. Yes, he's powerful like a brother: he *ha-ad* to be."

"Or like something nearer," said Dal, and turned and walked away.

He did not go into the house that night until the lights were out and everybody was in bed. His remonstrance had not only failed of its effect, but had widened the breach between himself and his sister.

March was not half over that year before the farmers were busy "making their gardens." The odd little bullock-tongue ploughs, that made light, uneven scratches in the soil, were being dragged up and down precipitous ledges by the sure-footed mules, preparatory to "making a little crop of oats." Here and there oxen were at work ploughing up the level land in the valley. Nobody was in a hurry, for Nature gave the worker abundant time for his operations in this region where she smiled more often than she frowned. There was no necessity for haste.

Perhaps that was why a stranger, walking along the steep, rocky path that led to the saw-mill, surveyed the scene leisurely. Hurry would be manifestly out of place in a world like this around him. There was no hurry at the mill, certainly; for there even the wheels were resting. Dalbert Mozingo himself was idle, though the worried look on his face scarcely betokened rest.

"Howdy."

The stranger strolled into the open space in front of the mill.

"Had a breakdown, I hear."

His eyes — keen blue ones, that had not looked about on the world for twenty-six years without learning something from it — leisurely scanned the faces and figures of the men lounging in the neighbourhood of the mill. After that scrutiny their owner turned unhesitatingly to Dalbert Mozingo.

"Feel like having ary kind of repairs done?" he asked.

"I *feel* like having everything done, if it will set the machinery going again," said Dal. "But who's to do it? The break's beyond my knowledge."

"Maybe hit's not beyond mine," said the stranger. "I'm a machinist. I heard thar was something wrong at the mill, and came up to see."

"Do you understand *this* machinery?" asked Dalbert, looking more closely at the speaker.

He was of medium height, and slight build. The lithe, sinewy form showed grace and strength in every swing of the arm or movement of the body. The head was held well up, but carried lightly, as if its owner had expected good at the hands of the world, and had found his expectations met without conscious effort on his part.

"I reckon," he said, with a smile that was possibly more convincing than the words.

"You're welcome, then," said Dalbert,—"nary one more so."

They went into the mill together.

"Who's he?" questioned the loungers, looking from one to another for an answer.

Heads were shaken doubtfully.

"Looks mighty like a stranger. He's a powerful pretty man."

"He's done come in the nick of time," said another.

"I reckon."

"Whar have I seed his face afore?" asked one of the company, thoughtfully. "I'm plumb put aout. If I hain't sot eyes on him more 'n onct in my life, I've seed somebody powerful like him. I cain't jist decide whar, though."

They laughed, and went into the mill.

The breakdown proved to be more serious than Dalbert supposed. Will Hollingsworth was away, and in his absence Dalbert took upon himself the responsibility of having the machinery overhauled. The stranger set

about the examination with the cool ease that was characteristic of his every movement. Dalbert did not again question his knowledge of machinery in general, and this piece of machinery in particular. He took his time over the examination.

"Hit'll take two or three days to git things in good shape agin," he announced, when the extent of the damage was discovered.

Dalbert's reply was emphatic.

"It's got to go through quicker 'n that," he said. "There's stuff laying here that's promised to men who need it. It's trees now. It's got to be boards in less time than you say."

"Very good," replied the stranger. "I'll patch things up for you, and have the wheels turning in less than twelve hours, if you say so."

"I do say so," responded Dal.

"Very good," repeated the stranger. "The machinery shall be working at daybreak to-morrow."

From that moment the mill ceased to be a good lounging-place.

"That feller steps round powerful lively himself, and seems to think everybody's as young and spry as him," grumbled one of the men, reluctantly bending his back to lift a heavy block. "Hit'll be a plumb guede thing when the mill's runnin' agin'."

"Lor! you needn't be scart," was the reply. "He hain't goin' to git no extra work aout o' you-u. The man hain't born that could du tha-at."

There was an answering laugh, and the work went on.

Noon found the stranger at Naomi's table, his keen blue eyes scanning the girl's face.

"We're getting the break patched up," explained Dal, "and shall be at work again by to-morrow, thanks to," —

He stopped inquiringly.

"Marshall Lane," replied the stranger, with an odd

little smile that broke round the corners of his mouth and then died away. He was watching Naomi.

"How long will you guarantee the machinery to work?" asked Dalbert presently.

"Twenty-four hours—and take the risk of my words," replied the other.

Dalbert stared at him.

"Why didn't you say so before?" he demanded, half angrily.

"You did not ask me," was the reply, given with a quiet smile. "You said the machinery must be set at work. Very well. I will set hit at work, but I will not guarantee for how long. Hit may go for twelve months—or twelve hours."

Dalbert sat and looked at him, his dinner forgotten.

"What would you advise me to do?" he asked after a minute's silence.

"Eat your dinner, in the first place," replied the stranger, "and keep on with the patching up in the next. Hit hain't plumb necessary to stop the mill all the time the repairs are being done. Git things started agin, and to-morrow me and the blacksmith will set to work to make the new bolts and parts that are needed. When everything's ready, we can stop the sawing and git things fixed in abaout a day."

Dalbert breathed a sigh of relief, and Naomi vouchsafed a longer glance from eyes that for the moment lost their slumberous calm and awoke for him as they had not done before. He had come at a time when his presence was needed to help her brother out of a difficulty. That of itself was sufficient to commend him to her notice. But Marshall Lane was not a man who needed commendation from outside circumstances. He was accustomed to depend on himself for his welcome, and rarely to go without it. Perhaps he exerted himself a little more than usual to win it on the present occasion.

Not visibly. The blue eyes that now and again sought Naomi's had the same quiet smile in them for the girl that was there for everybody else. But possibly it came a little more often, and stayed longer.

The pressure of work at the mill was not over as soon as Dalbert expected. He found it inconvenient to stop the machinery. Fortunately Marshall Lane was accommodating.

"I'm in no hurry," he said. "Take your own time. I came to look abaout the valley a bit. Hit hain't plumb certain I shain't be putting up machinery of my own before long. I shall be here when you want me."

Apparently, he found Naomi's cooking to his taste, for he took no steps to provide himself with other accommodation.

"You cain't turn me aout, Miss Mozingo," he said with that smile which Naomi had come to acknowledge as pleasant; "for the machinery may break down any day, and hit is plumb necessary for me to be on hand — for your brother's sake."

"I could perhaps put up with a worse nuisance — for Dalbert's sake," she said.

There was a meeting of a pair of calm dark eyes and two keen blue ones. Then the owner of the blue ones laughed.

"I accept the position," he said. "We are both willing to do something — for Dalbert's sake."

The first week gave place to a second, and the machinery was not yet adjusted at the mill. Will Hollingsworth was still away, and business was pressing. Dalbert had begun by being somewhat suspicious of the stranger. He ended by liking him unreservedly. As for Naomi, she had possibly better opportunities for judging than her brother. Marshall Lane's comings and goings were less regular than those of other members of the household. She could not reckon on his being away from

breakfast until noon and from noon until evening. In truth there were few days when he did not break in on her work or her leisure. She took the interruptions kindly.

It was perhaps because she had a little more work than usual to do that she found the weeks short. This was the first occasion that Will Hollingsworth had left the valley since her own arrival there. It was strange that his absence did not leave a bigger blank.

CHAPTER XV

THE two weeks of Will Hollingsworth's absence from Big Creek Gap had put Marshall Lane on a very friendly footing at the house over which the steep bank above the "branch" hung protectingly. In spite of the breakdown in the machinery the weeks had been satisfactory ones to Dalbert. Local demands and calls from a distance had kept the mill going at its full capacity, and an unusually large quantity of work had been turned out. This in itself was enough to rejoice the heart of Dalbert Mozingo. It would have vexed him sorely had the mill owner been given cause to comment disparagingly on his superintendent's management during his own absence from the mill.

Those same weeks could not have been altogether unsatisfactory to the superintendent's sister, for the girl's step was buoyant, and the soft Southern voice had in it a melodious ring that was suggestive of happiness. Dalbert's attitude might possibly be regarded as the provocative cause of the happiness. There was a noticeable lessening of his irritability towards his sister. In the absence of the mill owner he found himself disposed to attach less importance to Naomi's position with regard to the family of Kennedy Poteet. Now that Will was not there to keep prominent the difference of opinion, the brother and sister fell into something like the old relations. Dal was glad to let the matter rest, and Naomi — well, maybe it was not at the moment the foremost interest of her life.

For the pursuit of justice — or vengeance — may become an interest as absorbing as any other. Naomi did

not tell herself that a pair of blue eyes, which were occasionally caught studying her face, had anything to do with the alteration of feeling. She was not in the habit of telling herself that any man's interest or indifference could make more than a passing change in her feelings.

She was not averse to being admired, but she took the admiration very much as a matter of course. That this stranger should find her a fitting object of study was nothing new. They all did it. But it was a little new that the study should make any material difference to her enjoyment of life. That it was doing so, she did not at present acknowledge. She had not thought about it. She had simply gone on her way, and found life pleasant. As for Marshall Lane, he was content also, unless appearance and reality strangely contradicted each other.

The business of the day was over. Twilight would have been fading into darkness if a moon, almost full, had not ridden high overhead. As it was, daylight simply stepped aside, and gave place to moonlight.

"Miss Mozingo, hit's a pretty night,— too pretty to be spent indoors."

A well-shaped head appeared in the doorway, and a pair of clear blue eyes looked in on Naomi.

"Yes,— I thought you had gone aout to enjoy it."

She was lifting a pile of plates to a high shelf. The action showed to advantage the grace and symmetry of her form. Marshall Lane stood watching her.

"Won't you come?" he asked, as she turned for another pile.

"Perhaps,— when I have finished," she said.

He was by her side, with outstretched hand, a moment too late to help her with the second load. She looked at him with a laugh in her eyes.

"You choose the smaller of two evils," she said. "The choice lies between waiting and making yourself useful."

"No, the greater of two privileges. Either leaves me where I want to be," he replied.

"Perhaps. There's a powerful lot of things that sound plumb different and mean exactly the same," she said.

They went out together. The moon looked down on them approvingly. Marshall Lane began climbing the precipitous, almost overhanging bank.

"The air is fresher on top," he said.

Upon the road above they stood for a minute, drinking in the cool evening air. Beneath them was the house, and not far from it the mill, occupying the low land by the bed of the "branch." Above, on the opposite side of the stream, rose a high hill, shutting in the "branch," and the steep bank, and even the rugged rock pathway beneath their feet, that went dipping down sharply till it reached the level of the valley road which here crossed it at right angles. Looking down towards that road, the dark outlines of the Walden range could be seen, apparently so close to-night as to stretch sheer across the end of the pathway upon which the two were standing.

"Hit's pretty, hain't hit?" said Marshall. "Miss Mozingo,"—for Marshall Lane had not dropped into the more familiar form of address adopted, as a rule, by the workmen, and taken very much as a matter of course,—"if nary person had been before me, hit's thar I should have built a mill."

"A saw-mill?" asked Naomi.

"No, a grist-mill. I've had my eye on that spot for years. I put hit off a little too long."

"You knew the place, then?" said Naomi. "You must have known it well, to choose that spot."

"Yes." Then after a moment's silence: "I spent a year or more here some time ago."

"Here, in this roadway?"

"Not exactly," he said with a little laugh. "But in Big Creek Gap,—and in this neighbourhood."

They were walking on now. He had taken the initiative, and turned in the downward direction, which would lead them into the valley road.

"You have not been here for ten years, I think you said," remarked Naomi.

"More than that. I was a boy when I came. But I knew every foot of the valley. Hit was soon after the war."

She did not answer him. The words had sent her thoughts leaping back, and quickened emotions that had been less active of late. She felt as if the moonlight had been suddenly dimmed.

He did not speak again. He was watching the changing expression of her face. The moon was a splendid ally, revealing what night pretended to hide. They had almost reached the end of the path before the silence was broken. It was Naomi who spoke.

"Are we going to turn back, or get our feet wet?" she asked.

They had come to a point where the "branch" filled the space between hillside and hillside, and the path disappeared beneath the waters, or, more properly speaking, took to mountain ways and became a mere track, climbing laboriously the rocky projection above the stream.

"Neither," he said. "We will climb. Hit's not dark enough for stumbling."

He held out his hand, and she put hers in it. It was not necessary. She was a mountain girl, and she knew the way perfectly. But he kept it in his strong grasp, and they went hand in hand over the spur of the hill, and down into the valley road.

"We have come down for the pleasure of going back," she said, laughing. "There is no other reason for being here."

"Isn't that pleasure enough?" he asked. "Hit is for me."

He went on a few steps, however, until they stood in the hollow, facing the big house. It was dark and silent. Just so it had appeared when Abner Poteet came before it on the night of the preaching. Marshall Lane looked long at the building.

"You did not know the old man who lived there," he said, turning to the girl by his side.

He looked into her face. It had frozen beneath the light of the moonbeams.

"I know what he was," she said, in a voice that was very quiet.

"Do you? So do I — a little," he replied, in a different tone. "Miss Mozingo, I think there was never a man abaout whom I should feel more like applying that Bible injunction, 'Judge not.' Nobody really knew Kennedy Poteet but the One who alone is able to judge him. He was the strangest mixture of good and evil that ever bore the name of man — but for *me* the good predominated."

"He did not kill *your* father," she said, in a cold, hard voice.

"No," he answered gently. "Is hit plumb certain he killed anybody's? Yes, I know what you would say," he continued, answering the quick gesture. "There was the time when Abner surprised him in one of his fits of passion, and witnessed what looked like a murder. But Ab was a mere child, and could not understand how the quarrel arose. The rest is solely conjecture."

He had not taken his eyes from her face while he spoke. He saw it change from cold stillness to a quivering, passionate life. The lips that opened to make him answer drooped one moment in sorrow and the next hardened with passion.

"Was it conjecture that my father was seen in that house, and never seen again?" she asked, in clear, low, vibrating tones. "Was it conjecture that he came there overflowing with God-given life, filled with eager love for his children and anxiety to be with them again, and from that moment the life and the love and the anxiety perished from the earth, and his children stretched aout empty hands and called his name into blank space? Was it conjecture that his ring — *his* — was found in the cave where men say that Kennedy Poteet was in the habit of burying his victims? Even his son does not deny the charge."

She was looking at him with eyes dark as night, but kindling with a smothered fire. They challenged him. He gazed into them, and hesitated.

"Miss Mozingo," he said, "until hit's plumb proved, hit does nary thing but add to your sorrow to make so powerful sure he died as you think. Why should it please you to believe so cruel a thing?"

"Why does it *please* me?" she repeated, with angry scorn. "Is it question of pleasure or pain? Can believing or disbelieving undo the deed? The death was his. I can at least bear to believe it — and to seek to win justice for him."

"Yet you may be bearing an imaginary sorrow, and putting on another an undeserved punishment," he said, more gently still.

"Undeserved?" Her eyes were flaming now. They blazed into his.

"Yes," he said. "Hit is *possible* that even Kennedy Poteet does not deserve *all* your condemnation. Hit is certain that his son does not."

She looked at him for one long minute in perfect silence. He met the gaze of those scornful eyes steadily.

"He *is* his son," she said, "inheritor of all that could by ary possibility descend from parent to child. The shame of his father's sin is his."

"And hit is for being his father's son that you condemn him?" he asked, in the same gentle tone.

"Yes. Should the family of the murderer go free, and the family of the murdered suffer?" she demanded. "Upon whom should the punishment fall if not upon his children and his kin? They are one with him."

"In a measure, yes," he said. "And you make no distinction?"

"None. Why should I?" she replied.

He stood looking at her for a moment, and then turned.

"Shall we go back?" he asked.

He would have taken her hand again to help her over the swell of the hill, but she kept it by her side. They walked back along the moonlit path in absolute silence. To Naomi the beauty was gone from the night.

"Miss Mozingo, will you come back along this road to-morrow night?" he said at last. "I have something I want to tell you — down there by the old house."

They were nearing the mill. She stopped, and looked at him.

"Why should I?" she asked coldly. "To you my feeling is nothing but folly. Your sympathies are upon the other side. The question does not touch you personally. Why should we talk of it further?"

"Doesn't touch me?" he said. "Thar agin hit's best not to be plumb sure. You shall judge of that after to-morrow. You will come?"

The keen blue eyes were fixed on hers. There was something compelling as well as entreating in them. In truth, the compelling force was stronger than the supplicatory. Naomi yielded.

"If it's a pretty night," she said.

His eyes thanked her. For himself, he turned away, and left her to go on to the house alone.

Why was it that the glory had gone out of the moon-

light and the springtide had lost its gladness? Why, because Marshall Lane did not agree with her, should the night be suddenly robbed of its grandeur and the world look cold and gloomy? His attitude placed him in the ranks of those whom she had come to regard as her enemies. Well, there were others relegated to those ranks before; but it had never troubled her unduly.

"Where is Marshall Lane? I thought he went aout with you."

Dalbert was standing by the door.

"He did," replied Naomi. "But he found the moonlight pleasant. He turned back a minute ago."

"I reckon he'll soon be in."

Naomi was not so sure, but she left her doubts unexpressed.

"I want to have a talk with him," continued her brother. "If nothing new turns up in the morning, we'll overhaul that machinery to-morrow. Then, if he's in a hurry to be getting away after his own business, it won't hinder us."

"Does he want to go away?"

"I reckon he does," said Dalbert. "He said something of the sort to-day."

Again there came to Naomi a feeling of chill. She had noticed in Marshall Lane no signs of haste. If he were anxious to be gone he had not betrayed the feeling to her.

Dalbert made no arrangements about the machinery that night. He was asleep when Marshall Lane came in. Naomi was not.

When Will Hollingsworth rode along the "branch" about noon of the following day, he noticed two things: first that something was wrong at the mill, and second that a stranger who was standing by Naomi's side had just taken a bucket from the girl's hand and was stooping to dip it into the stream. He filled it to overflowing,

and lifted it brimming from the bed of the "branch." As he turned to carry it indoors, their eyes met,—the blue ones and the dark ones. Just what those eyes said to each other, Will did not know; but he did know that of the two unusual circumstances the stationary condition of the machinery and the advent of a stranger, he was inclined to investigate the latter first. He rode up to the door as the summons for dinner was given.

"I'm in luck! Naomi, keep guard over that seat of mine. I'm here to take possession of it."

He was still on his horse's back, but he had bent down to look in. The girl turned at his words.

"I'll see that there is a mouthful of something or other left for you to eat," she said carelessly.

She did not come to the door. She was busy putting dinner on the table.

When Will drew himself up on the saddle there was a scowl on his face. He turned, and saw Dalbert Mozingo.

"Who's that feller?"

"Which?"

"The feller in there with your sister."

"Oh! Marshall Lane. We've had a break in the machinery. He's putting it right."

"In there?"

"No." Dalbert looked into the mill owner's face, and a smile played for a moment over his own.

"It's noon," he continued. "We've left off for dinner."

"Does he eat here?"

"Yes — with the rest."

Will sprang from his horse.

"I'm going to see after this beast," he said. "I'll be in directly. When are you aimin' to get the mill running again?"

"To-morrow," replied Dalbert. "It was running yesterday."

Will made no answer. He was leading his horse away. Dalbert went into the house with a smile on his face.

There was a noticeable absence of smiles on Will Hollingsworth's face. He ate his dinner and took observations. Then he went to the mill.

It would have suited the present mood of the mill owner better if he could have found something to grumble at. His feelings were not amiable. But beyond the breakdown of the machinery, which could by no possibility be laid to the account of the superintendent, there was more to commend than to criticise. He examined the damaged parts, stood for a few minutes watching Marshall Lane without speaking, and then followed Dalbert out of the mill.

"How did that feller come here?" he demanded.

"Walked, as fur as I know," replied Dal. "Heard we'd had a breakdown."

"Who told him?" snapped Will. "And who asked him to stick *him*self into the mess? He's plumb full of conceit. Who is he, anyhow?"

"A powerful useful feller," answered Dal quickly. "He's been about the country pretty much, so he says. He seems to understand his business."

"Understand! How do *you* know what he understands?" demanded the mill owner. "What do *you* know about it? If you'd understood what was the matter, you could have set it right. You don't know whether or not he's fooling you, and more don't I. I ain't so powerful struck with him as the rest of you seem to be."

"Tell him to leave things alone then," replied Dalbert coolly. "You can get somebody from one of the cities to come and look at the break."

The mill owner's answer was not polite. He turned his back on his superintendent and strode off down the stream. Dalbert went back into the mill.

Wherever Will Hollingsworth spent that afternoon, it was not in the vicinity of his own premises. It may be inferred that he found his occupation satisfactory, since it materially improved his temper. He came back to the boarding-house an hour before supper time, whistling cheerily.

"Hello, Naomi! Want ary help — about fetching water, or such like?"

He had a smile and a keen glance for the girl who sat on the doorstep gazing into the strip of blue sky in which the opposite hill seemed to be trying to bury its head. The dark eyes were incomprehensible this afternoon. Will was none the wiser for his scrutiny.

"I'm not plumb sure there's ary thing for you to turn your hand to," she said. "Have you been idle so long that you're suffering for want of occupation?"

"Yes,— occupation of the right sort, and for the right person," he said, standing close to her and looking down upon the dark, shapely head. "Got all you wanted done this morning, didn't you?"

"Yes," replied the girl, raising her eyes to his. "I'm not in the habit of making my work last till ni-ight."

She let her eyes drop slowly to the waters of the "branch." As for his, they never moved.

"Had a mighty willing assistant when I came along at noon, hadn't you?"

She lifted her eyes again, swept them over the face and figure before her, and returned them to their quiet survey of the stream.

"I ain't powerful fond of having assistants that are *not* willing," she said.

"And you ain't powerful likely to find them," he laughed. "As for that whipper-snapper feller, I reckon you know plumb all about hi-im, and don't need me to tell you. If it warn't so, I could pitch into a story that's clear aout of the common order."

"Have you been for two weeks outside of Big Creek Gap, and found nothing better to tell than the gossip of this little place?" asked Naomi coolly. "Will Hollingsworth must have plumb wasted his time."

"Oh, my experiences will save," he responded. "I ain't expecting to have ary to match those of Marshall Lane Rutherford."

He was watching her face. It was distinctly uninterested.

"Marshall Lane didn't tell *you* he'd got another inch or so to his name, did he?" he continued.

The dark eyes scanned him critically.

"Do you mean the young man who has come to mend your machinery?"

"I reckon," replied the mill owner.

"An inch more or less was of little moment," she answered coldly. "He gave enough to distinguish him by."

"Did he? That's the question," laughed Will. "I venture to say he'd be better distinguished by the whole than by the part. Left out the best end."

"Possibly," she said. "If the best end of a man's name is like his character, it's seldom at the front."

"Better tell Marshall Lane Rutherford that," he said. "Nice honest sort of feller, ain't he?"

"I'm not presuming to decide that question," she responded. "Honesty is scarce—even among one's friends. It would be wiser to go and make his acquaintance, and judge for yourself. If he cheats you-u, it will be your own fault."

"Oh, I don't know that I'm afraid he should cheat *me*," he replied, with a chuckle. "The danger don't lie in that direction. He's aimin' higher than me-e."

She settled herself in a more comfortable position, and let the subject drop. Will found the outcome of his efforts unsatisfactory. He returned to the attack.

"Keeps his affairs pretty close, don't he?"

"We-el," replied the girl, with an air of reflection, "it depends on what you call close. Perhaps he does. He has never told me exactly how much money he possesses, nor explained explicitly his plans for the future, nor even opened his mind on other subjects,— such as his opinion of the men he meets here in the village. On second thoughts he *is* a little wanting in frankness. Now I think of it, he has never picked another man's character to shreds once; and of course by such abstaining he has refrained from showing his own. Depend upon it, you're right. He's close,— powerful close."

She looked at the mill owner quizzically, and relapsed into silence.

For a moment the smile left his face, and the first beginning of a scowl appeared. It never got further than a beginning.

"I dare swear there's other things he's been slow to take you into his confidence about," he said, with a smile. "Has he ever chanced to take you down to his uncle's place,— the big house in the hollow?"

If his aim had been the raising of those great dark eyes again, he accomplished it. They lifted slowly to his face.

"His uncle's house?"

Her voice was well under control. It expressed nothing but cool surprise.

"Yes,—his uncle's,— old Kennedy Poteet's. Marshall Lane Rutherford is old Ken's favourite nephew. He ought to do the honours. If it ain't his now, it may be some day. He got plenty of the old man's money, if he didn't get the house."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

The question did not imply an overwhelming amount of confidence on the part of the speaker. Naomi asked it quietly.

The mill owner passed over the implied suspicion silently.

"It's just as I heard it," he said. "Nobody knew him when he first came back. He'd altered since he was a boy."

She looked at him steadily for a full minute without speaking. Then she rose from her low seat on the step.

"He will have finished your machinery to-night," she said. "After that he can find accommodation in the village."

She turned, and went into the house. In the doorway she stopped.

"The fire must be tolerable near dead," she said. "I wish you'd bring me an armful of wood."

"Powerful cool!" muttered Will Hollingsworth, as he selected the sticks from the pile. "But that's an end of *hi-im*."

"He was an impudent rascal to push himself in here. I had my doubts as soon as I set eyes on him."

The mill owner deposited his wood on the floor with a crash, and straightened himself to look at the girl. She made him no answer.

"Ever let him know your feeling towards the Poteet family?"

She looked at him with a quick flash in her eyes.

"Yes."

Will chuckled.

"Didn't agree with you, I reckon."

"No."

A scornful smile crossed her lips.

"Not altogether likely that he would," she added, a moment later. "Well — he's done his work, and that's an end of him."

"Only there's two instead of one to bear old Ken's sins now," said the mill owner; "and you've got two on

whom to visit justice. He's in the same list with Ab Poteet."

The words had the sound of a challenge.

For barely a moment the girl hesitated. Then she lifted her head and looked him squarely in the face.

"Yes," she said, "he's in the same list."

When the men came in to tea that night Marshall Lane was not with them. It would require another hour's work to put the machinery in running order. He had decided to stay and finish.

"I told him I'd see you kept his supper for him," said Dalbert, with a quiet smile at his sister.

"It's powerful dangerous to make promises for ary person but yourself," said Naomi, in a tone he did not quite understand.

He looked from her to the mill owner, and then began talking about the machinery. He kept up the talk till supper was over.

"Shall I tell Marshall to come in for his supper when he's finished?"

Dal had followed his sister into the kitchen.

"No."

He looked at her inquiringly.

"What's up?" he asked.

"The nephew of Kennedy Poteet may go hungry, but he can't eat in thi-is house," she said.

"Nonsense! He's eat here times enough before. He's no worse to-day than he was yesterday."

She turned on him sharply.

"Did you know he was Kennedy Poteet's nephew?"

"Yes."

The look she gave him was full comment.

"How long have you known?" she asked.

"Since yesterday."

"Who told you?"

"He did," replied Dalbert. "He'd have told you,—he wanted to tell you. You'd better let him explain."

"He's had plenty of chance," she said. "But there is nothing to explain, except how he dared to come here. He is the nephew of my father's murderer. That needs no explanation."

"And you won't give him his supper?"

"No."

Dal went out, and slammed the door behind him. Will looked in a few minutes later and was politely assured that the air outside was cooler than that within, and that the fewer people there were inside, the better for those who must remain. He went out.

The moon was getting high in the heavens when Marshall Lane Rutherford knocked imperatively at the door of the room which Naomi reserved as her private sitting-room.

"Miss Mozingo," he said, "I have gathered together my belongings. The work at the mill is finished."

"If it is satisfactory, Dalbert or Will Hollingsworth will settle with you, I have no doubt," she replied coldly.

"I reckon. I hain't afraid of the money," he said. "Miss Mozingo, I've come to ask for the fulfilment of your promise. Hit's a pretty night."

She rose, and came to the door of the room.

"You dare to ask that?" she said quietly.

"Is hit dangerous?"

He was smiling, his face on a level with hers.

"Yes," she replied, in a low, cool tone.

"Nevertheless, I think you owe hit to me," he said.

"Owe it to *you*,— to *you!*"

"Certainly," he insisted. "Last night you gave me your side of the argument. To-night I want to give you mine. Nary one sided case can be just."

"It is not for kin of Kennedy Poteet to call for justice," she said. "The justice might come."

He looked at her regretfully.

"I'm powerful sorry somebody has been ahead of

me," he said. "I wanted to tell you myself — and take the consequences."

"The consequences are not likely to escape you," she replied.

"No — I see that. Miss Mozingo, won't you let me plead my cause?"

"You have no cause to plead," she said coldly. "Kennedy Poteet was a thief and a murderer. His nephew can hardly lay claim to being an honest man."

He looked at her for a moment in silence, then drew himself up proudly.

"I understand you," he said. "You would accuse me of stealing into your house unannounced. I plead guilty, if hit *is* guilty to come and investigate for myself. You set yourself to ruin an innocent man,— yes, an innocent man; for, if ever thar *was* an innocent man, hit's Abner Poteet. I had not been in the neighbourhood since I was a boy. I heard the story by accident, came back before ary one in the valley knew me, and learned that the machinery at the mill had broken down. I came to see for myself,— the machinery and the enemy. Miss Mozingo, before I had been in this house twenty-four hours, I changed my mind abaout the character of the enemy as fully as you would change yours abaout Abner Poteet, if you would let yourself know the man — as I learned to know the woman."

His voice dropped a little at the last words. He was watching her face. It was hard and cold, with that paradoxical coldness that suggests hidden fire. There was only a momentary pause, but after it his tone changed — slightly, but perceptibly. It was a little less urgent, had lost a tinge of gentleness.

"Miss Mozingo, I have failed," he said. "I hoped to convince you that evil was not the only characteristic of those who, willingly or unwillingly, were related to the old man."

His eyes caught a gleam in hers, and he stopped.

"Yes, you have failed," she said; and he noticed that the lips took a scornful curve.

"I know hit," he replied. "You think hit was what I might have expected. Well, I judged otherwise. I hoped to persuade you yet to do justice to the old man's son. I confess — for I may as well make a clean breast of hit — to a still more daring desire, the wish to see the noblest side of a nature that *could* be noble git a mastery over the ignoble side, the passion for cruel vengeance. I've failed. I'm ready to take the consequences. I cain't help being my uncle's nephew. I would not, if I could, help being Abner's cousin. I only wish I was as fine a feller as he is. You can think of us as one. I'm plumb sure you'll be willing to."

Marshall Lane's head was held a little higher than usual at the last words. He looked the girl in the face with a glance that was little suggestive of overwhelming shame. And as he looked, he saw the colour sweep for a moment over cheek and brow, and then recede.

"I'm going to stay with Ab for a time," he said.

She did not answer, and he turned away.

"Good-night."

He had stopped a step from the door to fling back the word, with a smile.

"Good-night."

The answer was grave and low. It told him nothing.

He heard her door close behind him as he went out into the moonlight.

CHAPTER XVI

THE night on which Marshall Lane Rutherford turned his back on the house beneath the hill was as "pretty" as the preceding one had been. The moonlight was as clear, and the air as soft. Both made their way in at the window of a room where a girl stood looking out into the brightness, and feeling more in keeping with storm and darkness than with the soft splendour that flooded the world and made the beautiful, scornful face clearly visible.

For it was full of scorn,—scorn of herself and of another. Why should the "prettiness" of the night mock her with the thought that but for Will Hollingsworth's discovery she would now have been following the rocky road with Marshall Lane by her side? She turned from the suggestion with a curl of the lip, an added scorn of herself. What should she be doing on that path with Kennedy Poteet's nephew for a companion?

The knowledge of the relationship had come upon Naomi with a shock. Marshall Lane's departure left her angry and disturbed. Indignation that the nephew of her father's murderer should dare to set foot inside her door divided her feeling with outraged pride that demanded to know by what right Marshall Lane had presumed to argue with *her* as if there were justice in his cause. He had hoped to alter the situation! How dare he think that his coming could make any difference?

And yet—it *had* made a difference; it *did* make a difference. Naomi was not a girl to cheat herself with

a garbled report of her own feelings. She spared herself no scorn. Marshall Lane had said that he had failed. If that had been an unmodified truth, the girl would not have stood with the angry bitterness in her heart, looking with darkening eyes into the moonlight. How dare he put her in this difficulty? For Naomi acknowledged that in her own mind the situation was changed. The way, which before had been clear, had suddenly grown difficult. It had been easy to think of the innkeeper's son as one who by character and inheritance was outside the pale of her sympathy, one with whom justice, and not brotherly kindness, should be called to deal. Her arguments had been strong. She had convinced herself with them. And she had included in her condemnation all who were kin to the old man, though she had known of none but Abner. She remembered how positively she had declared to Marshall Lane that she made no distinction. Well, it was true. She *had* made none; she *could* make none. But the sweeping assertions of the preceding night stood out in a very different light now that she found herself forced to apply them to Marshall Lane. She felt a wave of colour rush to her forehead as she recalled her own words.

Not that justice had shifted ground. The facts remained as before Marshall Lane Rutherford appeared on the scene. Only between herself and the vengeance she had desired to see fall upon the house of Poteet there had come the vision of a pair of blue eyes. It was easy to think of Abner Poteet in the light in which she had accustomed herself to think of him. It was *not* easy to think of Marshall Lane in the same light. Yet she could not apply one set of rules to the son and another to the nephew. Both were inheritors of the old man's wealth, the richer for his sins. On both the shadow of the crime fell. There was no difference, except that the relationship was nearer in the one case

than in the other. Consistency called for the including of the son and nephew in the same category. "He's in the same list with Ab Poteet," Will Hollingsworth had said. She could no more deny it now than when the words were thrown out as a challenge. Marshall himself had acknowledged it. "You can think of us as one," he had said; and she had not contradicted him. Consistency demanded that she *should* think of them as one. It increased her contempt of herself that she was not ready to meet consistency with open arms.

The moonbeams had grown pale and the world shadowy before the tall, still figure by the window gave sign of movement. Consistency had won, as the girl had known from the beginning it must win; and Naomi suddenly became conscious that limbs and brain were weary. Perhaps the thought of Will Hollingsworth, and the impossibility of receding from the position she had taken, had had something to do with the strengthening of the calls of justice. Perhaps the going forward presented less difficulty than the going back.

When Will Hollingsworth saw Naomi again, she met him with a smile.

"We-el," she said, with a scornful drawl, "my boarder is gone; and our task has grown a smart sight harder. Marshall Lane Rutherford will not take the place his uncle has earned for him without a *lit*-tle struggle."

"He'll take it, though," replied Will, with a scowl.

"Yes — he'll ta-ake it," she said, looking straight into his eyes.

Will Hollingsworth understood that consistency had won. He understood a little more, and that extra piece of intuition put into the struggle a personal element that had been lacking before. Up to the present moment he had been labouring in Naomi's cause. The cause had suddenly become his own. In seeking to bring vengeance on Abner Poteet he had been pursuing the

man who to Naomi represented her father's murderer, in turning his weapons against Marshall Lane Rutherford he was pursuing a man who stood as a possible rival to himself. The pursuit had gained in excitement.

Will had from the first been guided by his anxiety to please Naomi. It had suited his purpose to carry out her wishes. Now his own wishes had become engaged. From following the dictates of a sagacious policy he turned to the more engrossing pursuit of fulfilling the desires of his own heart. There was a difference.

In the next few weeks a sharp division of feeling manifested itself in Big Creek Gap. Will was not often at home in the evenings now. The village saw more of the mill owner than it had ever done before. The creation of a wave of popular sentiment in a small community differs little in character from the earliest beginnings of those popular movements that work in a more extended field. The public press is wanting in the first case; but there is always the same impressionable human nature to operate upon, the same subtle working of many and often dissimilar forces, that, set in motion from different points and from different motives, combine to produce the final result. Much depends in every case on the perseverance and powers of resource of the leader. Will Hollingsworth was an indefatigable worker, not easily daunted, one, moreover, who knew how to change his tactics with every change of hearer. He had decided that Big Creek Gap should become an undesirable place of residence for Marshall Rutherford. Much of the work had been already accomplished. When Marshall Lane Rutherford came to Big Creek Gap, the friends of Abner Poteet were in a constantly diminishing minority. The first result of his appearance was a revival of the courage of those who had not yet gone over to the majority, and a tendency among the weaker members of the opposite party to adopt a policy of neu-

trality. The return of Will Hollingsworth, and the vigour of the campaign at once established, sent the tide rolling back with increased energy.

If Marshall Rutherford had known the real state of public opinion, it is possible that he would never have come to Big Creek Gap; but, being there, he stayed. He did more. He made up his mind that the current of feeling should be changed. With the image of a proud, cold face before him, and a fair amount of honest anger stirring in his heart, he bent himself to the undoing of a girl's work. The trial of strength between him and this girl was not altogether distasteful. Marshall Lane Rutherford was not accustomed to scorn, and Naomi's words had been proud. The blue eyes flashed more than once as he recalled those words, but the lips never lost their confident smile.

With a quiet energy altogether unlike Will Hollingsworth's aggressive tactics, he set himself to counteract the influences at work, fully understanding that the task would neither be short nor easy. He entered the contest deliberately and of set purpose, realising the strength of the adversary. The verdict of Big Creek Gap was the stake for which both sides were playing, and the enemy had the advantage. Marshall Rutherford proposed to turn the tables.

"We shall win yet, Ab, my boy," he said; but the tone was not without a trace of bitterness.

Underneath the words, and the resolution they embodied, there was a little soreness of heart at the memory of a shapely head and a pair of scornful eyes, and the knowledge that the girl to whom both belonged was the leader of the opposing forces.

Ab shook his head.

"I hain't expectin' to win," he said. "*You* may. You hain't *his* son. The sins o' the fathers don't reach you, maybe."

"I hope not," said Marshall. "I've got enough to do to answer for my own. I hain't like you, Ab. If you hadn't nary other person's sins on your shoulders, you'd go plumb free."

Ab shook his head again, disapprovingly.

"You hain't realisin'," he said. "Thar's a powerful sight of evil in sin."

Two or three times during the next month Naomi met Marshall Lane Rutherford face to face. On the first occasion a smile accompanied his "good-evening." It was hard to believe that between himself and this girl there was to be unrelenting enmity. At no future meeting was the smile in evidence. Naomi told herself she was glad that opportunity had occurred for her to make clear to Marshall Lane Rutherford the relation that existed between them. Then she took herself to task for the nature of the gladness, and held her head a little higher for the rest of the day, in proud scorn,—whether of herself or another did not appear.

After two or three such encounters, however, the disturbing cause ceased. In her journeys to and from the village she no longer met Marshall Rutherford.

She did not ask why. The name of the young machinist was seldom mentioned by her. Will Hollingsworth could have enlightened her, had he chosen. But he did not choose. He had gained a little personal knowledge of Kennedy Poteet's nephew in the month that had passed since his own return to Big Creek Gap. The knowledge had not made him the readier to accord to the young man a fair field in the winning of Naomi Mozingo. Will was clear sighted where Naomi was concerned. He did not need to be told that the increased vigour with which party feeling in the valley was promoted was more in keeping with the girl's principles than with her feelings. She showed no sign of holding back; and there was a certain proud triumph when she

saw that in spite of Marshall Rutherford's appearance upon the scene, public opinion was stronger on her side than it had ever been before. But Will was not deceived into believing that she regarded Abner Poteet and Marshall Rutherford in the same light, though she put them in the same category.

The knowledge he had gained of Marshall himself showed the young man as no insignificant rival. He was not sure that in the matter of wealth Marshall Rutherford was not his superior. For personal characteristics,— well, he sneered at Marshall Lane Rutherford, and never lost an opportunity to place him in an unpleasant light; but he was far from despising him. It was not strange, therefore, that he was in no haste to inform Naomi that sickness was the cause of the young man's absence from road and field. Sympathy was the last feeling he desired to invoke for his rival.

For the time being Marshall Rutherford had cast in his lot with his cousin. Abner's crops never looked better than they did this year, when Marshall's lithe form might any day be seen in the fields between Abner's cabin and John Kisselbaugh's farm. The weeds had an energetic enemy, and succumbed without a struggle. There came a change, however, when the hand that had manipulated the hoe suddenly lost its strength.

At first Marshall made light of his illness, laughing at Abner when he talked of a doctor. But when his words began to mix themselves in strange fashion, and the blue eyes were either unaccountably heavy or dangerously bright, Ab took matters into his own hands, and went for the disciple of medicine.

Now it chanced that the doctor was a man well weighted with years, and over-fond of the good things of life. There were days when it was wisest for patients not to summon him in a hurry. Unfortunate men, the exigencies of whose cases required haste, were

on such occasions conscious of a lamentable shakiness about the fingers that encircled their wrists, and potions that should have been measured by drops fell into the glass in trickling streams. If the patient were wise, he used his own discretion about trusting too implicitly to those potions. If his disease were of such a nature as to impair his wisdom, he drank, and took the consequences.

When Abner sought the services of this veteran in the art of healing — or otherwise — he was just emerging from a four days' seclusion. He came, viewed the patient, shook his head, which was shaky enough to begin with, and looked ominously grave.

"A severe case of fever," he said. "He'll want a smart sight of care, and he hain't goin' to be on his feet agin in a hurry."

Marshall did not want for the care, though Abner called on none to help him. His old neighbour, who had shown friendliness when the cow was "spelt," was crippled with rheumatism, and could barely hobble across her own floor, or she would doubtless have proved useful. As it was, Abner troubled neither friend nor foe. He left the fields to look after themselves, and devoted his attention to his cousin.

The big, gentle fellow made a laboriously careful nurse, taking in all seriousness every head-shake of the doctor, and carrying out directions with a precision founded upon the belief that half an hour's mistake in the administering of a powder might turn the scale against his patient.

There was an excuse for his anxiety. The blue eyes that stared up at him had an unsettling tendency. The Southern belief that the spirit might wander while the body was yet instinct with life did not seem hard to believe with those uncomprehending eyes fixed on his face. In one of those wanderings of spirit the intelligent

agent might neglect to return. It would not be because the body to which it belonged lacked aught that Abner could do for it. He watched day and night, with but the briefest snatches of rest.

To Abner the nights were longer than the days; for then, while his patient slept restlessly, or roused himself to give utterance to strange, wild words, little calculated to reassure the watcher, the hosts of darkness seemed palpably to press around the little log cabin. To Abner it seemed that they watched for his soul and for that of the sick man. More than ever, during these later months, had he realised that he was under the curse of his father's sins. The sickness that had come upon Marshall made him fear lest the curse should not be limited to himself.

That curse was ever present to his mind. The verdict of his neighbours at Big Creek Gap seemed but the drawing closer round him of the retribution which was destined to pour itself out upon his head. Throughout his whole life one terrible scene, indelibly printed on heart and brain, had remained in the foreground of his consciousness. Resting there unexplained, it had produced a result inevitable in the presence of a hopeless, pressing evil, that was as impossible of removal as his own life,— a part of himself, since it was the act of his father, and had come to be regarded as a piece of his own existence, yet abhorrent, loathsome, hellish. It never occurred to Abner to repudiate it as a deed that belonged to his father and was in no degree his. Left to produce its natural effect, it had worked itself into his life in those early days when the spirit was susceptible of impression, and had produced an exquisite pain, that responded to the slightest touch. That scene had shaped Abner's life and character. It had produced a man more fully alive to one set of influences than to all the world besides.

Cast in a deeply religious mould, the mind of Abner Poteet had grasped the terrors of the law in connection with this sin, which, originally that of his father, was in some strange way a part of himself. A more egotistical character would have grown rebellious under the hopelessness of inherited guilt. Abner neither questioned nor struggled, but accepted, as he accepted many another belief that had less foundation in fact than had this strangely garbled presentation of a great truth. The belief that the sins of his father rested upon himself had gone on working, robbing the boy's heart of its lightness, and making the man one set apart from his fellows.

In very truth, the sins of Kennedy Poteet had from the first rested upon his son. From the day when the scene of violence made its indelible impression upon the boy, the "visiting" had been going on. Pressing down upon him, so that the terrors of the unknown took deep hold on his nature, this *natural* consequence of his father's sin, while it weakened in one direction his power of resistance, and left him a prey to fears as unfounded as they were real to himself, worked in yet another fashion, strengthening and purifying and ennobling. Petty pride, weak self-indulgence, the greed that clutches at the good of life and holds it for self away from other men, were burned out by the fires of that retribution that was, in all truth, "the visiting of the sins of the fathers upon the children." Not in the light sense in which he threw out the words, but with a fuller significance than Marshall Rutherford realised, it was true that Abner had fewer sins of his own to meet than grow out of the lives of most men; and they were fewer because he had so long borne the sins of his father. The simple nobility and unselfishness of the man's character were results of the "visiting" that he could not be expected to see, and that those who knew him well accepted without

questioning, as "Ab's way." And so the great, noble, unselfish heart, and the over-developed conscience, struggled on together, and to Abner the retribution that Big Creek Gap dealt out was but a part of that to which he felt himself devoted.

One haven of rest was left him in the long night watches, when the powers of darkness were more real than aught besides. It was found in the thought that no breath of harm, no personal knowledge of the innkeeper's sins and their consequences, could come upon Norah Felps. He had not seen her since the day he left her standing in the cave, and turned to face the world without the hope that had brightened it. Men could never say again that Norah craved Kennedy Poteet's money,—the money that was accursed. He had abstained from going near the house. If there were disgrace in associating with Kennedy Poteet's son, that disgrace should not touch her. He was jealous for her honour. It should never be stained by contact with him.

Marshall Lane Rutherford had not been as scrupulous. He and the girl were on friendly terms. But Marshall was not Abner: he was not the son of the innkeeper.

The thought of Norah Felps came to Abner in those hours of night like the presence of an angel. He was in sore need of it. For to his impressionable nature, at such times the powers of darkness joined with the powers that were seen, and hell as well as earth was ranged against him. It would not have surprised him had the captain of the hosts of evil claimed him audibly as his prey. The scenes of the past lived again during the hours when the world slept, and Marshall tossed and moaned, and roused himself now and again to ask some wild, incoherent question. The blood that he had seen shed seemed to Abner to cry out against his father and

himself. The horror of a night long buried in the past stood forth as justification of all the penalty that earth or heaven or hell could exact. There were those who declared that Kennedy Poteet's victims had been many. Abner did not question the truth of their words on these nights, though there had been days when he had dared to hope that the accusations were unfounded. He multiplied the horror indefinitely. Round him in the night watches gathered ghostly forms, clamouring for vengeance. He made no effort to escape them. Why should he? Where was the line that could fathom the depth of curse that rested on the son of the murderer many times over?

And then his thoughts would pass with pitying tenderness to the old man himself, till great drops of perspiration stood out on his face, and the hands that tended his cousin were clammy. For he had loved the old man who had gone to meet the reward of his sins.

It was little wonder that Abner's face grew haggard as the days and nights passed, and that he became more than ever a prey to dreams of evil, less able to judge between reality and an excited imagination. His cousin, too, gave him cause for uneasiness. Abner could not fail to see that he was not progressing favourably.

"He hain't improvin' none," said the doctor gloomily. "I won't answer for hit that hit hain't goin' to turn aout more'n a common case of fever. Better take powerful good care of him, Ab, if you don't want the trouble of buryin' him. I hain't goin' to be responsible for no neglect. He's got to have them powders and drops reg'lar every hour."

It was when the doctor had taken his departure, leaving a deepened gloom behind him, that Norah Felps made her appearance. Abner saw her from the window, and his heart gave a great throb of joy. He was at the door before she reached it.

"You hain't comin' in," he said, a tender smile lighting up the face that was growing worn with watching.

"Nonsense!" replied the girl, with a laugh and a toss of her head. "I hain't aimin' to go back without. I shain't hurt him."

"I hain't fearin' for hi-im. Hit's you I'm thinkin' abaout," said Abner, with an intonation in his voice that was not wasted on the girl.

"What harm will he do me?" she asked lightly. "I'm comin' in to see if the doctor hain't made more 'n half his head shakes out of his own feelin's. He come close to shakin' his head off when mammy asked him how Marshall was. We didn't know he was as powerful bad till to-day. Mammy's comin' to set up with him to-night."

Ab looked at her for a moment in silence. The heart warmth the offer brought to him meant much in the present crisis. It cheered him none the less that he had no thought of accepting it.

"No she hain't," he said, after that momentary silence. "I hain't aimin' to hev nobody lueke atter him but me. Doc hain't plumb sure hit *is* the fever. Hit might be ketchin'."

"If hit is, we hain't aimin' to ketch hit," she said.

"And I hain't aimin' to let ye," he replied, with the same light in his eyes that had shone there when he greeted her.

In the end the girl did *not* go in, and the night found Abner watching alone. Morning demonstrated his wisdom. The doctor stood long over his patient without speaking. Then he turned suddenly upon Abner.

"Hit's been a tol'rable smart while showin' hitself," he said. "Thar hain't no doubt abaout hit now. Hit's a good old-fashioned case o' small-pox, and hit hain't tuk him light."

Even the doctor wondered at the look that came into

Abner's eyes. He did not know that the man's thought had gone straight to a laughing, queenly face, and that the first tender impulse of his mind took the form of satisfaction that the girl had not been permitted to come into the house.

Totally oblivious of self, Abner increased his vigilance, refusing to let any one enter the cabin. Norah's mother presented herself at the door, but he bade her go home.

"Thar hain't no need for more'n one to run into danger," he said. "You've got *her* to think of as well as yourself."

"I hain't fearin' for myself, though I hain't never had hit," replied Mrs. Felps; "and I don't know as I'm fearin' much for her. We don't neither of us ketch things powerful quick. You cain't du everything without he'p."

The bright eyes, so like Norah's that they made the world look homelike while they gazed into his, were scanning Abner's face.

"Oh, I shall du well enough," he said.

The little woman shook her head.

"You hain't lookin' plumb lively," she said.

"Hit's jist want of sleep. I'm duin' all right," he replied, with a smile.

She went away unconvinced.

"If you want he'p, you've only got to say so," she said. "Me and Norah hain't afraid; and I hain't got no man to make a time over hit, if I du run a leetle risk."

Abner went back into the house with a warm spot in his heart. He was not going to let them risk anything for him, but it made everything look different to know that they wanted to do it.

The night that followed was hot and close. There was thunder in the air. If he had consulted his own wishes, Abner would have shut his windows in spite of the heat. There was comfort for him in the knowledge

that no ordinary avenue was left open through which the evil from without might easily enter. But his patient tossed restlessly about, and was plainly suffering from the heated condition of the atmosphere.

Abner went into the outer room, and opened a window wide. Then he returned to Marshall's side, seating himself between the bed and the open window.

He was anxious about his cousin. Moreover, he was very tired. For five nights he had slept only in short snatches. The depression of utter weariness was upon him. Every thought was full of sadness, except that which came with the memory of Norah and her mother. He let himself turn again to that brilliantly beautiful face as he saw it when it smiled upon him two mornings ago; and, thinking of it, his head dropped, and his thoughts took the irresponsible character of dreams. At first it was of Norah he dreamt. Then, with the inconsistency of dreams, the face he loved faded out of the vision, and dark figures took its place. Shadowy forms moved about him, and angry voices clamoured in his ears. They were his neighbours of Big Creek Gap who were condemning him, those who had aforetime been his friends. They were shouting against him, demanding that punishment fall speedily. No, after all, they were not his neighbours. They had changed character. Those forms were not of Big Creek Gap, nor of earth at all. They surged up from the depths, stretching out eager hands, and calling that he belonged to them. He tried to move, to draw himself away from them, and then —

His eyes were wide open. This was not a dream, whatever the rest had been. He put out his hand, and laid it upon the fever-heated one on the bed. That touch assured him the thing was real. The object upon which his eyes were fixed with a horrified stare *might* have been one of the forms of his dream grown more

vivid, but that touch told him he no longer slept. Was it an actual visit of the prince of evil,— that dark, hideous head, with eyes and breath of fire, that seemed to fill the outer room with its presence?

Abner had fallen asleep sitting between the bed and the outer room. The open window was exactly opposite. Just within that window, bending forward with a grin of satisfaction that allowed the fiery breath of the apparently Satanic visitant to become plainly visible, was a head that belonged, surely, to neither man nor beast. Its eyes were pits of fire. Its size was colossal. Its attitude was one of satisfied examination of the premises of which it had taken possession. Coming, as it had seemed to do, out of the confines of his dream, Abner did not doubt that the powers of hell had at last prevailed to claim their own. He was their legitimate prey. He had feared it long. Why should he wonder that they had come for the soul that belonged to them?

He tried to remove his eyes from that terrible fiery visitant, but they refused to obey his will. He sat and stared at it with a horror that knew no diminution as the minutes passed. Suddenly, for one brief moment, the room blazed with light, from out of which the fiery eyes burned dully, while the great dim form of the head to which they belonged made a blot in the dazzling brightness. Then the light died, and the eyes kindled afresh. To Abner the thunder that rolled over the house was a voice from the unknown world, telling of doom.

Was it part of the thunder, that deep voice that took up the sound, sending in a long, low roll through the place the significant word, "Mine!"

"I hain't denyin' hit," replied Abner, in a low, awe-struck tone. "I hain't denyin' hit's just. I knowed the visitin' must come. I've been more 'n half expectin' hit would come this away. But I hain't ready to meet hit. I'm a plumb coward!"

Then, as the figure made a movement towards him, he rose from his seat, took a couple of steps forward, turned, and fled back to the bedside, burying his head in the clothes.

Once more the air vibrated with sound,— a long, vindictive hiss, like that of a serpent. It filled the listener's ears, presently resolving itself into articulate sentences.

"Mine,— body and soul! I set my seal on this house and every soul found thar. When I come to claim my own, let all be ready."

When the lightning flashed again, Abner did not see it. With head buried in the bed-clothes he was wrestling with his supreme fear. After the thunder rolled away the house became very still. He did not know how the minutes passed. He was face to face with the terror that had hung over him so long. With his soul as the prey, he was fighting for strength to pay the full penalty of his father's sins.

When at last he lifted his head, the light of day was faintly stealing across the room. Weary and stunned, Abner rose, and turned to where the fiery head had been. Its place was vacant. Through the open window came the cool breath of morning. Then, and not till then, did he remember the powders that should have been administered, and the patient whose life, as he believed, depended upon the regularity of their consumption.

A look of self-condemnation came over the weary face.

"I've plumb forgot him! And doc sayin' his life depended on his gittin' 'em reg'lar!"

With a trembling hand he administered a powder, and stood looking at those that should have been taken during the night.

"I hain't fit to look atter him," he said reproachfully. "I'm too big a coward. I warn't aimin' to neglect

him, but I was powerful tuk up with the danger to myself."

He leant over the bed. To his unpractised eye the patient seemed worse.

"Thar hain't no knowin' what harm hit's done him," he said. "He'd got to hev 'em reg'lar."

He gazed regretfully at the unconsumed powders.

"And hit hain't this night only," he continued hopelessly. "Thar's other nights. Hit may come agin. Hit's tol'rable likely hit will. And I shall forgit agin. I'm too powerful scart to remember. I hain't wantin' to neglect him, but I'm that plumb full o' fear that I hain't no use. Hit hain't a coward that's fit to look atter hi-im."

And while Abner reproached himself, and trembled lest in the overpowering nature of his fear he had sacrificed his cousin's last chance of life, a loud, coarse laugh was sounding through the barn where John Kisselbaugh's mules started nervously at the approach of their master.

"He's been believin' in devils and ha'nts and witches all his life. Hit'd 'a been a plumb pity he shouldn't never see one on 'em."

The words followed the laugh, and a thud upon the floor followed the words. That which was immediately responsible for the thud was the contact of John Kisselbaugh's foot with an object of sufficiently uncanny appearance, no other than the head of a horse, not yet denuded of hair, but lacking both eyes and more than half the teeth. Just how terrible such an object could appear when lighted from within by two burning candles, one must view it in the darkness of night to imagine.

John Kisselbaugh gave the head a kick.

"He'd better 'a kep' his hands offn *me*," he growled. "If he hain't found that aout yet, he will afore I'm done with him."

CHAPTER XVII

"HIT was every soul in the house. The words was clar."

Abner stood looking down upon his cousin. Marshall was no longer conscious of his presence. He was raving wildly.

There was a new thought working in Abner's mind,—the danger to his cousin arising from contact with himself.

"Hit's his connection with we-uns," he said sadly. "Hit's the curse. Hit's costin' him his life. I hain't believin' hit will cost him more. I hain't *expectin'* hit. He hain't *his* son. Hit hain't *likely* he'll hev to answer for the sins. But thar's danger. The words was powerful clar."

The morning was drawing on, and Abner was waiting for the doctor. He was very uneasy about Marshall. His neglect seemed to him to have produced terrible results. And stronger than his fear of those results was the doubt that had arisen by reason of the words uttered by the unearthly night visitant. When he grew calm enough to recall their significance, fear for himself receded into the background. With Abner, danger to another implied forgetfulness of himself. The voice of the preceding night had made a distinct claim upon every soul in the house. Terror that the curse was about to fall upon his cousin superseded the personal fear that had taken possession of him.

Abner had no doubt that the voice he had heard belonged to another world. The superstitions that had been part of his daily nourishment while a child, com-

bined with the stern doctrines of the religious teaching of his day, made it seem a not impossible thing that the family of a bad man should be doomed to destruction, or that the powers of darkness should make themselves visible, and claim control of a soul upon which a curse had fallen. His idea of the manner in which his father's sins were to be visited upon him had always been vague and shadowy. Whether the curse would exhaust itself in this world, or achieve its fullest significance in the next, he did not know. He feared always — hoped sometimes; but ever, through fear or hope, accepted the consequences of his father's sins unquestioningly.

But that which he accepted without question for himself was not to be as readily admitted when applied to his cousin. The visitor of the past night might make any kind of demand upon him. He would neither contradict nor resist. But, when Marshall was included in that demand, Abner's mind was exercised.

"Hit's his bein' here," he said. "If he'd kep' away, he might 'a been safe."

The doctor's visit brought no comfort. He looked at the patient despondingly.

"He's plumb worse," he said. "He hain't goin' on as he should. Thar's too much fever. You hain't been neglectin' them powders, have ye?"

"Thar was one time in the night when he didn't git 'em powerful reg'lar," confessed Abner.

"That's hit," growled the doctor angrily. "Thar's always somethin' at the bottom of these relapses. He's tol'rable bad this mornin'. I hain't goin' to answer for the consequences. If he don't git what I leave for him plumb reg'lar, I hain't comin' here at all."

The big, gentle fellow looked as penitent as a scolded child. When the doctor had gone, he stood over Marshall, gazing down upon him with eyes that were full of trouble.

"Hit may happen agin," he said slowly. "I hain't sayin' hit won't. I hain't to be trusted, if *hit* should appear to-night. I hain't wantin' to neglect him, but I *might*. An' then thar's the curse. He hain't nothin' to du with hit naow. Hit hain't really *restin'* on hi-im. He oughter hev a chance."

The trouble in his eyes grew deeper. He still stood by the bedside. He did not know how long he remained there. He was weighing dangers and possibilities. At last he turned away.

"I warn't reckonin' to let ary bit of hit come near he-er," he said; and there was a catch in his voice, suggestive of a sob. "Hit hain't right *she* should suffer — and hit hain't right *he* shouldn't hev a chance," he added sorrowfully.

If John Kisselbaugh could have seen the figure that went tearing across the fields a few minutes later, it would have done the man's vindictive spirit good. Sorrow and remorse and compelling fear were visible in Abner's face. His pace alone was sufficiently suggestive of danger. In truth, he hardly dared to go at all. He had left his cousin unattended, and he was fearful of the consequences. When Mrs. Felps opened her door in answer to his knock, she started back in alarm.

"Mercy sakes! What is hit?" she asked. "Come right in."

"No, I dassen't," replied Abner. "I left him alone. I hain't knowin' what to du. I warn't wantin' to ask you to he'p. Hit hain't safe. But he oughter hev a chance, and thar's danger to him — whar he is."

The deep-set, worried eyes looked into the little woman's face.

"You go right back, Ab Poteet," she said decisively. "I'll come atter ye as quick as I can; and when I come, I'll du the decidin'. You leave that to me. I'll tell ye what to du."

Abner did not stop to take breath. He was off again like a shot.

"Lor! if he hain't a si-ight," said the little woman, her dark, handsome face expressing nothing but motherly concern. "He hain't got nary thought for himself, settin' up a-nights and runnin' his legs off in the days."

"You better go and see," rejoined Norah. "We-uns hain't afraid o' small-pox. Thar's things a plumb sight more ketchin' than small-pox, and cowardice is goin' round powerful bad jist naow. I hain't sayin' one hain't pretty much as bad as the other. You go and see, mammy."

Mrs. Felps went, and Abner met her outside the door.

"He's sleepin' still," he said. "You hain't comin' in till I've told you. I hain't askin' nothin'. I hain't knowin' what to du. I'd done made up my mind that hit shouldn't never put *her* in no danger. But thar's him to think of — and hit's soul as well as body."

"You jist tell me all abaout hit, and leave hit for me to decide," said Mrs. Felps.

Her bright black eyes grew wide with horror before Abner's story of the preceding night was told.

"Mercy sakes!" she said. "I hain't wonderin' you forgot the powders."

He looked at her sorrowfully.

"I was plumb tuk up with my own fears," he said. "I might be agin. But that hain't the most danger. Hit's the curse. If hit's comin' on everybody in this house, hit hain't givin' him a fair show. He cain't git himself aout o' the house. But I hain't wantin' to ask you to run into danger. Thar *is* danger. Hit's powerful ketchin', and *she* might ketch hit. I'd done made up my mind thar shouldn't no shadder of harm come near *her*. But is hit jist right to him? Hit's his hevin' ary thing to du with me that's puttin' him in the danger. Hit hain't him that's to blame: hit's his bein' *here*. He's a-comin' in for the curse that's restin' on me."

Abner's face expressed doubt and sorrow and grievous disappointment. It was costing him much to open this question which in his mind had been so completely settled. To risk Norah's safety was the biggest sacrifice he could have made for his cousin.

The brown face, full of the vigour of health and hopefulness, wore a thoughtful look. The little woman to whom it belonged was for the moment silent.

"You hain't no call to feel so ba-ad," she said, after that reflective silence. "He shain't be sacrificed. Hit's a sight how trouble falls on some people. I hain't denyin' thar's all kinds o' spirits abaout — and ha'nts; but, lor! I don't see why they should set on you-u more 'n ary other. You hain't your pappy; and you hain't to blame for his doin's, if folks make aout you are."

Abner shook his head.

"I hain't expectin' to escape," he said. "But *he* hain't his son."

"No, he hain't; and he hain't goin' to suffer," she said decisively. "Hit hain't safe to let him stay here. You go and hitch up the mules, Ab, and we'll take him along to my house. He's got to hev a chance. He's as likely a young feller as ever I see. We-uns are goin' to pull him through,— me and Norah. You cain't du no more; and you hain't fit, if you could."

"You're *very* good," he said gratefully; but his voice was full of regret. "I warn't wantin' hit to be so. I warn't wantin' to come and ask ye. Thar might be evil come to you — and her. But I dassen't say no. Thar's more 'n life at stake for hi-im."

The dark eyes that looked into his had suddenly grown misty. The little woman took a quick step forward and laid her hand on Abner's arm.

"You done all you could, and you done plumb ri-ight," she said. "I hain't wantin' sorrer. Thar's enough of hit in the world, and hit comes tol'rable easy.

But that hain't no reason why a body should refuse to he'p them that's in need. You go and hitch up the mules."

Marshall knew nothing of that journey across the fields. Later in the day he *was*, in some indistinct way, conscious that the face which was bent over him was not the face of his cousin. Perhaps it was a girl's voice in his ears that set his brain wandering into new fields, and made him whisper, in softer tones than those in which he had hitherto spoken: "Hit's a pretty night. I've come to claim the fulfilment of your promise."

When Abner had turned the mules into the field, he came back to the empty house.

"Thar 'll be only one here to-night," he said. "Hit hain't right more 'n one should suffer. He hain't his son. Thar's no claim agin him."

Then he went over to the hearth and stood there. He could not have been thinking of his cousin; for when he spoke, his words were not of him.

"Thar's no keepin' hit offn her," he said; and there was the ring of longing and despair in his voice. "I aimed to do hit, but I warn't able."

CHAPTER XVIII

"FEELIN' pretty gue-ude abaout naow, hain't ye, Will? Marshall Rutherford's gittin' his deserts, as *you* count deserts."

The speaker shifted his shoulders to obtain a more comfortable support from the doorpost, and stared into the room where Naomi was clearing the dishes from the table, and Will Hollingsworth was doing nothing in particular, unless watching Naomi was particular — as it might well have been, to him.

A grunt was Will's only answer.

Undismayed by the want of appreciation of one of his hearers, the speaker continued: —

"Knowed he'd got the small-pox, didn't ye? Got hit powerful bad, too. Hit's done tuk plumb hold of him."

"*I* don't care what he's got," said Will, turning savagely on the visitor. "If you're wantin' ary boards cut to-day, you'd better go to the mill to see after them."

"Thar's plenty of time," replied the other coolly. "I hain't in a powerful hurry. Hear Abner had throwed up the nursin' 'cause doc warn't satisfied?"

"Hear? I hear a sight more 'n I want, with your everlasting chatter," snapped Will.

He had been watching Naomi. So had the speaker. There was not much for either of them to see. Only half a dishful of potatoes emptied hastily into the pan that contained dirty knives and plates. It was a little matter, but it was not like Naomi.

"Lor, man! don't put yourself aout," responded the visitor. "You'll hear more clatter than mine afore you die. Cur'ous, hain't hit, that Norah Felps and her

mammy's done tuk him in? I hain't sure there was ary other person would 'a done hit. Small-pox hain't a thing many hankers atter, and neither Marshall nor Ab hain't got a powerful lot o' friends jist naow."

He was looking from one to the other of his listeners as he spoke. It was fair to suppose that Naomi *was* a listener, though she had turned her back on the speaker and was brushing crumbs from the table with some haste.

"Norah Felps is a fool!" said Will angrily.

"No, she hain't," replied the other slowly. "That girl hain't no fool, and more hain't her mammy. Ever try to argy with the-em abaout Marshall and Ab?"

"Not I," said Will. "They're all of a feather."

"I thought not. Better not try hit. That girl would be more 'n a match for *yo-ou*."

Will uttered an exclamation that was not a blessing, and went out of the door. The visitor shifted his shoulders into a fresh position, and continued to gaze at Naomi.

"Hit's plumb like a judgment on him, hain't hit?" he said, after a considerable silence.

The girl turned from the now crumbless table and swept her eyes over the speaker's person.

"If judgments are coming this away, there 'll be a smart sight o' folks calling aout before long," she said.

He laughed awkwardly, relieved the doorpost of his weight, and went off to the mill.

"Hit's done tuk plumb hold of him."

Naomi stood staring at the dish-pan, and listening to the words as they formed themselves again and again in her brain. It was the first she had heard of Marshall's illness. The workmen in the house rarely mentioned the young man's name, possibly having not yet forgotten the two or three vigorous snubs that had followed attempts to see how the land lay when Marshall first

left the boarding-house. Whatever knowledge Dalbert possessed he kept to himself. The increase of brotherly feeling that had existed during Will Hollingsworth's absence had more than died out since.

It was possibly ten minutes before Naomi remembered to lift the dish-pan and carry it into the kitchen. Dish-washing was a purely mechanical performance that afternoon.

The day was not a propitious one for the assertion of brotherly authority. The heart that is listening to its own condemnation does not take kindly to that of another. Dalbert was perhaps unfortunate; but he had no choice, or he persuaded himself that he had none. He had come to the limit of his patience — and passed it.

The attitude he had been obliged to take, in order not to range himself against his sister in the attempt to force the opinion of Big Creek Gap, had never been pleasant to Dalbert. In the last few weeks it had become unbearable. Will Hollingsworth and Naomi were the prime movers in this arousing of party feeling. Naturally everybody credited him with sympathy with the movement, if not with actual participation in it. How were people to know that, while he worked for the mill owner, and lived in the same house with him, he was antagonistic to his actions and purposes? He would openly have denounced his policy, but that by so doing he must denounce his sister. Since that policy had become more aggressive, he had found it hard to keep silence.

The close intimacy with the mill owner irritated him. What right had the fellow to assume more than brotherly relations with Naomi? He looked impatiently forward to the time when he should be able to tell Will Hollingsworth to look after his own mill. Then he would take Naomi away from an influence that brought out the side of the girl's character that Dalbert could least understand. He felt nearer to that time when he went out

that morning, for there had just been dispatched another handful of letters that left his indebtedness at Cedar Fork comparatively small. They left the actual cash in his pocket more than comparatively so.

When he left the house that day, Dal did not know quite how near he *was* to the time when he would tell Will to look after his own mill. He did not know when he started for the village: he did when he came back. Before he entered the boarding-house, the knowledge had passed into action.

"Naomi, where are you?"

Dalbert's voice rang through the place. Its tone was imperative.

"We-el?" said the girl, appearing at the door of the kitchen.

"I want you to pack up and get aout of this house. I've done with the mill, and everything belonging to it."

Dalbert's tone was authoritative. His face was wrathful. Naomi scanned it leisurely.

"You've been powerful quick making up your mi-ind," she said.

"Quick!" he retorted. "I've stood it till I can't stand it a day longer. I ain't a brute, if Will Hollingsworth is."

"No-o?" she replied, raising her eyebrows a little.

"Look here," he said, coming a step nearer, "we've had enough of this fooling. You ain't without conscience or heart, if you do act as if you'd nary a bit of either."

"Thank you," she said sarcastically.

"It had got to come to an end, and it *has* come," said Dalbert, too much carried away by his own appreciation of the subject to be observant of his sister's attitude towards it. "We've done with Will Hollingsworth and his mill, and with his house too, so the sooner we get aout of it, the better."

He looked at Naomi as if he expected her to make immediate movement towards putting the latter proposition into effect. Her eyes were fixed on his face with an expression half scornful, half indulgent. She made no answer in words.

"I've told Will Hollingsworth that he's had the last stroke of work he'll get aout of me," Dalbert continued. "I'll have naught to say to a man who thinks it a fine piece of business to frighten a harmless feller aout of his wits, to say nothing of killing a sick man."

He was not sufficiently at leisure from himself to notice the startled movement of the listener's eyelids which was simultaneous with the last words. There was still no answer from Naomi.

"To have a great brute like John Kisselbaugh claiming connection with *me*," he continued angrily, "and taking it for granted that I was a party to his outrages!"

"What has John Kisselbaugh to do with the mill?" asked Naomi.

"What has he to do with the mill?" repeated Dal. "Not much. What he has to do with Will Hollingsworth is more to the point. Who's set such ruffians at work, and given them the countenance of a decent name? Would that brute have dared to come up to *me* if Will hadn't given him reason to think that he might? 'Our friend Ab has had a bit of a scare, hain't he?' he said, bold as brass, poking his elbow into me as if he'd a right to be as free as he liked. 'Been dreamin' of ha'nts all his life, and come to see one with his own eyes at last. Pity he shouldn't, naow, afore hit was too late, warn't hit?'"

Dalbert's eyes flashed angrily. If it was in this mood he met John Kisselbaugh, there was little fear that even he would repeat the offence.

"Is tha-at all?" The girl laughed lightly. It would not have taken a very close observer to detect a tone of

relief. "If a fool chooses to see a ghost, what is that to you or me? *I'm* not going to complain."

He turned on her angrily.

"What is it to you?" he said. "It may be nothing; but if so, more shame to you. Don't you understand the feller's words? How did he know Abner Poteet had had a scare, unless he was in the business? He took good care not to say so, but he meant me to understand that he was at the bottom of it."

"Mercy sakes!" said Naomi, with a movement of impatience. "Let him be at the bottom of it, or ary other place in it, if he wa-ants to. There's no need of a tempest over tha-at."

Her words did not tend to cool Dalbert's temper.

"Look here, Naomi," he said. "I've had enough of this. You ain't like the same girl that came to Big Creek Gap. You don't see any harm in things that would have looked powerful bad to you twelve months ago. If you ain't ashamed of what's been going on, I am. It's time this thing was stopped, and I've stopped it. We've done with this arrangement, and none too soon."

"You've been fool enough to give up your place at the mill?"

Naomi spoke slowly and deliberately.

"I've *given* it up — fool or not," he said.

"And what are you going to do next?"

"I don't know. Go to farming, maybe," he replied.

"At this time of the year?"

"It's not too late for a crop of corn."

She laughed contemptuously.

"Going to grow corn without seed, and with one horse to do your ploughing as late in the season as this?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do," he replied. "But I do know I won't stay here."

"When are you going?" she asked.

"As soon as you can get ready. To-night, if you can pack up your things."

"*My* things are not in the question. *I'm* going to stay he-re," she said.

She was looking at him steadily.

"Naomi!"

He stared at her as if he could not believe his ears. In truth, he found it difficult to do so. This was an outcome on which he had not reckoned.

"You won't go with me?"

He had waited for an answer to his exclamation, but it had not come.

"Certainly not," she said. "I'm not a fool, if you choose to be one."

"What will you do?" he asked.

"Stay where I am. It is more practicable than growing a crop of corn on nothing."

"Stay here with *that* feller?"

"Stay here and go on with my work," she said. "I'm not fond of starvation."

"Nor of respectability," he retorted, turning on his heel.

Even when he walked away, Dalbert did not really believe that his sister would persist in her refusal to leave the boarding-house. The rude familiarity of John Kisselbaugh had brought home to him the position in which he stood, and the man's words had opened his eyes to the true character of the warfare that was being waged. He had understood, as John had meant that he should, more than the words expressed, more than the man intended that any should know as a fact. He realised the malice and unscrupulousness of these allies of Will Hollingsworth. Hot anger had been aroused at the thought that all this was done in his sister's name and his own. John Kisselbaugh's words had proved the straw too much for him. He had gone straight to the

mill, and given Will the benefit of a little plain talk. He ended by resigning his position, and refusing to do another day's work in the place.

"Please yourself," replied Will coolly.

It may have been that the mill owner counted on influence more potent than words of his. To all appearance he did not disturb himself much about his superintendent's decision.

Before the day was over, the vague plans that had been floating in Dalbert's mind had crystalised. The immediate securing of a home was an imperative necessity. After what had occurred that day, the same roof would not shelter him and Will Hollingsworth. It was hardly likely that a new position as manager could be obtained in a hurry. Saw-mills were not as plentiful in the mountains in those days as they became a few years later. He might find what he wanted in time, but certainly not to-day. And he must secure a home to-day.

When he came again within sight of the "branch," he possessed one. Not a very satisfactory home,—nothing but a rude log cabin, set in a hollow halfway up the slope of one of the ridges that diversify the country inside the great sweep formed by the Cumberland and Walden mountains. It was a long way from being attractive, it could not even boast of picturesqueness, and it was hopelessly dirty. But it was a shelter, and it was far removed from both village and mill. The latter fact was, in Dalbert's estimation, overpoweringly in its favour. His mind at once busied itself with plans for converting the rough cabin into a decent dwelling. He did not deny that the change would be a hard one for Naomi, but — it was very much her own fault. However strongly he might blame Will Hollingsworth, Dalbert could not forget that the movement against Abner Poteet had been set on foot by his sister.

The working of the fields that pertained to the log cabin was not as hopeless a matter as Naomi had suggested. Cash was by no means an indispensable item of the programme. It was easy to arrange with the owner to supply the mules and implements for working the land. When his crop was gathered in, Dalbert would have nothing to do but divide the produce into two parts and give the landlord his choice.

In the meantime the lateness of the season presented the greatest difficulty. It was even now the first week in May, and the crops in the fields he passed looked to Dalbert almost grown. He was impatient to be at work preparing for his own. It was too late to draw back, even if he had so desired. He allowed his thoughts to go forward. Already he was entering with something like eagerness into the new scheme. It would at least bring the present condition of things to an end.

His anger against Will Hollingsworth had not in the slightest degree cooled when he came back into the valley, but his irritation towards Naomi was swallowed up in the multitude of thoughts and considerations connected with the new enterprise. It was not worth while to nurse his resentment against his sister. Besides, she would have to suffer for her folly. There was no need for him to scold.

But when his feet carried him down the sharp slope of the bank, almost on top of the house, and his eyes showed him his sister sitting upon the doorstep in close and apparently friendly converse with Will, his tolerance experienced a severe strain. He passed the two without a word, and went in at a back door.

Being a man who was not observant of the working of women's ways, Dalbert did not know, and could not be expected to understand, that there were reasons other than an overwhelming desire for his company that might

prompt Naomi to assume an easy familiarity with Will Hollingsworth on this particular evening. Will, who was as well versed in those same women's ways as Dalbert was ignorant, was not at all surprised that she did not avoid him when he returned to the house. She met him with a frown.

"What did you want to quarrel with Dal for?" she asked peremptorily.

"*I* quarrel with Dal?" he said, looking at her with a smile. "Lor! if you'd heard hi-im abuse me, you wouldn't know how to praise my forbearance loudly enough."

"You are plumb foolish — both of you," she said. "How are you going to get on without Dal?"

"How's Dal going to get on without me-e?" he asked, laughing.

It was not his policy to treat the trouble seriously — with her. Whatever his own feelings might be, he met the difficulty lightly. Neither spoke of Marshall Rutherford, but the little bit of conversation listened to that morning occupied a more prominent place in both minds than did the quarrel between Dalbert and the mill owner.

Will looked up quizzically as Dal passed, and then down again at the girl.

"Implacable," he said in a low voice.

"What can you expect?" she replied, in a tone that was light, but not meaningless. "He holds you responsible for John Kisselbaugh's doings, and John is a brute. Frightening sick men and fools is not manly work."

She did not avoid his eyes as she spoke. On the contrary, she raised her own to a level with his face. Her look was neither a challenge nor a reproach. It was a quiet, steady gaze that required no interpretation because it held no hidden meaning. For one moment there came across the face of Will Hollingsworth the suggestion of a scowl. It was a mere suggestion, gone almost as soon as it appeared.

"If I'm to answer for all John Kisselbaugh's doings, I'm to be pitied," he said.

"In addition to your own — ye-es," she replied slowly.

There were three people beneath the boarding-house roof who made but a feint of slumber that night. Dalbert threw himself on his bed, and gave himself up to his thoughts, alternately fuming over Naomi's obstinacy and working out plans for the season's labours. Occasionally he broke off from this double train of thought to indulge in an ebullition of anger against Will and his insolent pretensions. He did not hide from himself the fact that the move was a losing one on his side. By throwing up his work at the mill, he was putting off indefinitely the time when he should again operate a mill of his own. It would have been wiser to exercise a little more patience. But his irritation at a connection that had long been distasteful was too great to allow him even to wish that it had been possible for him to continue that connection longer. He was glad that it was severed; and as for his sister, it was time she was removed from Will Hollingsworth's influence. He could not understand how she could feel satisfaction at the attentions of the mill owner.

He was taking the satisfaction a little too much for granted. Naomi's attitude afforded no suggestion of it as she sat in the darkness, with an angry pain at her heart. There was no moon, as there had been on a night, more than a month ago, when she stood by the window. Clouds were over the sky now; and if they had not been there she would not have gone to the window. She wanted no reminder of the time when Marshall Lane Rutherford's life was not yet completely outside her own. She had made her choice then, and she meant to abide by it. But she had not reckoned on this. Marshall Lane Rutherford in health and Marshall Lane Rutherford ill and helpless were different objects

of attack. The young man's relationship to Kennedy Poteet stood out less prominently to-night than the character that had made itself felt in those two weeks of intercourse.

Towards Abner Poteet, Naomi's anger was hot. Truly it was like a Poteet to consult his own safety and ease by putting the risk and the burden of the nursing on others. Why should Norah Felps and her mother be dragged into the business? The words of the visitor vibrated uncomfortably through her brain. "Cur'ous, hain't hit, that Norah Felps and her mammy done tuk him in? I hain't sure thar was ary other person would 'a done hit." Common humanity surely called for gratitude to this woman and girl. But it was not gratitude that was stirring in Naomi's heart. It gave her no satisfaction to be assured that womanly ministrations would fall to the sick man's lot. It was when she thought of his eyes opening to meet the queenly face of Norah Felps that she grew more violently irritated against Abner Poteet, and that some of her irritation passed over to Will Hollingsworth. Will's zeal had outrun his discretion. What did he want with such allies as John Kisselbaugh? Questionable methods of warfare were unnecessary, where the justice was all on one side.

Justice had never looked less attractive than it did to-night, when it laid a firm hand on Naomi's heart, and forced her to acknowledge that truth had not changed, and that Kennedy Poteet was no less a murderer to-day than when she found in the "bone cave" the indisputable evidence of his guilt. And Marshall Lane Rutherford was his nephew, and the gainer by his crimes, as fully now as he had ever been. The situation was in no sense altered by the fact that the young man lay at the point of death.

The angry pain in the girl's heart had perhaps some-

thing to do with her readiness to mete out a measure of justice to her brother. It was just like Dal to upset things now that he was so near success. A few more months, and he could, if he chose, make a move that would be profitable to himself. To-day he was penniless. He simply *could* not quarrel with Will Hollingsworth. The moment was the most inopportune possible. He would have to give in. She would smooth the way for him with Will, and leave him to take the rest of the consequences himself. Will would be glad enough to see him go back to work again. Dal was as necessary to the success of the mill as the mill owner's money was necessary to Dal. They were all dependent on each other, and it was foolish to quarrel.

And yet, in her heart, Naomi never felt more like quarrelling than she did to-night, only she did not quite know with whom to quarrel. The real quarrel was with herself.

Not so Will Hollingsworth. His quarrel was never with the mill owner. When Will and the world were at daggers drawn, it was always the world that was to blame. At the present moment it was only a piece of the world. Dal was a fool, always had been, and always would be. He was an aggravating fool. But fools were not always prejudicial factors in a case. They had been known to be useful before now.

Will was not as sure as Naomi that Dal would be willing to resume work at the mill. He was not at all certain that he desired such an ending to the quarrel. Dal's influence with Naomi was decidedly against him. It was the last thing he would have told Naomi, but to himself he acknowledged that if the mill could get on without the superintendent, the mill owner could, and if the mill could not,— well, there was a possibility that the mill might be left to take its chance.

If it had been a question of getting on without the

superintendent's sister, the answer would have been different. Fortunately, it was not. Will had with some dexterity assured himself on that point. It was a fundamental one. If the superintendent's sister could not be retained without the superintendent, the superintendent must not go.

Will's real quarrel, however, was not with Dal. His mind was in a decided state of unrest, but it was not Dalbert Mozingo who was answerable for that condition. When Will consigned himself to the sheets, and concluded to give himself up to slumber, his last thoughts were not of his manager. Nor had Dal any considerable share of his waking projects when, a short time after the sun showed a red rim above the hills, he let himself out into a dewy, half awakened world, and walked down to the valley road.

Any one not conversant with Will Hollingsworth's feelings might have imagined that he was bound for the home of Mrs. Felps, to inquire after the welfare of Marshall Lane Rutherford. He took the path over the low-lying fields that led across to the mountain. Before he reached the cottage, however, he turned off, passing the shallow excavations from which, in the days before the war, men dug iron ore for the village blacksmith to turn into horse-shoes and plough-shares. Beyond the shallow mines he came upon another house, and was early enough to see its owner emerge from the door, a little sleepy-looking about the eyes, as befitted the first minutes of a day hardly yet begun.

"Good morning, Wash," said Will briskly. "I came to see when you aimed to have them logs sawed."

"Oh, I hain't in nary bit of a hurry," replied the other, not without some indications of surprise. "I warn't calc'latin' to hev 'em cut jist at present."

"I'm glad of it," said the mill owner heartily. "I'm considerable driven just now. There's men want more

sawing done than I can get through. I was reckonin' on taking an order from a man aout Jellico way for a tolerable big lot of lumber, but I warn't aimin' to put my friends aout none for hi-im. If you wa-ant them boards done, you can have 'em. I only wanted to know."

The young man — for he was some four or five years younger than Will — shook his head.

"I hain't in nary bit of a hurry," he said.

"That's good news," replied Will, following the other into the barn.

In spite of his vaunted pressure of business the mill owner seemed in no hurry to get back to the mill. He strolled around after Wash Forehand while the latter fed his mules and his cow. From the mules the talk went to other subjects; and when the animals were fed, the two men stood lounging against the hay-mow, talking still. "Hit hain't a pleasant thing to hev round," the young man was saying.

"No, it *ain't*," replied the mill owner emphatically. "You've got a mother, and sisters, Wash; and you've a right to think of the-em. It ain't as if it had been kept aout of the way, as you might say, in Ab Poteet's house. He hadn't nary one to think of but himself; and if he was to catch it, why, I ain't sayin' there'd be much harm done. But now — well, it's tolerable near to you-u, and there's Norah —"

He stopped reflectively, took a stalk of hay, and began chewing it.

"Yes, hit *is* tol'rable near," said Wash with some irritation. "Hit hain't jist right that hit *should* be so near."

"It ain't, Wash. That's plumb true," replied Will, still chewing the grass-stalk meditatively. "It's hard on you-u. And there's that girl to think of. She ain't thinkin' of herself none. Girls don't when there's a man they ain't considerin' just exactly in the same light as

other men plumb in front of the question. It ain't to be expected that Norah will think till she's down with the small-pox. She's a powerful fine girl is Norah, a powerful fine gi-irl."

He stopped to chew the hay-stalk appreciatively. Wash Forehand remained silent.

"I ain't saying you-u should do ary thing in the matter," continued Will after a long pause. "It ain't an easy question to decide. But, if ary person should feel it right to take that sick man plumb out o' this valley, it would be a mighty good thing for the valley — and for Norah Felps. I'm pitying that poor girl, all the more that I know her heart's in the nursin'."

He glanced meditatively at Wash as he spoke, and was not surprised to see the hot blood reddening face and neck.

"I hain't calc'latin' Norah feels a mite more interest in Marshall Rutherford than in ary other sick man," said Wash uneasily. "She's a good-hearted girl, and she's sorry for him. She hain't expectin' to ketch hit, but she mi-ight."

"Yes, she mi-ight," said Will.

"Marshall Rutherford don't belong this away," he resumed after a considerable silence. "He's only come here lately. It's the place where he belongs that ought to take care of hi-im. It's plumb wrong that he should cost that girl her life — or her pretty face. She's a powerful pretty girl, I declare."

There was no need to tell Wash Forehand that. Everybody knew that Norah's pretty face had turned his head long ago.

"Hit hain't right to leave him thar," he said doubtfully.

"It's plumb wrong," replied Will. "It's nothing to me. I ain't afraid of small-pox. Had it when I was a young un. But I don't like to see an injustice done;

and I say it is an injustice to that girl, and to your mother and sisters too, to leave that sick man right there among folks the way he is now. It's plumb wrong, and it would be a real benefit to everybody round here if ary person should see his way to alter it. But it ain't my business."

He pulled the hay-stalk from his mouth, and threw it away. Then he straightened himself.

"Well, I reckon I'd better be moving," he said. "There's a smart sight of sawing to be done before sundown."

He went back across the fields with a smile on his face that certainly was not heaven-born, and that hardly owed its origin to earth. He was just in time to meet Dalbert coming out of the house.

"I'm going to see about a wagon to carry my things away," said the young man shortly.

"Don't hurry yourself," replied Will, with perfect coolness. "Take your time. I think there's a day or two's money between us. You can have it when you like."

"As well now as any other time," replied Dalbert.

The young man's face was paler than usual. He had just learned that Naomi's refusal to leave the boarding-house was something more than a piece of temporary opposition. He was as much surprised at her determination as she was at the news that he had actually hired a farm. They looked at each other in something like consternation.

"Well, I never thought you'd be so plumb foolish," she said.

"*Does* it look foolish to you to be tired of this?" he asked. "It's real, powerful real. I'll not stand another day of it. You've got to choose between me and Will Hollingsworth, Naomi."

He looked angry, but his voice was gentle. There was entreaty in his eyes.

"You put it wrong," she said. "It's a choice between starvation and the boarding-house. I'll stick to the boarding-house."

His face grew pale.

"You mean it?" he asked.

"Of course I do. I should be a fool if I didn't."

He turned away from her; but when he reached the door, he stopped. Then he came back.

"No, I can't go so," he said. "Naomi, you are not realising what you are doing."

"Oh, I'll get an old woman in to play propriety," she said. "I want some help."

"And you won't come?"

"I won't come."

She looked him full in the face.

"Then I'll go," he said. "And I'll not come back. While you go one way and I go another, the further we are apart the better."

Again he turned at the door.

"I shall come for the contents of my own room," he said. "The rest of the things I will leave for you."

Then he went out, and met Will.

CHAPTER XIX

"THERE'S a si-ight of difference between having a sister to do things for you and having everything on your own hands."

Dalbert was down on his knees scrubbing a floor that, to judge by appearances, was receiving its first application of sand and water that evening. His reflections took character from his occupation.

Dal was tired. He had come in from a long day's ploughing, with muscles aching from the unaccustomed labour, and prepared his own supper in a house dirty enough to take away the appetite of even a hungry man. Then he had set to work with a stone and some sand to scrub off the top coat of dirt from that cabin floor. It was not a hopeful occupation. And the thoughts which were an accompaniment to the work were not of a kind calculated to lighten the labour.

The young man was worried about Naomi, and his own prospects were not promising enough to be an offset to his anxiety. It was well that his credit was good at the village store, or he might have had to ponder over the question of providing dinners and breakfasts as well as cooking them. Credit does not furnish the best of sauces for a frugal meal, however; and Dalbert's supper had been of a strictly frugal character. The situation looked gloomy, and that log cabin more so. Dal scrubbed and pondered, and grew more tired and less hopeful, and then went to bed and worried about Naomi.

It was on the same evening, while Dalbert was yet struggling with the dirt on the cabin floor, that a little shock-headed, wild-eyed lad might have been seen — if

there had been anybody to see him — hurrying across the fields in the direction of the old ore mine. His progress was not in proportion to his haste. The night was dark, and he had no lantern. Ridges and holes were as plentiful as was to be expected when a traveller had left the path and struck across rough pasture land in the neighbourhood of the mountains. Caution was assuredly in place on this dark evening. There were, too, risks enough of another nature to make a little lad, out alone in the darkness, look sharply about him. The graveyard was behind, some distance behind, but near enough to have a suggestive effect on his thoughts. Moreover, night was the time for witches to be abroad; and everybody knew that witches were plentiful in that region. The boy recalled stories of witch-riding wherein the horse had been man or boy metamorphosed for the occasion, and the riding had lacked nothing but mercy. He grew hot and anxious, peering into the darkness with eyes that were ready for any uncanny sight. He wished he had a lantern, and then grunted contemptuously at the thought that the last thing he desired was to draw attention to his presence by the twinkling light of a moving lantern.

He hurried along, making as direct a line for Mrs. Felps's cottage as the darkness would permit. As he passed beyond the last belt of trees, the light from the windows gave him courage. He broke into a run, his forward dash accompanied by more than one nervous glance over his shoulder. His breathlessness when he reached the door was not altogether to be attributed to the exertion of running. He came in with a rush.

"I've done got here fust. He hain't within hearin' yit."

As the door burst open, a little black-eyed woman sprang to her feet.

"Mercy sakes, boy! what du you mean by comin'

he-ere?" she cried. "Don't you know thar's small-pox in this house? Git aout o' here quick, if you hain't aimin' to be tuk with hit."

The boy retreated a step, and stood in the doorway, hesitating between the darkness without and the danger within.

"I hain't inside," he said doggedly. "You listen to me. Hev you-uns contrairied John Kisselbaugh ary way? Has he got ary grudge agin ye? If he has, you'd better lue-uke aout. I come to tell ye. I warn't wantin' him to git the better o' *he-er*."

He nodded towards an inner room. He had heard Norah's voice.

"Come to tell what?"

Mrs. Felps looked puzzled.

"That John's aimin' to be here to-night," replied the little lad. "I cain't tell what for. He warn't sayin' tha-at. But I heared him say he was a-comin'. He was a-laffin to himself, and cursin' the mules 'cause they didn't git home fast enough. 'Git up, you lazy brutes!' says he, flourishin' his whip like a good un. 'Hain't I got to tumble this load aout and git turned round like a flash to pay that upstart gal a leetle visit? Lor! my dear, won't them black eyes o' yourn shine when we come along? I hain't forgot the last time I was in yer company, my dear,' says he. 'I hadn't as many of my friends with me then as I should 'a liked; but bless your shinin' eyes, Norah, gal, I hain't comin' unattended thi-is time.' And with that he started wallopin' the mules, and I slipped. I thought he was a-comin' plumb directly. I wanted to warn *he-er*. If he's got a grudge agin her, you'd better look aou-ut."

"Lor me! What should the man be comin' here for?" said Mrs. Felps. "Mercy alive! He'd better no-ot. This hain't a house to come visitin' in."

"How long was hit since you see John?"

The words were quick and sharp. So were the eyes of the girl who came through an inner door into the room.

"Not a powerful while."

"Did you come straight here?"

"I reckon."

"Whar was John?"

"On the road comin' from Big Creek. He'd got to go home, I reckon; but he was wallopin' the mules for all he was worth. It wouldn't take him long."

"Was he drunk?"

"I reckon."

There was a minute's silence. It was broken by the girl.

"All right, Jimmy boy," she said appreciatively. "Hit's worth somethin' to hev a friend like you, hain't hit? You're more good than a dozen men, I de*clar*. We'll be ready for visitors, now you've give us notice. Lor! we'll hev all the best china aout, and the johnny-cake a-cuekin' time they co-ome."

The boy laughed.

"John's a bad un," he said doubtfully. "He's a bully man, when he's got a grudge agin ary person."

"Lor, yes!" said the girl. "John hain't a lamb. But you wait, Jimmy Paul — you wa-it."

The boy laughed again.

"What 'll you du?" he asked. "I'd powerful like to see John plumb tuk daown."

"Would ye?" said the girl. "We-el, you-u won't see hit, because you've got to go. Hit wouldn't du for you-u to be seen this away. John might git a grudge agin you-u. No, Jimmy Paul, you jist fly, and git back afore John comes. We-uns 'll fix hi-im."

"I reckon," said the boy, lingering a moment before he went out into the darkness.

Norah crossed over to the door, and locked it.

"Mammy!" she said, turning to the little black-eyed woman by the hearth.

"Hit's plumb dangerous," said Mrs. Felps, in answer to that unspoken expression of opinion. "John's powerful rough when he's drunk."

"Hit *is* dangerous," said the girl. "He hain't forgot the shakin' Abner give him in the cave. He's meanin' somethin'."

"He dassen't touch ur-rs," said the mother scornfully.

"He hain't atter ur-rs," replied Norah. "He hain't aimin' to lay a finger on we-uns. Mammy hit's hi-im."

She nodded towards the inner room, from whence a man's voice was audible now and again in strange mutterings.

Mrs. Felps shook her head.

"What should John want with hi-im?" she said. "Hit's you he's aimin' to hurt, honey. He's got a grudge agin you for what Ab done."

She was looking questioningly into the girl's face. There was no fear in that look, but there was loving anxiety. That beautiful girlish face was the sun of the mother's world.

"I know," replied Norah. "But John hain't aimin' to touch ur-rs. He'd powerful li-ike to du hit, but he cain't. And John knows hit. Thar's nary man in Big Creek Gap would lay finger on we-uns."

She lifted her head proudly.

A light leapt to the mother's eyes.

"That's plumb true," she said. "John would hev to go clar beyond Big Creek Gap to find a man that would du aught agin you-u."

"No, *we* hain't nothin' to fear," replied the girl. "Mammy, don't you see what he's atter? He's aimin' to hurt us through *hi-im*." Again there was a glance towards the inner room. "Thar hain't a man save John himself would go agin ur-rs, but thar's fifty plumb

ready to go agin hi-im. We've done gone and put ourselves on the losin' side. We've tuk Marshall in, when we'd oughter let him die. Thar's them that would be ready enough to show us we cain't du what we like with our own house if what we like is he'pin' Ab or Marshall. We-el, let 'em put hit to the test."

She gave her head a little scornful toss.

"They cain't touch a sick man," said Mrs. Felps; but she said it doubtfully.

Norah laughed contemptuously.

"Is John Kisselbaugh the feller to stop for a sick man?" she said. "Lor! the sicker he is, the more that coward will du. He'd maybe stop for a well man. If Marshall Rutherford could stand up to him, John would sha-ake in his shoes; but a sick man's jist the game for hi-im."

"Thar's truth in tha-at," said her mother. "But if they've got a sick man to deal with in Marshall, they hain't got a sick woman in me-e."

The girl was silent. Her mother watched her for a minute.

"What is it, honey?"

"Mammy!"

Her eyes were shining.

"We-ell, darter?"

"They hain't goin' to touch Marshall. We-uns are goin' to see to tha-at," said the girl. "But you've got to let me hev my own way. Thar's danger for him to-night. We-uns hain't no match for a lot o' drunken men. John's a brute when he's tight. He hain't much less 'n a brute when he's had nary a drop. Mammy, we hain't goin' to let 'em kill him naow."

She came up close to her mother, and the eyes that looked straight into those of the little woman were pleading.

Mrs. Felps shook her head.

"I cain't promise anything, honey," she said. "I've got to know fust."

"Mammy, you *will* let me — you must. I — I cain't let him die, and roughness of ary kind would kill him."

She put her hands on her mother's shoulders, and looked down into her face. Whatever those eyes said in that long look of confidence, they said eloquently.

The mother sighed, and then laughed.

"I hain't expectin' thar 'll be as much trouble as you-u think," she said. "But du as you li-ike. Only I hain't goin' to let no harm come to you-u."

The girl bent forward for a moment, and her lips touched the little woman's forehead. Then she moved back with a laugh.

"Thar hain't no danger to me," she said. "Thar wouldn't be no danger to him if he warn't so powerful sick. But John hain't comin' for nothin'. He means harm to somebody, and he knows he cain't touch ur-rs."

"Well, what is hit?" said Mrs. Felps. "Thar hain't no time to lose."

It took but a minute to explain, and then mother and daughter stood looking at each other.

"Thar *is* danger to you," said the older woman, after that long look. "Thar hain't no real need to du hit. Thar's them we could git to stan' by us if we hurry. Wash hain't fur off. He'd come. He'd do ary thing you-u asked him."

"I hain't goin' to ask one thing of Wash," said the girl sharply. "And if he *was* to come, he'd be no match for that crew. He's only one, anyway. Thar hain't many would come aout to he'p Marshall Rutherford."

She broke off. Through the still air there came a harsh, discordant shout, the effort of voices not well under control.

"Hurry, mammy," said Norah. "They're comin',

and thar's a tol'rable many of 'em. They're drunk, too," she added.

Mother and daughter went into the inner room. There was no time for protest.

"You've got to keep him quiet," said Mrs. Felps.

For answer the girl stepped to the window-sill, and took up a bottle.

"Thar's the sleepin' mixture doc left," she said. "Hit'll quiet him in fifteen minutes. They've got to be kept aout from this part till the-en."

Quietly, as if danger were not momentarily coming nearer, the girl raised the sick man's head. The sound of her voice caused him to look up rationally, and at her bidding he emptied the cup she held to his lips.

Again there came the discordant shout. In the quiet of the evening — for at that hour the stillness around the cottage beneath the mountain was as absolute as in the dead of night — that wild laughter was startling. A scrap of song, a derisive shout, a burst of loud mirth, succeeded each other; and then a yell, blood-curdling enough to suggest the days of savages and scalping, made the heavy night air ring. The sick man started up, and began talking loudly. The noise without had a disturbing effect on his fevered brain. It was Norah's voice that quieted him, and her hand that coaxed his head back again on the pillow. This accomplished, the girl turned to her mother.

"Quick! They're 'most here," she said. "We'll carry him on his bed jist as he's layin'."

"Hit hain't goin' to be plumb easy," said her mother.

"No, hit hain't; but hit's goin' to be done," replied the girl.

They did it, and quickly. Before the sounds without told them that the wagon-load of men approached the house, the patient was transferred to an inner room, to which access could only be gained by the one from whence he had been removed.

"They're nearly here, mammy," said the girl quietly. She turned from the bedside, and listened.

"Yes. Hit's time for you to go," she continued. "I'll fix the bed in the other rue-ume. You keep the door locked till you hear a right smart o' coughin' inside."

"*I'll* fasten hit," said Mrs. Felps. "And I hain't calc'latin' to open hit agin for the-em. I hain't reckonin' on havin' nary person in my-y rooms without invitin'. You can du as you sa-ay, but I'm goin' to have *my* talk fust."

She went out, turning the key in the big wooden lock that fortunately secured the door between the outer and inner rooms. The house had more conveniences than were to be found in some of the dwellings in Big Creek Gap.

She had hardly put the key in her pocket before there was a knock on the outer door,— not a riotous hammering, as she had expected, but a decorous knock. The little woman went up to the door.

"Who's thar?" she asked in a voice perfectly free from either fear or suspicion.

"Oh, one or two of we-uns come to pay you a visit. What are you-all keepin' your door locked for? Hit hain't powerful late."

The little woman almost forgot in her surprise to answer, for the speaker was Wash Forehand. She stepped back to the inner room, unlocked the door, and put her head inside.

"Thar hain't nothin' to fear. Wash is among 'em," she said.

The girl was by her side in a moment.

"Hush! I hain't trustin' Wash," she said. "Du plumb the same as if he warn't thar."

She gave her mother a little push, and waited until the key turned again in the lock. Her patient was quiet now. The sleeping draught was taking effect. The

girl ventured to leave him long enough to carry into the next room the bed that had been displaced for his accommodation. She stopped to listen to another knock at the door.

"What's up here? Is everybody dead?" inquired a fresh voice from without.

"Nary bit of hit," replied Mrs. Felps stoutly. "But this hain't no house to come visitin' in. Hain't nary one of ye heared thar's small-pox here? I hain't goin' to hev nobody inside."

"You hain't?"

This time it was John Kisselbaugh who spoke.

"No, I hain't. If you hain't got no consideration for yourselves, I've got some for ye, whoever you may be. Didn't I hear your voice, Wash?"

"Yes. Open the door. I want to come in and hev a talk with you."

The tongue spoke thickly. Wash had been calling a little false courage to his aid.

"I cain't let neither you nor nobody else in to-night." The little woman's tone was firm. "I'm goin' to bed. Thar hain't none too much sleep to be had whar thar's sickness."

"We hain't goin' to keep you long, and you'll sleep better atter we're gone. You'll hev a plumb quiet night's rest," replied Wash.

"Shall I?" said Mrs. Felps, in a voice not intended to reach to the other side of the door. "So that's your game, is hit?"

"I'd let you in if I could, but I cain't," she said aloud. "Hit wouldn't be no more for your good than for mine. Are you-uns powerful eager to ketch the small-pox?"

"No, we hain't. And we hain't powerful eager to hev our young uns ketch hit," returned John Kisselbaugh savagely. "You jist open plumb quick. If not, hit hain't goin' to take we-uns till to-morrer mornin' to try the strength o' thi-is door."

John was getting impatient. He had not come here to be kept outside and cheated of the pleasure of putting Norah Felps in her place.

When Wash Forehand decided that it was the duty of every man in Big Creek Gap to see that danger was removed from the valley, and especially that it was removed from Norah Felps, he knew that he might count on John as an ally. They were very different motives that worked in the two men's minds. John gloated over the opportunity for revenge. As for Wash, the poor fellow had been eaten up with jealousy from the moment when Will Hollingsworth suggested a motive not purely philanthropic for Norah's care of her patient. It was not the first time that jealousy of Marshall Lane Rutherford had stirred in his heart. He had more than once met the young man at Mrs. Felps's cottage. The sight of that lithe figure had on every such occasion caused him to lose his temper, and the loss of temper had earned him a contemptuous snub from Norah. He was not in sympathy with Marshall Lane Rutherford, even in his sickness; and Will's words woke a tempest of passion in his heart. Was this stranger, this nephew of a murderer, to come here with his wiles, and steal away the girl who was the one prize of Big Creek Gap? She was ready to risk her life for him now. It would not take much to make her ready to give that life to him, if he chose to ask for it. Wash brooded over the situation, and, as he grew desperate, had recourse to the whisky bottle. His heart needed strengthening. It was his courage that needed it later, after the heart had evolved a scheme that satisfied its own passion but left the brain aghast.

Wash would never have thought of the plan if Will Hollingsworth had not suggested the danger to Big Creek Gap of allowing a man sick with small-pox to remain in the village. When he decided to take Marshall

away by force, he persuaded himself that the course was necessary for the safety of the neighbourhood, and that it was therefore justifiable. Why should one man's life stand before the interests of a whole community? And the life was the life of a man against whom Big Creek Gap had set its face. Marshall Lane Rutherford had no right there in any case. Since he had come, and turned out a menace to the community, it was perfectly legitimate to take steps to avert the danger. If such steps involved consequences that were not pleasant to contemplate, it was unfortunate — for Marshall Lane Rutherford. It did not materially alter the case. There were consequences equally hard to accept in leaving him where he was. Why should Norah and her mother be exposed to contagion, and made to suffer through him?

Wash was not in the full possession of his senses when his first wild schemes took definite shape, and he prepared to put them into action. His brain was maddened by jealousy and inflamed by the liquor he had taken. When Wash was sober, he was harmless as a baby. But he had not been sober since Will paid him that morning visit, and to-night he had drunk deeply. He needed *some* extra support to carry him through the undertaking. It was a drunken man's scheme, and it needed a drunken man to carry it out.

Wash was not without fear that he should offend Norah beyond hope of pardon, but his jealousy was too strong to allow that consideration full weight. He should lose her in any case, he told himself; but he could at least have the satisfaction of knowing that Marshall Rutherford was not the gainer by his loss.

The men to whom Wash had confided a part of his scheme were of the rougher class of the Big Creek community. A few months before, even this fact would not have been sufficient to account for their presence on

such an errand at Mrs. Felps's cottage. But prejudice is like a stone rolling down hill. It gathers momentum as it goes. Will Hollingsworth had set it moving, and from time to time given it impetus till it was fairly over the brow of the hill. It no longer needed external force, being carried forward by its own momentum. The men who stood by Mrs. Felps's door had taken up the cause against Abner Poteet and Marshall Lane Rutherford. They had taken it up hotly. They were ready for anything.

"You'll break my door daown!"

There was indignation in the little woman's voice. She gave them no opportunity to do it, for it was open now; and she stood within, with eyes blazing at the half-dozen men before her.

"Well, you're a pretty set of neighbours, I de*clar*. To come along this away when a woman's tired aout with nursin'. Break my door daown! I've lived in Big Creek Gap ever since I was married, and I never heared sich talk as that afore, except from the rebels in war time. Thar, stan' still whar you are, and let me hev a good lue-uke at ye. I want to make plumb sure which o' my neighbours hit is that's comin' round in the night-time threatenin' two women with breakin' their door daown."

She stood with one hand on the door, and the other on the post, in such a way that it was not easy to pass her,—stood and looked at the six faces gathered round the opening.

"John Kisselbaugh, and Jim Harrison, and Burly France, and Frank Powell, and Nim Graham, and Wash Forehand. What are you-u doin' here, Wash? You aimin' at breakin' doors daown?"

"Lor me! we hain't no notion o' doin' you-u ary mischief," said Wash uneasily. "Our business hain't with you-u."

"Hit hain't? I hain't so sure. Ary business inside this house has *got* to be with me-e."

She stepped aside as she spoke, and threw the door open wide. She had seen John Kisselbaugh making a movement to push past her.

"Ary one that comes in takes the consequences on himself," she said. "I hain't askin' one on ye in. I hain't wantin' ye. I'd be proud to see ye go. Thar hain't a mite o' sense in puttin' yourselves in danger. And you hain't none on ye fit company for women, neither. You've been drinkin', Wash, and so hev the rest of ye. You're all tol'rable full. You hain't nice company, and I hain't wantin' ye. If you're men in ary other sense than in name, you'll go right aout. I'd be proud to say good-night to ye."

"We'll go, tol'rable soon. We hain't meanin' no harm to you," said Wash sullenly. "We're jist goin' in to look at that sick man."

The little woman stepped between the men and the door of the inner room. She was very small, but she looked formidable at that moment.

"No, you hain't," she said, as the men stared at her a little nervously. "Thar hain't nary one of you-uns goin' further 'n this room to-night. What you've got to say, say to me, and say hit plumb quick. I hain't wantin' to hear. You hain't none of ye fit to talk to a woman."

"Hit won't take long to say what we've come to say," replied Wash. "We-all want to see that sick man."

"You cain't see him to-night," she said, "nor no other night till he's well. He'll be proud to see ye then, I reckon, if you come like decent men."

"Whar's Norah?" asked Wash irrelevantly.

Mrs. Felps stood and looked up at him for a moment. That steady gaze disconcerted the big, sullen fellow. He turned his eyes away.

"Whar is she?" replied the little woman. "Whar

you-u hain't like to git speech with her. You hain't fit to talk to no girl, Wash. You hain't, and you know hit. Du you want to see Norah that away? Lor sakes, man! git away home, and hide your head! Mercy! she'd never speak another word to ary one of the set of ye if she was to see ye naow."

Wash wavered. Mrs. Felps looked at the men with undaunted eyes.

"We-ell, it's a si-ight," she said. "Here's me and Norah got enough compassion in us to risk a *lee*-tle to he'p a sick man, and you-uns, great strong fellers that could fight a bullock easy, that skeered at a little bit o' sickness that you plumb forgit you're men. Git away home, du, and shet yerselves up till the man in ye throttles that thar coward that dassen't du what two women hain't afraid on. Lor! you'd ought to be comin' to he'p with the nursin', instead of actin' this away. Thar, git aout, every man of ye. Hit hain't safe for you-u to be here. If you-uns was to ketch hit, you're all that cowardly you'd whimper like infants. If thar's danger, hit's all the more reason you-uns should run."

"We hain't goin' to run away from you-u." It was John Kisselbaugh who spoke. "We're goin' in that rue-ume, and we're goin' naow."

The little woman looked into the coarse, brutal face, and believed that the man spoke the truth. He *would* go in, and go in soon.

She turned to the rest. "Are you men aimin' to stand by and see John break my door daown?" she asked. "Wash, hain't you got a mite o' manhood left in you-u?"

Wash looked at her sullenly. He was finding his enterprise unpleasant.

"We-uns hain't calc'latin' to du you no harm," he said. "But we're goin' in thar. If we hev to break

that door daown, hit's your fault. We want to hev a lueke at that sick man."

"What else du you want to du beside lueke?" she asked.

It was not Wash who answered. Jim Harrison stepped forward.

"Lueke here," he said. "We-uns hain't got no grudge agin you and Norah. Hit's plumb kind of you-uns to be willin' to he'p a neighbour. But Marshall Rutherford hain't no neighbour to we-uns. He hain't belongin' to Big Creek Gap. We hain't wantin' no more of Kennedy Poteet's stock in here, and we hain't aimin' to hev 'em. We hain't wantin' to hev the small-pox go right through the place on account of hi-im. We hain't goin' to hurt a hair of his head, but we're goin' to put him whar he cain't du no harm to nobody, and that hain't here. He's duin' harm to everybody here. He's makin' us all live in dread and uneasiness. Hit hain't right. Hit's got to be altered."

"And you-uns are goin' to alter hit?"

"Yes."

"What 'll you du with him?"

"Put him in a safe place. You've got to leave that to we-uns."

"A nice lot to leave hit to," she said. "You're in a fit state to care for a sick man, hain't ye? Well, go in. And if harm comes of hit, as hit will come if you-uns carry aout what you're aimin' to du, hit'll rest on your souls. You hain't goin' to shake hit offn ye. Hit'll stick. But *I* cain't stop ye. You're six big, strong fellers, and I'm one little woman. I'd be ashamed to lueke at myself if I was you-u. I'd hide my head quick. Go in. You're as good as murderers, every one of ye. You'll hev to answer for the harm that's in you-uns' hearts, whether you succeed in carrying hit aout or not. You're aimin' to. Don't forgit tha-at."

She threw open the door. She had heard a paroxysm of coughing inside.

The men trooped in. They had left their lanterns in the wagon, and the room was dark, save for one small lamp that burned on a table in the corner farthest from the bed.

"You're runnin' a tol'rable big risk," said the little woman reflectively. "He's got hit bad. Hit hain't come aout as hit should, but his face is powerful red. Better not go nearer the bed than you're forced. I hain't wantin' ye to ketch hit, though hit wouldn't be no more 'n a likely judgment if every one of you-uns was daown with hit afore a fortnight."

Evidently the men themselves were not eager to "ketch hit." They stood just within the door and looked towards the bed, where a flushed face was partially hidden by the bed-clothes. A towel bound round the head left but a portion of the face visible, and there was a strong smell of vinegar in the room.

"Hit's his head he's always complainin' of," said the little woman; and as she spoke a groan came from the lips of the figure upon the bed.

"Hit's burstin'," said a hoarse, unnatural voice.

"Feel like hurtin' ary one that's sufferin' that away?" said Mrs. Felps significantly. "Them that shows no mercy cain't expect to receive none. Thar *is* justice, and hit lights on the right head one day."

Nobody answered her, but John Kisselbaugh pushed forward.

"Come on," he said savagely. "We cain't stay here all night."

John was becoming impatient. He was not getting the amusement he had anticipated. He had expected to have an encounter with Norah. It would have done his savage heart good to see the anger change to entreaty in her eyes, and to be able to trample on her

feelings with the rough brutality that was a part of his very nature. There was no entreaty in this little woman's eyes.

"Come on," he repeated. "Three of ye ketch hold of the head. We-uns 'll take the foot o' the bed."

It was noticeable that the position of danger, where there was most chance of coming in contact with the patient, was assigned to his companions. John Kisselbaugh walked to the foot of the bed. He handled it cautiously. The object of the visitors was evidently to carry the sick man away on the bed as he lay.

Mrs. Felps moved forward as the men advanced, and, purposely or not, stood between the light and the bed. The face of the patient, half covered by the wet towel, was in shadow. As the men came nearer, another groan burst from the lips that were almost buried in the pillow. Then an arm, showing a man's coat-sleeve, was thrown outside the bed-clothes.

"Lay still, cain't ye," muttered the man nearest to that moving arm. "I hain't goin' to hev you-u touch me."

Instantly, as if in answer, the arm moved again, and a hand for a moment grasped his with feverish touch. He started back with a yell.

"Here, hurry, and let's git hit over," he shouted. "I hain't aimin' to ketch hit. He's plumb crazy."

"He's been that away for a day or two naow," said Mrs. Felps quietly. "Better leave him to us women. We-uns hain't scart."

A savage oath was the answer. The six men settled to their task. As they lifted the bed, the little woman slipped in front of them and passed into the outer room. When they came through, the front door was open, and the light extinguished.

"Thar's a plumb fresh wind blowin'," she said. "Hit's too much for a body's lamp. You-uns have got a lantern though."

They came out into the darkness. The night was very heavy. It took some moments to hoist their burden into the wagon. Mrs. Felps stood by. When the bed was in position, she came alongside.

"Here, let me make him comfortable," she said. "*I* hain't afraid to touch him."

She smoothed the bed-clothes, and put her hand gently on the flushed face.

"I'll be atter you in a flash, honey."

The words reached none but the ear for which they were intended.

The restless hand of the patient came suddenly out from beneath the coverlet, and closed over the little woman's.

"No, no! Stay with him! They cain't hurt me. I hain't afraid. Promise!"

The hand held her fast.

"All right," she said, "I'll look atter him." And the arm tossed restlessly again.

Then the little woman stepped back.

"You-all are duin' a wrong thing, and you know hit," she said. "But thar hain't no stoppin' ye. You've got to answer for hit though. Don't be forgittin' tha-at."

"Git ap!"

John was by the heads of the mules. His whip swished through the air, and came down. The animals jumped, and sprang forward. Then the wagon moved off. There was no more shouting. An oath from John Kisselbagh as the mules stumbled in the darkness was the only sound that broke the silence. Nobody felt like joking now, and nobody felt like riding. There was not a man among them tired enough to prefer a seat in that wagon to using his own legs.

When Mrs. Felps returned to the cottage, her first act was to open the door of the inner room and look in on Marshall Rutherford. He was sleeping quietly. The

mother's heart was troubled. Something very like fear was tugging at it as she thought of Norah out there in the wagon. She was sure that, with the exception of John Kisselbaugh, there was not a man among them all who would do the girl harm; and Wash, sober or not sober, would give his life for her any day. She was not even afraid that they would wreak their vengeance on her if by any accident they should discover that the small-pox patient they were so laboriously carrying away was Norah Felps. They would be much more likely to stand abashed, ashamed that the girl should witness their unmanly deed.

Her fear lay in another direction,— in the direction of violence offered, not to the girl Norah, but to the man, Marshall Rutherford. The visitors had gone away convinced that they were taking with them the nephew of Kennedy Poteet. Whatever fate was destined for the sick man would fall to Norah's lot. Would they do the girl injury before they discovered that their intended victim was not in their hands?

"She'll not tell, no matter what they du," said the mother. "I hain't blamin' her. When a girl's heart's in hit, thar hain't much she'll stick at. But hit hain't ri-ight to leave her. And yit thar's sense in what she said abaout leavin' Marshall. Hit hain't safe. I'm goin' to risk hit for a lee-tle, though. I cain't sit still a minute longer. I'm goin' to fetch Abner."

The little woman had not been sitting still. She had wandered from one room to the other, now putting things in order around her patient, now clearing the room that had been hastily disarranged. Half an hour had passed since the sound of the wagon wheels died away. Mrs. Felps could no longer bear the strain of inaction. She took a last anxious look at Marshall, extinguished the lamp, and went out of the cottage, locking the door behind her.

CHAPTER XX

IT would not be true to say that there was any sensation akin to fear in Norah's heart as she felt the wagon begin to move across the uneven ground. She was too much excited to be afraid. There was a little amusement mingled with her anger against these men. They were taking an immense amount of trouble to carry away a girl who was not for a moment in their thoughts. That is to say, she was not in the thought of the majority of them. Norah knew well that she was always in Wash Forehand's thoughts; and as for John Kisselbaugh, she was surely in the forefront of his anticipations to-night. She laughed quietly at the manner in which his triumph had been turned into absurdity. It was not Norah Felps who would stand as the vanquished party when this night's performance became public property.

For a long time she lay very quiet, only now and then lifting her head to discover which way the mules were going. This was not an easy matter, for the night was dark. The difference of motion told her when the wagon left the rough track for the high road, and she guessed, rather than saw, that in a few minutes it had turned across towards the Ridges.

Hitherto only a few words had passed between the men. With the exception of John Kisselbaugh, who was guiding the mules, they kept at a respectful distance from the wagon. Norah smiled again as she realized that she was little likely to be molested by any one of them.

John's voice broke the silence frequently. Oaths

dropped from his lips with extraordinary facility. John needed an outlet for his ire, and he found it in his treatment of the mules. More than once Norah was almost thrown from the wagon as the animals jumped beneath the heavy lash and brought the wheels over some great stone high enough to tilt the wagon almost on its side. It was after one such dangerous jolt, when the girl had been forced to cling to the wagon-box to avoid being tipped out, that she received her first hint of the destination of the party. She was dragging herself and the bed into position again, when she heard one of the men speak.

"Got your hospital all fixed up, Wash?"

A grunt was the only answer.

"Goin' to drive right inter the cave?"

"I reckon. Thar's room to turn."

"Aimin' to keep your patient plumb at the openin' or give him a private apartment, whar he can make up his mind comfortable-like whether he'll rid Big Creek Gap of his presence right away by skippin' inter the land o' shadders or wait till he gits on his feet agin, and gives us the trouble o' he'pin' him aout o' the valley? He won't be much more' n a shadder ary way, I reckon."

"I calc'lated he'd be better at the furder end o' the cave," replied Wash, speaking in a voice that in spite of its thickness conveyed to Norah's brain the impression of constraint. "I'm aimin' to make him tol'rable comfortable. I've dragged a heap o' boxes daown thar, and sot 'em together so's his bed won't hev to lay on the ground. Hit's as much as he can expect," he added argumentatively. "He don't belong to Big Creek ary way, and he hain't no right to put us and ourn in danger. Thar's John now, got young uns of his own. Hit hain't ri-ight that they should suffer for hi-im."

"They hain't goin' to suffer," said John with an oath. "We-uns are goin' to take care o' that. Hit's your

undertakin', Wash, and you'll hev to run what risk thar is in luekin' atter him. Hit hain't much. You've got to see he has somethin' to eat; and if he cain't eat hit, that hain't nothin' to nobody. You'll provide him with guede victuals while he hangs on, and when he takes himself off we'll bury him decent, right thar in the cave, and nobody won't be a bit the worse. Hit's more'n ary man of the stock of Kennedy Poteet deserves."

"I reckon," was the unanimous answer.

"So that's the game, is hit?" said Norah. "Very gue-ude. We'll trouble you-uns to feed your patient as long as you li-ike, but not to bury him, nor to he'p him aout of Big Creek Gap."

The blood flamed across the cheeks that had been hastily smeared with the red clay of the district. The girl's heart was beating wildly. So this was the treatment they would give a sick and almost dying man. A resting-place in a damp cave, and a grave beneath its floor, was the best Marshall Lane Rutherford could hope for from a village that had no word to say against him save that he was the nephew of Kennedy Poteet, and that he had come to a time of sore need. What wrong had he ever done man or woman among them that they —

Suddenly across the train of thought darted a new idea. The head in the wagon was lifted, and the eyes fairly blazed. It was well nobody was looking that way, or he would surely have seen through the darkness the angry gleam of those eyes.

"Thar's nary doubt of hit!" muttered the girl aloud. "Hit's plumb true! Hit's Wash! John Kisselbaugh hain't at the bottom of this at all. Hit's *hi-im.* He's done planned hit all, and the others are jist he'pin' him. Hit hain't John that's the brute: hit's Wash. And hit's Wash that's got to come with the victuals," she added significantly.

She understood now, and she did not ask again what harm Marshall Rutherford had done. The men's proceedings took on a new significance for her.

Her thoughts moved fast. There was much in what she had heard to quicken their activity. She was already turning the information to account. The plans of the men did not suit her ill. A lodging in a cave, and an occasional visit from Wash for the purpose of bringing food, presented a less formidable conclusion to this night's violence than any which she had anticipated. It would even be possible to keep up the delusion for a few days, and let these men believe that Marshall Lane Rutherford was really in their clutches. She did not fear close inspection in the dark recesses of a cave. She had feared being taken beyond the limits of Big Creek Gap, and left in some barn or house where her identity might be at once discovered. This variation of the programme pleased her well. She gave a short, angry laugh, and smothered it in a groan.

"Hit'd be a pi-ity not to let 'em carry aout their good intentions," she muttered. "Thar 'll be he-eaps of chances for Wash to bring the victuals afore *I* tell him to sto-op."

The girl saw safety for Marshall in the scheme she would help these men to carry out. The next few days were critical ones for him. His presence in the house could easily be hidden, for few were likely to court infection by coming near. As for herself, she would be in the cave when Wash made his visits. A peculiar smile crossed her face as she promised herself that these would not be very frequent.

"He won't be comin' *more 'n* once a day. He won't be *wantin'* to come," she said significantly.

There would be no necessity on any day for her to stay in the cave later than the time when Wash left it. His visit over, she would be free to return to her mother and Marshall.

"Hit's a tol'rable good plan," she said. "Hit's a sight better than jist gittin 'em away for one night. Of course thar's Abner,—he'd 'a fought like a tiger for Marshall,—and thar's others would 'a come to he'p. We'd 'a got 'em to-morrer. But hit hain't the best plan to hev fightin'. Thar's better ways."

Her mind was made up to let the men carry their undertaking through to the end. The intermediate stages would afford some amusement, for there were the visits of Wash to be met, and rendered interesting—to the philanthropic visitor. As for the climax, the thought of it would cheer many an hour spent in waiting within the cave.

The girl lifted her head again. As far as she could guess, she was about two miles from home. The wagon had been travelling over a rough cart-track, but now the change of movement told her there was grass beneath the wheels. While she strained her eyes to distinguish the surroundings, the wagon stopped with a jerk. The men drew together to consult, and the light of the three lanterns for a moment revealed the mouth of a cave.

Norah knew where she was now, and she knew the cave. That is to say, she was fairly well acquainted with its outer passages, and had penetrated into more than one chamber far back in the darkness. A thorough knowledge of it she did not possess, though she had often entered it in company with the boys and girls of Big Creek Gap. It was damp and cold, the more remote parts still obstructed by the stream that had once flowed in greater volume through it. The thought of bringing a sick man into such a place filled her with indignant horror. She alternately congratulated herself on having averted the catastrophe and glared at Wash Forehand, who stood swinging one of the lanterns and talking in a tone too low to reach her ears.

"Wait a bit, Wa-ash,—wait a bi-it," she said. "We hain't plumb through this business yit."

She saw Wash take a bottle from his pocket, and put it to his lips. Then he passed it round. The undertaking was one that called for the fortifying of courage. When John Kisselbaugh withdrew his lips from the fiery liquid, he returned to the heads of the mules.

"Git ap!" he shouted savagely.

The animals started with a jump. Wash went ahead with one of the lanterns, the others serving for the rest of the party.

"He's hurryin' to git his boxes fixed," said the girl, watching the light as far as she could see it.

The angry laugh had not died out of her eyes or gone from about her mouth. She was thinking of Wash, of the visits he would make to the cave, and of the crowning reward of his philanthropy when he should learn that the small-pox patient whom he had lodged on a bedstead of boxes in a damp cave was the girl he would have given the world to propitiate. The thought of that overwhelming climax afforded her so much diversion that she turned from it with regret, to meet the more pressing experience of descending the slippery rocks within the mouth of the cave. The opening was wide; and the mules went sliding down the steep incline, to draw up on the level with a jerk.

"Drive plumb across, John. You can turn, and back up that away. That's the prong where Wash has got his hospital."

There was a weak attempt at laughter, some shouting, and more swearing; and then the mules were brought round, and the wagon backed into an opening that narrowed a few yards beyond.

"Tumble him aout!" said John brutally. "I've done my part, and you don't ketch me touchin' him agin. You-uns may git him in furder, or leave him thar, for all me."

"Haul your boxes this away, Wash," shouted one of

the men. "We-uns hain't powerful eager to carry him back thar."

There was no answer. Wash was out of hearing.

"Does the fool think we're goin' to the end of creation with sich a burden as thi-is?" exclaimed another angrily. "Wa-ash! Wash Fore-hand!"

The low walls sent back the sound, and a groan from the patient added to the weird effect.

"Tumble him aout, and leave Wash to fix him to his likin'," said John. "Hit's his look aout: hit hain't we-uns'."

"Wa-ash! Whar are ye, you fool?"

This time the call provoked an answer.

"Come on!" shouted Wash, his voice sounding faintly through the long stretch of rock passage.

"Come on yourself. We-all hain't comin' in thar."

The light of the lantern appeared as a glimmering star in the blackness.

"Hit's all ready," replied Wash, in a voice that had grown more perceptibly thick and unsteady.

"Haul your boxes up to this end."

"I cain't."

The tone was positive.

"How fur is hit?"

"Not a great ways."

Grumbling was loud as the men advanced to the wagon. This night exploit was evidently not altogether to their taste. John Kisselbaugh found it necessary to remain with the mules.

The long passage they entered narrowed as they proceeded. Towards the end there was barely enough room for the men to pass through with their burden. Once the bed scraped against the sides, and the bearers found themselves obliged to stoop.

"Be a plumb good place to bury him in," remarked one of them facetiously.

Twenty yards beyond the narrow part the passage widened out, and the stone floor was comparatively dry. Here, in the open space back from the passage, Wash had arranged his boxes.

"That'll be a tol'rable good place to put him in," he said thickly.

"We hain't carin' whar we put him, so long as we git rid of him," was the answer.

Norah had lain very quiet during the transit from the wagon to the extremity of the passage. She was willing to allow the task to be completed as speedily as possible. The sooner it was accomplished, the sooner she would be at liberty to return to the cottage. Not one of the party but had taken too much whisky to attempt another visit to the cave to-night.

"Thar, that's done! And a powerful guede thing for Big Creek Gap. A feller like that's best aout o' the way. The rest's your look aout, Wash."

The speaker straightened himself, and stood back with a sigh of relief. The patient moaned, and threw up one arm. The movement had the effect of hastening the departure of the bearers from the immediate vicinity of the bed. One man alone stood his ground.

The scene in that dark cave was eerie enough to fix itself in the memories of those who were present. The heavy figures of the men stood out of the darkness against the whiteness of the bed-clothes, and the rock walls shone damp where they caught the glare of the lantern. The wild eyes of the patient travelled from one face to another with a stare that was disconcerting, and ended by fixing themselves on that of Wash Forehand. He moved nearer to the bed, a little unsteady on his feet and uncertain in his general movements.

"All right. Go ahead," he said. "I'm jist goin' to stop to put some victuals near him. He shain't say

thar was nothin' to eat, if so be he should feel like hevin' a snack."

A bottle of milk and the remains of the whisky were drawn laboriously from the speaker's pocket and placed near the bed. A hunch of corn bread followed, and then the young man stood for a moment in silence.

"Come on, Wash. We hain't aimin' to stay here all night."

They were already moving off.

"All right. I'm coming," was the answer; but Wash did not stir.

His hands were clenched, and his lips moved excitedly, though no sound came from them. He waited until the footsteps grew distant, and the light of the lantern could no longer be seen. Then quickly, as if action and words were forced from him, Wash leant over the bed.

"You thought you'd git the best of me, didn't you?" he said, in a low, hoarse voice. "You're aimin' to git well and lay claim to *her*, but you hain't goin' to hev her. *I* know well enough she'll never hev me naow. She might, if *your* cursed face hadn't never come between us. She won't now. But she hain't for you. I'll fix *you-u!*"

The last words came through his set teeth. A moment later he lifted his head and swung his light into the passage down which the others had disappeared.

The passion and hate in the action and the words for an instant stunned the girl. They revealed to her the reality of the danger that threatened Marshall Lane Rutherford. For a time her anger against Wash was swallowed up in fear. Such passion as this was not altogether a thing to be laughed at. It was a real peril, to be acknowledged and met squarely.

It was of no possible harm to herself that Norah was thinking. Her fears were all for Marshall. They

made her cautious. She determined to remain still until all likelihood of Wash Forehand's return was at an end. The footsteps of the men could no longer be heard, but those of Wash were loud. What was he lingering for?

She sat up, and strained her eyes to see into the blackness. It was no use. The lantern had gone beyond the first turn, and the passage was dark as death.

"Wait a bit," said the girl softly. "I hain't come here without the means of gittin' a light."

All was still in the cave. The men must before this have reached the opening. Norah was wondering whether Wash had joined them, when there came a heavy, booming sound, and the noise of falling rock. She started up in alarm. The sounds were very close.

"He's done blowed the passage up!"

A horror fell upon her,—horror of the deed rather than of the danger. She remembered the low, narrow passage through which she had passed a few minutes ago. It would be easy to block up that opening with debris, so that a sick man would be virtually buried alive.

"He's *done* hit,—the murderer!"

Even then she was not afraid for herself. She was still thinking of Marshall.

She could hear nothing now but the occasional fall of a loose bit of rock. The passage was too securely blocked for sounds easily to make their way through. For a full minute she sat perfectly still, listening and thinking. Then, as with a flash of light, the knowledge of the danger dawned upon her.

"I'm plumb blocked in, and mammy don't know which away we come!"

Her face grew white beneath its smearing of clay. To sit still longer was an impossibility. She felt choked,—oppressed with the darkness, and this sensation of being buried alive. She wanted to scream, to call out

to Wash to come back and remove that mass of rock which, she was sure, was barring the way. She would have done it, but like a hand laid upon her lips came the thought of the passion in Wash Forehand's face. It was for Marshall he had planned the fate that had fallen upon her. To let him know that he had been tricked would be to court fresh revenge against his rival.

"He shain't know. Hit hain't safe," she said.

But she must do something, and at once, if only to free herself from the horror that had fallen upon her. It was possible that the outlet was not too completely obstructed to allow of passage through it. She struck a match and lit one of the candles she had brought. Then, carrying it carefully, since she had no lantern to put it in, she went out to the passage. The scene of the explosion was only a short distance away. When she had examined the great fallen masses of rock, she realised more fully than before the passion that had driven Wash Forehand to make the deep drills which had been necessary to produce such a catastrophe.

"He's done gone plumb crazy," she said.

She gave up all hope of removing those stones. It would have taken strong men, with picks and shovels, to clear away that obstruction, so that she might creep through. With only her own hands to help her the thing was an impossibility. Norah felt the damp heat come out on her face. She was trembling. She put her hand to her forehead and felt the drops of perspiration. Then she drew herself up sharply.

"Lor! Norah Felps," she said aloud, "you hain't come to your last gasp yit! Mammy's thar. She'll find you. Mammy hain't no fool."

She went back to the wider part of the cave, and began to examine it. It had no outlet, but through the wall at one end flowed a considerable stream of water.

"Whar does that git away?" questioned the girl.

She followed it as it crossed a corner of the chamber, and then disappeared beneath the opposite wall of rock.

"Hit must run clar through into another prong," she said.

She stooped, and put her arm into the water. It came high above her elbow. She could not reach to the bottom.

"Hit's a deep hole," she said, and turned away with a sigh.

Then she stood still to think.

"I'd like tol'rable well to git aout of here afore mammy raises a row," she said. "Hit'd be a sight better that Wash shouldn't know note abaout hit."

But the minutes wore on, and she was no nearer finding a way. The atmosphere in the cave became oppressive. There was no longer open communication with the outside air. The girl looked at the candle.

"Thar hain't enough for you and me," she said, and blew it out.

Then she groped her way back to the bed, and sat down in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXI

"AB! Ab Poteet! Open your door right away, and let me in!"

Mrs. Felps was breathless. She stood by Abner's door, panting. She had run every step of the way from her own house to his,— run as she never could have run if her feet had not been urged on by the mingled feeling of fear for Marshall and anxiety about Norah.

Abner heard her voice, and was quickly at the door.

"What is hit? Is he worse?" he cried, as he threw it open wide.

"Hit hain't Marshall — hit's Norah!" gasped the little woman.

He staggered as if he had been struck.

"Hit hain't touched *her?* The curse hain't lighted on *her?*"

His voice was hoarse and appealing.

"Lor! man, don't lueke like that," said Mrs. Felps breathlessly. "Hit hain't no curse, unless hit's the curse of evil men. They're curse enough anywhars. Hit's John Kisselbaugh, and Wash Forehand, and a lot more,— all on 'em drunk. They've done carried her off, and I don't know whar they've tuk her. Mercy alive, I'm clean done aout!"

"Carried *her* off? Norah?"

To all appearance it would have been more than any man's life was worth to touch her with his little finger if Abner were present. Mrs. Felps looked at his face, and an odd little smile played about her mouth. She sank into a chair, and held her hand to her heart. She had come very fast.

"Hit's this away, Ab," she said, after a minute's silence. "They aimed to take Marshall,—carry him away somewhars. They said he was puttin' they-uns in danger, and that sort o' talk. And Norah hadn't no mind to let 'em hev their way. So she jist humped round, and got Marshall into another rueme, and got into his bed, and tricked 'em into thinkin' she was the sick man. They was that drunk they didn't know her from Marshall. And they tuk her off."

"Tuk Norah off? Whar?"

Abner's voice rolled like thunder.

"That's jist what I want you to find aout," said the little woman. "She wouldn't let me foller. 'Thar's Marshall to see to,' she said, and she was that set on my takin' care o' him that I had to go back to the house, and leave them to carry her whar they liked."

"How long ago was hit?" asked Abner, his eyes shining, and his face working.

"Half an hour afore I set aout," she replied. "I've come mighty quick. You'd better foller 'em, Ab. They started to go to the road. I hain't no knowledge whar they went atter that. I was scart to leave Marshall. I'm goin' back this blessed minute."

"Had they-uns a team?" asked Abner.

"Yes—John's."

"I'll be atter ye in a minute," he said; for she was already at the door.

She had barely gone a hundred yards before he was by her side. He carried a lantern and a heavy axe.

"What's that for?" asked Mrs. Felps.

She was not referring to the lantern, and he knew it.

"Hit'll du to break a head or two with," he said grimly.

"Lueke a-here, Ab," said Mrs. Felps quietly: "this hain't no time for bloodshed. They won't hurt he-er. They hain't aimin' to hurt he-er. Hit's *hi-im*. But

thar might come harm to her all the same, though they hain't aimin' to du hit; and I want you to go and find her. But you don't want to use that thar. You hain't goin' to fight."

"You're right," he said slowly. "*I* hain't no call to shed blood. Thar's been enough shed. But, if they've hurt a hair of he-er head" —

"They hain't, Ab — they hain't," said the little woman. "Thar hain't none on 'em, 'thout hit's John Kisselbaugh, that would touch her if he knew. But hit hain't safe to let the time go on, and we not knowin' whar she is. Now we'll run. I'm tol'rable rested."

They did run, but Abner was first at the cottage.

"Give me the key," he said when they started. "I'll go and see he's all right."

He had been in to look at Marshall, and was examining the tracks of the wheels by the light of his lantern when Mrs. Felps came up.

"I'll foller 'em to the road," he said. "Hit hain't hard to see 'em. The ground's tol'rable soft."

She noticed that he still carried the axe.

"Goin' to take that?" she asked.

"Yes. Hit might be useful," he said. "I hain't goin' to hurt nobody, unless thar's need — for her."

He was already some distance away, following the tracks. Mrs. Felps went into the house.

"He'll find her — Ab 'll find her," she said. "Lor! he'd foller them tracks to the other side o' creation afore he'd give ur-rp."

She went into Marshall's room comforted, and for the first time since she started out stood still long enough to take breath.

When Abner reached the high road, he was puzzled. There were marks of wheels in both directions. A certain instinct made him turn away from the Gap. Reason told him the men would go through the Gap if their

object was, as he believed, to carry Marshall out of the village. Yet he turned away. And a few yards further on he came to a stone that was ground by the passing of a wagon over its edge. The dust was newly strewn upon the ground. He examined it by the light of his lantern.

"They've done gone to the Ridges," he said.

He turned off along the road the wagon had taken.

If John Kisselbaugh had not driven back by a different route, he would have met Abner at the outset of the search. He reached his own home at the time when Ab was carefully working his way along the cross-road, stopping often to assure himself that the wagon had not turned aside. He was making slow progress, for the search must be thorough. There were side paths into the woods to be examined, and openings among the trees, into any one of which a wagon could be driven. Abner failed to understand why this road had been selected. It led to hamlets across the hills, but there seemed no reason for choosing it rather than any other.

The time went on. It was long since he had seen any trace of wagon wheels other than the deep ruts that were always in evidence. He had begun to wish for daylight, and to fear that he had lost the clue, when his light shone on grass newly trampled down. Footsteps had been on it since the night dews fell. He swung his lantern round. Where was he?

"The cave!" he ejaculated, and stood still to think.

It lay a field's length off the road. He knew it well, and went on confidently.

"Hit would du to put him in," he said meditatively. "But hit was a fool's plan."

He hardly stopped to notice the marks of the wheels on the long grass. He did not doubt that he had found the goal.

"Thar's lots of prongs," he said, as he stood within the cave.

Was Norah here still, or had she already gone? He was sure that she had *been* here, or rather that the wagon and the men had been here, for the grass round the opening gave evidence of recent trampling.

"Norah!"

The voice rang through the cave, but it failed to penetrate the mass of fallen rock that lay between Abner and the girl he sought.

He called again and again, and then began a systematic search. He had already followed several passages to their end before he stepped into the one that presently brought him up short. He stood staring at the fallen stone, letting the light of his lantern flash upon it.

"That didn't come thar by no ordinary means; and hit hain't been long thar, neither," he said.

He stooped to examine the broken rock.

"If that hain't been blowed up, my name hain't Ab Poteet!" he ejaculated. "What have they done hit for?"

He stood scratching his head. Then a thought struck him. He brought the axe down on the floor with a sharp report.

"The brutes!" he said. "She's behind thar!"

Then he raised his voice.

"Norah! Norah, girl, are you tha-ar?"

He was trembling with excitement.

Back upon him came the sound of his own voice, hemmed in by the rock walls. Hark! Was that an answering cry?

"I'm — shet — in! He's — done — blowed the passage ur-rp!"

By the faintness of the sounds he judged of the thickness of broken rock between himself and the girl.

"I'll git you aout. Hit's me,— Ab," he said tenderly.

"I — was — wishin' — for — you."

How the words thrilled his heart, and set his nerves

tingling! Wishin' for *him!* He wanted to wrap the speaker in his strong arms, and promise her that danger should never come near her again. Instead of that, however, the arms began to swing the heavy axe up and down, hewing an opening through the rock. He was glad now that he had brought the implement.

Abner was a strong man, but that rock soon convinced him that he was not likely by this means to stand in Norah's presence for many hours to come. He lifted his voice again.

"Is thar plenty of air inside?"

"Not — a — mighty — big — lot. Hit's tol'rable — used — up."

The voice was brave, but it was fainter than before. The closeness of the air and the strain of waiting were telling upon the girl. Abner stopped those steady blows, and stood up to think.

"I'm goin' to try another way," he called. "Wait a leetle, Norah. I'll hev you aout afore long."

"I *am* — waitin'," said the girl, with a little laugh in her voice, but a sob at the end of the laugh. He heard neither. The rock was too thick. But he turned away with a tender compassion in his heart.

Norah listened for the sound of the axe. It did not come again. The time seemed longer now that those steady strokes had ceased. Had he gone away for help?

"Abner!" she called, but there was no answer.

It was quite dark within her prison, for the girl had not dared again to light the candle. The air was too oppressive already. She felt faint and weak.

"Thar's nobody but Ab," she said. "Mammy hain't told nary other person."

The thought comforted her, and helped to keep her head steady. Many minutes passed. They seemed like hours to Norah. She groped her way back to the open

chamber,— the air was less oppressive there,— and stood straining her ears for the sound of Abner's return. She wondered whether it was the effect of the failing of the air within the chamber that she heard strange noises about her. There was a splashing of water somewhere in the distance, and then a sound of scrambling and climbing.

"Norah, dear, are you thar?"

"Ab! O Ab! I'm so glad!"

She struck a light recklessly, for his had been extinguished.

He was standing in the chamber, dripping and dazed.

"How did you come in?" she asked, making her way swiftly towards him.

"Through thar!" he said, pointing to the hole down which the water poured slowly. "Hit leads into another prong."

He was by her side a moment later, holding her hand.

"You hain't hurt, Norah?" he asked. "Them brutes hain't touched you?"

"*They* touch *me!*"

Her head was tossed proudly.

He looked into her face for a moment, and then bent forward and touched it tenderly with one wet finger.

"Thank God I found you afore it was too late," he said solemnly. "Thar's time enough to deal with them atter I git you aout."

She laughed,— an unsteady laugh.

"I'll du the dealin' thar," she said.

He gave her one long, wistful look, and turned away. His eyes were searching the floor of the cave.

"Better put that candle aout," he said. "I've got to light the lantern."

He had been carrying it in his hand. Now he lit it and went to the part of the chamber where the water flowed in.

"I'm goin' to set hit runnin' another way for a piece," he said.

The strong arm began to swing lustily. Abner was hewing a channel towards a lower level of the chamber. It would draw off the water, and prevent it from flowing into the hole by which he had entered. The girl watched him for a minute, and then came forward and held the lantern. The air was becoming more oppressive. Abner worked with the energy born of hope and necessity. It was but a small ridge of rock that must be cut through before the water would flow into the new channel, and descend to a lower part of the chamber. It would not again seek its former outlet until it had filled the depression. Before he had finished, the light was growing dim, and the arms of the girl powerless. She had been in the close air a long time.

"Thar!"

The water was turned from its course. It went sucking down through the cut. A feeble light yet glimmered in the lantern. Abner sprang to the hole through which he had come, and with his hat began baling out the water. He kept up the effort till the light almost went out.

"We've got to go, dear," he said, turning to Norah. "You'll git wet, but thar hain't no danger now. The water hain't powerful deep."

She staggered towards him, and put her hand in his. He took it in a firm grasp, and extinguished the last flicker of light. Then she felt his arm about her, and the next moment found herself in the water.

"We're through. You hain't hurt, are you?"

He was holding her tightly, and trying to see into her face. They were on the dry rock again, dripping and breathless. It had been but a short rush through the pool, for now that the water had stopped coming in that direction, the stream beyond had run almost dry. When Abner came through it, there was much water in it.

"No, I hain't hurt. Whar are we?"

"In the next prong. We can walk plumb aout of hit to the open air."

He waited a minute, still keeping his arm about her. He could not see her.

"Can you stand while I light the lantern?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she said; but she staggered when the arm was removed.

The first faint streak of dawn was in the sky when Abner and Norah walked up to the door of the cottage. Abner held the girl's hand in his. There was a light on his face.

"Hit hain't safe to let her go with they-uns agin," he said, as Mrs. Felps came to the door. "Thar *was* danger."

The colour had not yet returned to the girl's face.

"Why, Norah!" said the little woman tenderly.

"Hit's all right, mammy. Is Marshall safe?" said the girl.

"He's sleepin' yit," replied her mother. "Come in, Abner."

He hesitated.

"No. I'm goin' back," he said.

"Ab!"

It was Norah who spoke.

He stopped directly.

"Don't tell ary person of this night's work," said the girl. "Leave John Kisselbaugh and Wash alone."

He hesitated.

"Ab!"

He turned to her with a look in his eyes that she did not understand. She came forward a step, and laid her hand on his arm.

"Hit's for *him*, Ab."

Then Abner lifted his lantern, and let its light fall on her face. She did not turn her eyes away, only a smile came to her lips.

"Hit hain't safe," she said. "Hit hain't safe neither for you nor hi-im. And besides," she added, with a mischievous light dawning in her eyes, "I'm goin' to deal with 'em myself,— with one of 'em, anyway."

He lowered the lantern.

"I want them to think they have succeeded," she continued. "I hain't wantin' to hev all this bother for note. Hit'll be plumb worth hit all to see 'em when they know. Hit'll be better 'n blows."

He was looking at her steadily.

"Hit's jist as you say," he responded at last.

"You are good," she said. "Mammy," turning to Mrs. Felps, "you done the best thing when you sent Ab. You wouldn't 'a seed me comin' back naow if hit hadn't been for hi-im."

The little woman laid her hand on Norah's arm.

"Come in, honey," she said. "And, Ab, you go home and git them wet clothes offn you. You hain't neither of ye fit to du no more talkin'."

CHAPTER XXII

WASH FOREHAND was sober. It was the first time this could have been said of him since the morning when Will Hollingsworth paid him an early visit. He was sober after ten days of delusion and passion. Those ten days were pursuing him insistently, making their personality aggressively prominent. They would not permit him to go back to the point whence they started out from the level round of his life, and changed it into a turmoil of passionate hatred. He would gladly have forgotten them, but they protested. It would have been easier to forget all that came before.

Wash had not returned to the cave, though a week had passed since he left his patient there. More than once he had gloated over the thought of what lay sealed up at the further end — but that was before he was sober. He did not gloat now. He wanted to forget, but he could not. Wash was not fierce of nature, except when passion seized him or drink possessed him. When both worked together, he could be dangerous. For the time being passion was dead,— burnt out. And he had left the drink alone for twenty-four hours.

The story of his night adventure had gone abroad. Wash had not told of it, but John Kisselbaugh and the others had been less reticent. It was an open secret that Marshall Lane Rutherford had been carried off by force, and placed where he would be less of a menace to the village than in the house of Mrs. Felps. Just where that was, nobody in Big Creek Gap could have told. On this point the conspirators kept their own counsel.

There were many who were curious. Contrary to Naomi's expectations, Mrs. Felps had visitors in plenty. She sent them all off with the assurance that "thar warn't nothin' to tell only what they knew a'ready, and the house warn't healthy for nobody to come into. If they wanted to know the up and daown of hit all, hit was easy enough told. Big Creek was all for hitself. Hit had a mighty straight law and gospel that a babe could understand. 'Lue-uke aout for we-uns,' that was abaout the go of hit; and if we-uns have got a tol'rable good kind of a place to live in, or ary other likely thing belongin' to us, take plumb good care to keep hit for we-uns' benefit. Ourn mustn't lose nothin' for outsiders. Think of we-uns, and not of ary poor sufferer that's dependin' for his life on the kindness that's in his feller-men. Lor," continued the little woman sharply, "thar hain't no need to come and ask *me* what happened. What is hit that's likely to happen when thar's one sick man, helpless and weak, and six great powerful fellers bent on protectin' themselves agin him? You-uns can tell what happened as good as I can. Mercy sakes! go home, and rejoice that you live in Big Creek Gap, whar thar hain't a mite o' danger that ary person will ever be injured through hevin' too much compassion!"

Nobody got further than the threshold of the cottage. The door was kept locked.

"Hit hain't safe to leave doors undone in Big Creek," said Mrs. Felps significantly.

Norah was not visible, on the day after the exploit, or any other. She sat by Marshall's side, watching the balance waver between life and death, and helping, by her care, to turn the scale in the right direction. Of late she was meeting with her reward. In spite of the absence of medical aid, Marshall was improving.

The eyes that had before looked at her with a puz-

zled reaching after something to hold by had recognition in them now. Marshall found the change from his cousin's laborious nursing to the light touch and soothing voice of this girl a tremendous improvement. He watched her with a new feeling of interest. It was Abner who told him what he owed to her courage and readiness of resource. The information almost caused a relapse. Marshall's eyes grew dangerously bright. She laughed into them when he tried to thank her, and to express some of his indignation at the same time.

"Lor! thar hain't no need for we-uns to git excited," she said. "We hain't come plumb to the end yit."

It was a step towards the end when Mrs. Felps, after a cheerful word to her patient, left the cottage while the dew was yet on the grass. She had not been out of the house since she ran in the darkness to Abner's cabin. She lifted her head, and took in a long breath of the cool morning air. Then she turned, and almost ran into Abner's arms. He was coming to the cottage. He came every day now.

"Go in and lue-uke atter Norah," she said. "You can be useful if ary person should knock at the door."

She understood the expression of his eyes, and the alacrity with which he covered the space between himself and the house. Abner would have started unquestioningly for the other end of the earth if he had been told that thereby he could serve Norah.

There was a motherly look on the little woman's face as she moved away.

"Poor feller!" she said softly.

She was not thinking of Wash Forehand, though it was Wash she was going to see.

Perhaps it was that motherly look, which had not yet faded from her face, that made a girl stop sharply, and turn back after she had passed her. Naomi Mozingo was not in the habit of exchanging many words with

Mrs. Felps. But when the heart is sore, habit's fetters lose strength.

"Mrs Felps!" she said, in a voice that was both insistent and pleading.

The little woman stopped, and turned about. She did not speak, however. She had nothing to say to this girl whose tall, shapely figure towered above her.

"Mrs. Felps," Naomi repeated,—and now the sharp gaze of the listener had discovered the dark rings round the girl's eyes,—"will you tell me whether you have had any news of your patient yet?"

"What news should I have?" inquired Mrs. Felps wonderingly. "Hit's you that should be able to tell *me* what has become of him."

An expression of pain passed over the girl's face.

"Mrs. Felps," she said, "I have had naught to do with this. Believe me, I am as sorry as you can be for what has happened; and I know as little what has become of Marshall Rutherford."

A queer little smile played about Mrs. Felps's lips.

"Darter," she said, "did you ever roll a stone up hill till hit come to the top, and then let hit go? Hit didn't take no rollin' to send hit clar daown the other side, but hit warn't plumb true that you hadn't note to du with the fallin'. Them that starts the stone rollin' has a si-ight to du with whar it lands, and with the heads hit breaks goin' daown atter they're tuk their hands offn hit."

There was no doubt about the pain in the eyes that looked down into the speaker's.

"I never meant that the stone should fall as it did," said the girl slowly. "I sought justice,—not cruelty."

She turned away, and went with swift steps towards the valley road. And when Mrs. Felps resumed her walk she was no longer conscious of the dew sparkling upon the grass. She was only conscious of the suffering in a girl's eyes.

"Hit hain't payin', darter," she said. "And hit won't never pay."

The conviction was deepened when she came upon Wash Forehand, standing outside his barn, and looking off into vacancy. His eyes had a worried, hunted look in them. He started when he saw her standing before him.

"Was you luekin' back at the gu-eude things you'd done, Wash, or forrard to the consequences that was a comin'?" asked the little woman quietly

He moved uneasily, but did not speak.

"Wash," continued the speaker, "whar's that sick person you tuk away yesterday was a week?"

He turned his back on her. He could not bear the scrutiny of those bright eyes.

"Whar did you carry that bed o' mine?" continued the visitor. "You hain't no right to tha-at, Wa-ash, whatever you may think you hev to the life of the one that was layin' on hit."

"If you don't git that bed back, I'll make the loss good," he said hoarsely.

"Will you make all the loss you've done me good?" she asked sharply.

"Yes."

"Then, Wash Forehand, give me back my girl." The little woman's voice was low and earnest. "Du you know who you tuk away by force that night, and carried nobody knows whar? Du you know who was a layin' on that thar bed? Wash, thar was no human compassion left in your heart nor ary one o' the hearts o' the men that was with you. You warn't ashamed to act worse 'n the brutes. But thar was enough compassion in a girl's heart to make her stop your cruelty. You thought you tuk Marshall Rutherford on that thar bed. Wash Forehand, hit was Norah you tuk,— my darter. Give me back my girl!"

She stopped and looked at him. He had turned towards her, his face white and horror-stricken. There was no attempt to hide it now.

"Norah!"

"Yes. What have you done with her? Give me back my girl."

He put up his hand to his head in a dazed fashion.

"Norah!" he said again. Then his eyes fell on the mother's face. "Give her back to you?" he said. "I *cain't!*"

The last word was a cry of despair.

"Why not? You said you would make good my loss!"

"I cain't," he cried again. "She's *dead!*"

Even as he spoke, he was racing across the fields like one frantic.

"He's goin' to the cave," said Mrs. Felps.

She watched him out of sight, and then retraced her steps toward her own house.

"Hit hain't payin'," she said.

She would have been more sure of it if she could have seen Wash tearing at the stones and rubbish within the cave, working like a madman to remove the rock he had taken so much pains to bring down. Every now and then he would stop, while a girl's name rang through the dark passages, the sound coming back upon him heavy and hopeless.

"Norah! Norah, my girl, I warn't aimin' to du hit!"

His hands were bleeding from their reckless contact with the sharp edges of the rocks. He had borrowed a lantern and shovel from the nearest house, but he did not stay for implements when his fingers could do more rapid execution. He worked desperately, thrusting his hands between great lumps of stone that he hurled out of his way with headlong haste.

Streams of perspiration poured down his face. Every muscle was strained to its utmost. Masses of rock that under ordinary circumstances would have required three men to move them, yielded before the long-continued, savage output of strength, and parted inch by inch from their fellows, till he could worm his way behind them, and come so much the nearer to whatever lay prisoned in the rock chamber beyond those tons of inert matter. As each vantage-point was gained, the wild cry, "Norah! Norah, girl!" now hoarse and pleading, now loud and passionate, disturbed the close air.

Once or twice Wash threaded his way out from the rock heap, and started for the mouth of the cave, almost resolved to call for help. It might not yet be too late to save her. Every moment was precious. But he never reached the daylight. The thought of what would greet the workers when they had opened up a way through the obstruction came like a stretched-out arm to bar his progress. The secret of that rock chamber was as yet all his own. The explosion had, indeed, been heard outside; but the men were at the time some distance away, and were moreover too thoroughly intoxicated to give the sound more than passing notice.

"That was a powerful near go," Wash had said as he joined them a few minutes later. "A great chunk of rock bigger 'n ary one of we-uns come near fallin' plumb on my head. Hear it thunder daown?"

They had accepted his explanation, and his secret remained undiscovered.

What was to follow the revelation which awaited the first man who passed beyond that barrier? The question deterred Wash from bringing witnesses upon the scene. He came back and resumed his efforts, working gradually nearer to the object of his desire and dread.

It was early morning when he disappeared within the

yawning mouth of the cave. Darkness had swept slowly down and settled upon Big Creek Gap when he drew himself clear of the rubbish, and stood gasping for breath. The veins stood out dark on his forehead. His face was purple. He had succeeded in opening an irregular passage more than half-way through that unyielding mass. The wall between him and the prison he had made had become thin. If the breath of life yet lingered beyond, he ought now to be able to win response to his pleadings. They had been loud and prolonged; in turn, passionate, humble, beseeching, despairing. They had been shouted with all the energy of lungs that almost rent themselves in the effort, but they had met with no answering shout. Now he drew back into the freer space of the passage, and stood dazed, hopeless, gasping and trembling.

"She's dead!" he said, in a low, hoarse voice. "I've done killed her, and I wouldn't 'a hurt a hair of her head to save my life."

Then a passion of remorse and longing seized him.

"Norah! Norah, my girl!" he shouted, in a voice that went beating against the damp walls. "Cain't you say one little word? I warn't aimin' to do hit, Norah,— I *warn't*."

He was shaking with a tempest of horror and grief.

"What would you hev me say to a *murderer?*"

Where did it come from,— the low, thrilling whisper that sent the blood running like fire through his veins? It was *her* voice,— Norah's.

Instinctively he turned towards the prison chamber, The sound must come from thence, though his ears told him it did not.

"Norah! Is hit you? Are you alive in thar?"

It was no wonder his voice was hoarse. His heart was beating so wildly.

"Alive in thar! Wash Forehand, du you dare to ask that,— you?"

He faced sharply round. The sound came unmistakably from behind.

"What is hit?" he cried in an awe-struck tone, his hand uplifted in fear.

A shadowy figure could be dimly discerned in the furthermost stretches of the light thrown by his lantern, a figure suggestive of Norah, or — could it be her spirit? White, swaying, ethereal, it came a step towards him, and stopped.

"You call on a live girl," said the voice, in tones low and clear. "Hit's not *alive* that the murderer sees his victim."

He shrank from those low, penetrating tones. They chilled him to the heart.

"I left food and drink," he pleaded; "and — I didn't know hit was you-u."

The last words were a wail.

"Lue-uke at me! Lue-uke, Wash Forehand."

The girl had come a few steps nearer. The light of the lantern fell upon her. There was something ghostly, unreal, in her appearance in that dark cave. She need not have told him to look. He could not have turned his eyes from her if he had tried.

"Wash Forehand," she continued, "you thought you tuk a sick man in thar. You tuk me — and you set to work to murder me."

"No, no, I didn't!" cried Wash; and the words were almost a shriek. "I never aimed to du hit. I wouldn't" —

"You blowed up the rock, and left me thar with less 'n enough air to last twenty-four hours," interrupted the girl, in the same low, vibrating voice that never changed its tone, but that thrilled through and through the listener, at one moment setting his blood on fire and the next sending it back to his heart with an icy chill. "Afore you woke from that drunken sleep atter you

done shet me in, the air inside thar was plumb gone. Hit was chokin' me. I never drawed a breath of hit atter."

A cry, loud and long, rang through the cave.

"I done killed her! Thar hain't no hope! She's dead! Norah's dead!"

He had been hoping against hope all day. Now the certainty of Norah's death seized upon him, pressed itself into his consciousness. "I never drawed a breath of hit atter." The words haunted him. He saw the girl he loved fighting for breath in the dark prison he had made,—not for her, oh, not for her. She was lying there at that moment, dead; and her spirit had come to accuse him. A terror of that presence in the passage seized him. It was so like Norah, yet it was cold to his pleading. He turned and dashed in among the rocks, heedlessly bruising himself against them. He was maddened by the despair that held him in its grip, and by the consciousness of the figure standing motionless behind him. He had no remembrance of the obstructions that lay in his way. His one thought was to get as far as possible from that accusing voice.

It was no wonder that he stumbled, no wonder that he was hurled forward upon the edge of a great piece of rock. The blow stunned him. It came with resistless force, as if the inanimate stone had become an intelligent agent, dealing out retribution for the crime that now met him face to face.

He was too much dazed to know that the lantern had fallen from his hand; but when he lifted his head, from which the blood was trickling, he found himself in darkness. The pain of the blow helped to bewilder him further. He could not have told whether he had fallen, or whether some mysterious force, emanating from that presence in the passage behind, had been exerted against him. The superstitions that were part of the air he

breathed took hold of him. He did not try to rise, but lay trembling. And while he lay, he heard again the voice that now was full of terror to him.

"Wash Forehand," it said, "you hadn't no pity, and you cain't expect none. You're plumb guilty of murder. Thar was murder in your heart."

The sounds were approaching.

"Thar was murder in your heart," the voice continued, "and that murder you aimed to du is writ down agin you. You've got to answer for hit, because you done give hit a place in your heart."

"I warn't aimin' at murderin' *you*."

It was a moan of dissent and deprecation.

"You done what you warn't aimin' to du that night, but you didn't du no *worse* than you was aimin' to du," continued the voice. "Wash — Wash Forehand, thar's lives that are white and clean by the side of yourn that's pursued by ha'nts and by judgments. How are *you* goin' to escape,— you,— a murderer of the sick and helpless?"

"I hain't escapin'."

"No, and you hain't goin' to escape," said that low, relentless voice, every tone of which went to his heart. "Hit's easy to sin,— plumb easy,— but hit hain't easy to face what comes atter. You're facin' hit, Wash."

She was very close to him now. She could hear his breath coming heavily.

"I know hit," he said despairingly.

"And you've got to face hit. Wash Forehand, you done had your will on me-e. Naow hit's my turn."

He groaned.

"Wash!"

She was so near now that he fancied he could discern the whiteness of her form in the darkness. He was trembling violently.

"You've got to swar what I tell you,— to swar hit, and keep to hit," she continued, in the same low, thrilling tone.

"I will," he said humbly.

"You've harboured hatred in your heart agin Marshall Rutherford," she went on. "You tried to murder him. You've got to swar that you'll stand between him and evil all the days of your life."

"I cain't."

He struggled to rise, to protest, to do anything to free himself from this unwelcome compulsion.

"You've got to," persisted the girl. "Wash Forehand, you cain't he'p yourself. You done blowed up that rock and left me in thar to die. You cain't stand aout agin me-e."

He knew it. The resistless power of a guilty conscience brought home to him every word that voice uttered. The strange presence was so near to him now that it seemed almost by his side. By a great effort he got on his feet, and stood at bay.

"I warn't aimin' to kill you-u," he said hoarsely. "I couldn't have hurt Norah. I loved her."

A cold, hard laugh rang in his ears. He felt a chill hand on his.

"Love don't act that away. Love don't hu-urt: hit he'ps."

Wash shrank back from touch and words.

"What are you?" he cried. "You're not Norah. She was warm,—and not like this."

"If you wanted Norah, what did you kill her for?"

"Kill *her!*"

The cry was bitter enough to shake the girl herself, though she had steeled herself against compassion. But she had come here for a purpose, and it should not fail of accomplishment. She waited a moment, and then Wash felt that cold touch again.

"Swar," she said. "Swar that you'll never touch Marshall Rutherford or Abner to du them hurt, and that if ary other should aim to hurt them, you'll defend them with your life. Swar hit, Wash."

"Why?"

"Because the girl you done shet in thar to die tells you."

Was it fear, or the thrill of those words that won? "The girl he had shet in thar to die." He promised,—swore as solemnly as she could desire, his breath coming in quick gasps as he spoke the words.

And then he waited for the next development, for the repetition of the touch or the voice. He waited in vain. He was alone in the cave.

It was long after those last words had been spoken when Wash gathered together his scattered senses and felt for the lantern. He lit it again, and looked about him. The cave was empty. The blood from his wound had trickled down upon his face and his clothing, and he trembled in every limb. Nevertheless he turned again to his task.

"I'm goin' through that thar rock," he said. "I'm goin' through, and I'm goin' to bury her."

He shuddered, and went wearily out from among the rocks to look for his shovel.

And while he worked and trembled, the girl whose dead body he was expecting to find behind that barrier was back in safety at the cottage. She was divesting herself of her outer clothing.

"He's done promised, mammy," she said. "He'll keep to hit. He's swore to hit, and he's scart to death."

There was no laughter in her eyes now. There had been when she started for the cave.

"Hit hain't payin', honey," said Mrs. Felps, when she had heard the story.

"No, mammy."

The girl stooped suddenly, and kissed the little woman's forehead. Then she went into the other room, and a pair of blue eyes brightened as she crossed it.

"Hit's better than powders to see you agin," said

Marshall Rutherford. "I came near having a backset when I found you'd given yourself over to the tender mercies of Big Creek Gap after dark."

There was an intonation of the voice that struck pleasantly on the girl's ear,—an intonation that yet lingered in the memory of Naomi Mozingo, and would by no means be put out of her life.

"Thar warn't no fear," replied Norah, a soft tinge of colour illuminating her face.

The eyes that did not seek that face with pleasure would have been strangely wanting in taste. Judging by his next words, which sounded irrelevant, but were prompted by a very logical sequence of ideas, Marshall Rutherford's taste was not open to criticism.

"I was in luck when you brought me here," he said, and the smile gave emphasis to the words.

CHAPTER XXIII

PERSECUTION of the Poteet family had reached the point at which reaction begins. There is a pendulum-like movement in strong public feeling, that in the case of any abnormal outward sweep causes it to swing back when the extreme point has been reached. That extreme point was reached when Marshall Lane Rutherford was — or was supposed to be — carried away by his enemies. For a time the more violent section exulted over the completeness of their victory. It is hardly necessary to record that Will Hollingsworth was at the head of the triumphant party. When Will heard of the night exploit, he clapped the newsmonger on the back.

"Well done for Big Creek Gap!" he said. "There's public spirit left there yet."

He went about the mill with the glow of exultation in his heart.

"*He's* counted aout," he mentally commented. "A feller who could stand tha-at, and come through alive, would be a wonder."

He felt now that Naomi was almost within his grasp. The girl had proved elusive since Dalbert's departure. The mill owner found himself relegated to the rank of the other residents of the boarding-house. The position pleased him ill. To all appearance, Naomi wished it to be understood that she regarded him rather in the light of her brother's friend than as peculiarly her own. At Dalbert's departure she had drawn back from the close intimacy she had formerly allowed him. He took the change quietly, but he resented it.

Naomi had installed an elderly woman in the kitchen, and the new arrangement gave her time to go abroad. She availed herself of the freedom, and Will saw little of her. He did not fail to attribute the change in her manner to her feelings respecting Marshall Rutherford. Hence his delight at Marshall's removal.

He was in no hurry to communicate the intelligence to Naomi. He rightly judged that its immediate effect would be an increase of coolness on the girl's part. He contented himself with more pointed attentions, that Naomi noticed and promptly snubbed. There had come into his bearing an air of proprietorship for which she was at a loss to account, but which she found decidedly irritating. His attentions had of late grown distasteful to her. The link of comradeship that had formerly drawn her and Will Hollingsworth together had snapped. She was not one with him in his steadily hostile pursuit of Marshall Rutherford. She did not deny — even to herself — that the warfare had been undertaken at her instigation. She had no *right* to blame Will for carrying out the principles she had herself inculcated, but she *did* blame him. Her mental attitude towards him had become antagonistic. She was ready to resent any undue aggression on his part. He partially understood, and he smiled and bided his time. She did not know all that he knew.

There came a day when she learned some of it. She had been to the village, and she came back with a bright spot burning on either cheek.

This should surely have been the moment of her triumph. She had long ago set herself to educate public opinion in Big Creek Gap to the point of driving out from the precincts of the village every representative of the household of Poteet. To-day she had learned that one representative had been violently thrust forth. The other was already very much of an outcast. There

should have been little more for her to desire. But the colour that burned on the girl's cheeks had not its source in satisfaction.

It was outside the house that she met Will Hollingsworth. He looked for her to pass him without a word, as she had done not seldom of late, but she stopped full in his path.

"I wish you all the joy you deserve of your last exploit," she said, looking him fairly in the face.

Will laughed.

"So that's the lay of the land, is it?" he commented to himself. Aloud he replied: "Oh, it's no doing of mine. A little personal matter on the part of Wash Forehand. Didn't enjoy seeing his girl fall a victim to Marshall's beguiling eyes."

He watched her closely, but she showed no sign that the words went home.

"Wash carried it aout; but who put Wash up to it?" she asked quietly.

Will laughed again.

"It shows you've got a plumb zealous servant, that's about all there is in it," he said lightly. "We set aout — you and I — to make this valley too hot to hold a Poteet, or ary relation of the Poteets. Well — it's getting warm for them now."

It was the first time he had put the connection between them into words, and definitely claimed her as the instigator of all his deeds. He saw the fire in her eyes before he had finished speaking.

"We-e set aout!" she said, slowly and scornfully. "I'm not aimin' to be classed with a coward."

Her lip curled, and her eyes were scorching in their scornful gaze.

"That's a trade-last not likely to be forgotten," he said, using the local term for compliment with a significance that was not lost upon her.

"When you see *me* getting together six strong fellers to help me oust one dying man, you may return it," she said. "Didn't it strike you there was a lit-tle disproportion between the attackers and the attacked? Big Creek Gap is shouting 'Glory!' over its achievement. When one of you, single-handed, vanquishes six, come to me for applause; but when six of you set on one, don't ask me to call your deed by any other name than it deserves."

She passed him and swept into the house. And for many days after he found no opportunity for word with her except when others were present.

In Big Creek Gap the pendulum had swung high, but already there was sign of a turn. There were men and women who remembered Marshall Rutherford's pleasant smile, and declared that "hit was a sha-ame to treat him that away." Their numbers were increased when the days passed, and no tidings of the sick man were forthcoming. Then there came a new development.

"Mammy," said Norah, coming in hastily one afternoon, "John Kisselbaugh's done got the small-pox. I heared his Sally tell abaout hit in the village. The doctor says thar hain't nary doubt."

Mrs. Felps looked up into her daughter's face.

"Lor naow! hain't hit a si-ight?" she said. "They-uns set aout to protect themselves; and thar hain't neither of we-uns got hit yit, and John's tuk. Lor me!"

"Hit serves John Kisselbaugh plumb ri-ight," declared many a voice in Big Creek, when it was known that the man who had tried to "protect himself agin Marshall" was stricken down with the disease. "He should 'a stayed at home, and left Marshall alone."

From the first the complaint took a strong hold of John's muscular frame.

"He hain't goin' to git better," said the old doctor bluntly.

John Kisselbaugh made no gentle patient. He had been fierce in health. When delirium seized him, those about him trembled. His wife and children watched him in fear, and everybody else refused to come near him. Oaths loud and blood-curdling poured from his lips. The air around the cabin was tainted with disease and laden with blasphemy.

It was when his wife had for two days and nights watched by his side that she lay down and slept the deep sleep of exhaustion. She did not hear his curses, nor know that with a single blow he felled the child who was in attendance upon him, and left her senseless on the floor. She did not know that he started in wild frenzy for the barn, nor hear the frantic jumping and plunging of the mules beneath the cruel torture of his big whip. It was not until he had fairly maddened them, and had brought them trembling and terrified out of the barn, that a little shrieking voice awoke the exhausted woman.

"Mammy, mammy, wake up! Pappy's killin' the mules!"

They were already in the wagon when the frightened woman sprang from her bed, and rushed out into the yard.

"John! John! What are you thinkin' abaout?" she remonstrated. "You'll ketch your death. Come back to bed."

He struck at her with his long whip. The blood followed the lash where it touched her face. The next stroke fell upon the mules. John was in the wagon.

"John!" cried the terrified woman again, forgetting her pain in her fear.

But he was gone, the mules racing and kicking as he plied the whip, and he himself standing in the front of the wagon. She ran a few steps after him, and then sat down on the ground and cried helplessly.

The sun had set, and darkness was creeping over the valley. One or two people on the valley road heard the mules go thundering by, and ran out as the crack of the whip sounded clear and vindictive.

"Hit's John Kisselbaugh! Lor! the man's crazy."

The mules were seen to turn up the road to the mill, but nobody saw them when they swerved aside and left the bed of the stream, maddened now beyond control. Nobody saw them gallop up the steep path above the mill, and nobody heard the succession of cruel cuts which put the animals past the exercise of that sagacity which on ordinary occasions would have led them to shun danger. There came a moment when the wagon swayed and swung upon the very edge of the precipitous hill, and another when the mules gave their last jump,— a jump to the bottom.

It was picked up the same night,— the shattered, disfigured body of the man who had let the brute force in him grow to its fullest stature. Beside him lay the dead mules. They would tremble no more at the sound of his footstep.

"Hit looks plumb like a judgment, don't hit?" said Big Creek Gap.

And John Kisselbaugh's fate helped to send the pendulum swinging back.

There were no more cases of small-pox. The disease appeared to have spent itself in that bold attack on the man who had been the most determined of them all to defend himself at the sacrifice of the life of another.

The death of John Kisselbaugh occurred more than a week after the day when Wash Forehand set himself to remove the rock masses he had taken such pains to bring down. When he staggered out of the cave in the early moments of the dawn that followed the evening on which Norah's accusing voice struck terror to his conscience, he looked round upon the world where the

light of a fresh day's hope was breaking, with wild, unaccustomed eyes. He felt as if he had been dead and buried. An eternity of misery had been compressed into the twenty-odd hours passed in the damp, chill gloom of the cave.

He had fought his way through the opposing rock, and come at last into the prison chamber beyond,— come into it and stood trembling, afraid to lift the lantern lest its light should fall on the dead face of the girl he loved. It seemed to him that it was hours before he summoned enough courage to approach the bed, over which he had bent in a frenzy of passion a few days ago. It was empty. He hardly knew why he was surprised. Norah would not lie there quietly to die. She would fight madly, desperately, against death, and against those great masses of rock,— fight as he had fought to get in to her. He should find her in some remote corner, whither she had rushed at last in her desperation. How close the atmosphere was, even with the passage partially open, allowing an inrush of freer air from the opening of the cave. It was a cruel death.

He no longer called upon the girl by name. Since that accusing presence had confronted him, he had not doubted that she was dead. He searched the chamber thoroughly. There was much water in it. Rain had fallen since he sealed up that prison. The stream was swollen. He was surprised to see that it had overflowed its usual channel, and filled the lower part of the chamber. It did not occur to him that it had been turned from its course. It was flowing down into the hole as freely now as if it had never known change. Its volume brought to him a new terror.

"She's done got drowned," he said. "She hain't here. She done wandered thar when the air got too bad to breathe, and tumbled in and got carried away. Thar warn't no light."

He searched the deep pools, and convinced himself that Norah's body was not in the cave. Then he returned to the side of the bed, and sat down upon it.

"I was a plumb fool," he groaned. "I couldn't never 'a done no good that away."

He sat long, staring into the darkness. Thoughts of a young life destroyed from off the earth wandered through his brain. Suddenly the memory of the girl's face, as he had seen it many a day, came to him with overpowering vividness. The pity and injustice of this unmerited death forced itself upon him for recognition. A yearning for the girl he had left here to die seized him irresistibly.

"Norah, Norah, I was a plumb fool! O Norah, my girl!"

Heavy sobs shook the bed. The passion that before had spent itself in fury took the form of grief. The young man writhed and trembled beneath it. He wondered in hopeless sorrow how he could ever have been so mad as to do that which had made this moment possible. When the paroxysm had spent itself he got up and staggered out into the dawning light. There was no light left in the world for him.

The wish to injure Marshall Rutherford had left him. Every thought was swallowed up in one burning desire that the past could be undone.

He did not expect to meet any of his neighbours. He had a vague purpose of reaching his own barn before the world was stirring, and of flinging himself down among the corn-stalks to rest. A deadly weariness had seized him. He staggered forward with that one object set before him. There was no hope in the future, no peace in the world for him; but there was a place to rest in, back in the mow above the heads of his mules. Just now that place of rest was the one suggestion of hope in the universe.

He did not know what a sorry object he made, even in this half-light. The blood from the wound on his forehead had trickled down his face, and caught and imprisoned there the particles of dust and rock that his violent exertions had set flying around him. When dry, the mixture gave a terrible appearance to a face that was wild with grief and despair, and haggard with weariness. It was no wonder that Abner Poteet stopped, and looked upon such an apparition in surprise. Wash was past noticing that Abner's face wore a look he had never seen there before.

"Wash Forehand, is hit misfortune or sin that's set hit's mark on you?" Abner asked solemnly.

"Sin," replied Wash, in a hard, expressionless tone.

They had met upon the valley road. Both turned across the grass land that led to the cottages under the mountain.

"Whar are *you* goin' at this time o' day?" asked Wash irritably.

It was an added burden to be forced to collect his senses and speak rationally.

Abner hesitated a moment.

"Thar's only one house this away whar I should be welcome," he said after that momentary pause.

The answer was not quite like Abner. Was there some subtle change at work within him to-day? Wash turned upon him.

"Goin' to he'p nurse Marshall Rutherford, or to see if thar's ary tidin's of Norah?" he asked, with an unsteady laugh.

Abner stopped short.

"Who told you ary word abaout Marshall?" he asked.

"*She* did."

"Norah?"

A loud laugh rang across the lowland.

"O lor! Norah!"

Again came the wild laugh. Wash had lost control of himself.

"Wash Forehand," said Ab, "you're either drunk or crazy."

"I'm crazy," was the reply,—"plumb crazy. Norah! My lor!"

"What's made you crazy? What ails you?" demanded Ab.

"Go and ask *her*,—Norah's mammy!"

Abner stopped short. He understood now.

"Have you seen her?"

"Yes.

"When?"

"I hain't sure," said Wash unsteadily. "Hit was in the mornin'."

"Whar have you been since?"

"In the cave."

Abner understood fully. Some strange peace must surely have been working within him, or he would not have been talking thus quietly with the man who had planned his cousin's death and almost accomplished that of Norah.

"Whar you tuk—Norah?" he said.

He was standing in front of the other. Wash put up his hands to push him aside.

"Git aout o' my way," he said. "I tell you I'm crazy."

"What did you go thar for?"

Abner had not stirred.

Suddenly Wash darted aside, and passed him. Then he turned his head.

"She's dead, Ab,—dead!" he cried. "No good hangin' round thar ary longer."

He hurried away, and Abner did not attempt to follow him. He stood quite still in the midst of the damp grass. Was he struggling with himself?

"Wash, go and see her agin, — Norah's mammy. Go and talk to *her*."

The words reached far. They fell on the ears of the young man who was stumbling despairingly homeward. He kept on desperately. The words were ringing in his brain. "Go and talk to her." What for? He wanted to get away. There was the barn and the hay-mow to be reached. But between him and that refuge had come the thought of Norah's mother. Reproach, denunciation, and possible arrest were in that direction. But she was Norah's mother. The face of the older woman was wonderfully like that of the girl. Now that the suggestion had entered his head, he was constrained to see that face again. "Go and talk to her." What about?

The two men were waiting together before the door when the sun's first rays dropped into the valley. Neither spoke; but Abner turned his face to the light, and Wash hid his from it. And standing thus, they waited till the household was astir.

"Mercy sakes!"

Mrs. Felps stood in the doorway and looked at her two visitors. In either face she found something unusual. Both men were looking down at her. There was a light in Abner's eyes that she had never seen there before. Had he wreaked his vengeance on Wash Forehand, and brought him here forcibly, to demonstrate his victory? Hardly, though Wash looked as if somebody had handled him roughly. The light in Abner's eyes had no passion in it.

"Thar's her mammy. You better talk to her. Sin's enough to drive ary man crazy if he shets hit up in his heart."

Abner passed the little woman as he spoke, and went into the house.

"I'm goin' to set with Marshall," he said.

Mrs. Felps was studying the face of the young man by the door. Slowly she read in it some of the story of those twenty hours spent in the cave.

"Wash Forehand, hit hain't payin'," she said at last.

"Payin'!" Wash looked at her wildly. "Lor! hit's payin' a right smart," he said, a harsh laugh again coming from his lips. "Hit pays with a grip on a man's heart and a stunnin' blow at his brain. Payin'! Mercy! hit's paid till I'm plumb crazy."

He staggered, and pulled himself up against the door-post.

Mrs. Felps looked at him fixedly.

"You warn't thinkin' o' that sort o' pay when you started aout, Wash," she said.

"Thinkin'!" he retorted. "I warn't thinkin' at all. I was broodin' over *his* hevin' all the chances with Norah. I was crazy then. I cain't tell what I am now. What are you standin' starin' at me as still as that for? I've killed her! Don't you hear? She hain't thar. I've done unblocked the cave, and she's gone. She's dead!"

"Come in and set daown," said Mrs. Felps peremptorily. "You're staggerin'."

"I hain't drunk," he said. "I'm crazy."

But he came in, and dropped on the nearest chair. Standing was becoming a difficulty,

"No, she *hain't* thar," said the little woman quietly. "You cain't du what you promised,— you cain't make the loss good to me. You cain't give me back my girl. You done barred your heart agin compassion, and that hard heart set all hit's hardness agin he-er,— my girl. Hit warn't her you was atter hurtin', but you was a murderer at heart, and hit was a judgment agin you that your hardness tuk effect on her. Hit hain't your fault I hain't broken-hearted to-day."

"What? Say hit agin!"

He had sprung up, and was standing before her.

She looked into that eager, working face, and her judicial severity softened.

"Wash Forehand," she said, "you might 'a been a murderer, you would 'a been if Ab hadn't" —

The sentence was not finished. The inner door opened, and a girl stood within the room. He turned, and saw her. His lips parted, but no word came from them.

"Wash Forehand," said Norah, more than half softened by the sorry spectacle before her, "I hain't dead; and you're only a murderer in your heart. You're a murderer *thar* right enough. But you've got to keep that vow you made, and keep hit the straightest way."

"I will," he said humbly. "Norah, I thought I'd killed you."

"No," replied the girl, "you shet me in, and come mighty nigh killin' me. You might 'a done hit, but you didn't. You hain't killed *me*, but thar's one thing you hev killed. You've done killed the good feelin' that was between you and me plumb dead. We was friends: we hain't goin' to be enemies. I hain't goin' to harbour no grudge agin you. I've seen the evil of grudges; and, if I hadn't,—you've got a powerful sight the worst of hit. But you've done killed the friendship, Wash. You go home, and go to sleep. You're plumb played out."

He did not think of resisting. He listened to her like one stupefied. Then he staggered to the door, stood with it in his hand while his eyes took one long hungry look at her face, and went out.

"Mammy," said Norah, "thar's something wrong with Ab."

"Wrong, honey?" was the answer. "I hain't sure. Thar's a change, but hit don't look wrong to me."

"Come and see," said the girl.

He was in Marshall's room, and he was talking earnestly. There was an urgent tone in his voice that was

not often heard there. Marshall's face wore a look of perplexity and distress.

"Let it rest, Ab," he said, as mother and daughter entered.

Abner turned to meet them. He took both the girl's hands in his, and looked into her eyes.

"Thar hain't no danger to you in hit naow," he said. "The visitin's plumb near hit's end."

"I never felt in much danger — from you," she replied, with a little, uncertain laugh.

She was conscious of a pair of blue eyes that were fixed upon them both, but she could not hurt Abner by withdrawing her hands.

"I came to tell you," he said,—"you and Marshall."

He let the hands go, and moved a step away. Standing there by the window, his rugged, sensitive face lit up by the morning light, he told it,— the strange thing that was accountable for the peace which possessed him.

"I couldn't wait longer 'n daylight to tell hit," he said; "and, beside, hit seems short,— the time that's left to me to talk to you and Norah. Two months hain't long."

His face had grown wistful as he turned it towards Mrs. Felps.

"Long for what?" she asked.

"To live the rest of my life," he said simply, "and to bear the rest of the visitin'."

"What do you mean, Ab Poteet?" questioned Mrs. Felps.

"Hit come to me last night," he replied. "Hit was past midnight, and I was asleep. I was dreamin' of Norah, when all at onct I heard the hoof-beats of a horse. They wasn't loud at fust, but they come nearer and nearer; and they got so loud they plumb filled my ears, so I couldn't hear nothin' else. They stopped

afore my door, and hit seemed to me I got up and opened hit. Thar was a rider thar on a white horse, a powerful handsome horse. But when I looked from the horse to him that rode on hit, I had nary thought for the animal agin. I hadn't no mind to ask him whar he come from. I knowed he didn't start from nowhars on this earth. 'I've got a proclamation to read to you, Abner Poteet,' he says; and his voice someways thrilled me through.

"I warn't afraid. I was listenin' breathless. Then he opened a paper he was carryin', and begun to read. Hit was solemn and grand. The sound of his voice made the words not like any others. I could 'a listened to that voice for ever. The words hev gone from me, but the sense of them hain't. They said that the visitin' of the sins of the fathers on the children had been a-goin' on upon me, and that that thar visitin' was almost completed. I seed the eyes of him that read look kindly at me when he spoke them words. 'Thar's one more stroke to fall yit,' he said; and he said hit sorrerfully.

"Then he went on to read, and afore he'd read fur I knowed that my time was come. 'Two months from to-night the soul of Abner Poteet is demanded of him,' he read. 'On that night the messenger will knock upon the door, and Abner Poteet is hereby called upon to answer the knock.'

"Then he folded up the paper, and looked daown at me. I warn't fearin' nothin'. His eyes were kind, as if they would encourage me. And with that look he turned away, and I heared the hoof-beats of his horse gittin' further and further away. I couldn't see either the horse or the rider. The darkness had swallered them up.

"It seemed to me I come back into the house. I was layin' in my bed when I opened my eyes. I didn't sleep

no more. I knowed my time was come, and as soon as the day begun to break I started to tell you. The visitin's nearly finished."

A smile of peace was on his face. The "visiting" had been very real to him.

During all the recital no one had interrupted him. So firm a hold had dream warnings upon the Southern imagination that not one of Abner's hearers questioned the finality of the verdict.

"You hain't afraid, Abner?" questioned Mrs. Felps. The little woman's voice was awed.

"No, I hain't afraid," said Abner. "If so be *his* sins hain't restin' on me, I'm hopin' thar's better things ahead. I hain't afraid, and I'm glad I knowed. Two months hain't long, and thar's a right smart o' things to be done."

He was looking at Norah. The girl caught the glance, and came over impulsively to his side.

"I hain't wantin' to part with you, Ab," she said, laying a small, soft hand on his.

The big, strong fingers closed over it. There was a sob in Abner's throat.

"And I hain't wantin' to leave you-u," he said. "But hit's better so. Thar won't be no more shadder of danger that the curse should touch you then. Hit's done been visited on me."

And while he stayed in the cottage, talking calmly of the future when he should not be there, the look of peace never left his face.

Both Norah and her mother had forgotten Wash Forehand. The tidings Ab had brought were too solemn to leave room for passion or revenge. They did not, at the time, even exult over the young man's very just punishment, or smile at the remembrance of his defeat. Not so the world. When it was known in the community — and it was not known in a hurry — that

six men had taken infinite pains to remove a girl whom they had no desire to kidnap, Big Creek laughed; and the laugh was not against Norah Felps. The pendulum was swinging back fast.

CHAPTER XXIV

"WHAR'S Dal?"

The speaker stood upon the steps of the boarding-house, and addressed his question towards the interior, presumably with the intent that it should reach the ears of Naomi, who was passing across the passage.

She turned to look at the lank, half-grown boy who held himself with one foot on the top step and the other two degrees lower, in a position favourable to sudden withdrawal.

"Why, Lem!"

She came swiftly to the door.

"Where did you come from?"

"Cedar Fork," replied the boy, with a grin.

"You did? Afoot?"

"I reckon."

She laughed.

"Thought you'd come visiting, eh?"

"Visitin'!" said the boy contemptuously. "I hain't tramped from thar to this place for note."

"You've done left your mammy?" asked Naomi.

"She's married another feller. I hain't wantin' a new pappy."

The sturdy disapproval in the boy's eyes brought the light of a laugh to those of the girl. Her mouth was grave, however.

"What are you aimin' to do?" she asked.

"Work. I'm a year older 'n I was when *he* went away. I'm aimin' to see *him*, and git work at the mill."

"He don't run the mill now," said Naomi.

The boy looked at her incredulously. Evidently he did not entirely believe the statement.

"Hain't that thar mill hisn?" he asked.

"No."

"Don't he work thar?"

"No."

"What are *you* doin' here then?"

The question was of the nature of a thunder-clap. Naomi had to recover her breath before she answered it. The answer, when it came, was only a low, musical laugh.

"Whar is Dal?" demanded the boy.

"Upon the Ridges, trying his hand at farming."

"Be them the Ridges?"

He pointed to the hills that rose within the broad sweep enclosed by the high mountain ranges.

"Yes."

"Which away is hit you've got to go to come to his farm?"

The girl laughed again.

"You are in a hurry," she said. "Come in and have your dinner. The men have just gone."

He knew that. He had watched them go, timing his appearance to their disappearance.

"No," he replied emphatically, "I'm goin' to find Dal. I hain't hungry."

Which was not literally true. A growing boy must needs be hungry when he has eaten nothing since the night before, and noon is already past.

Lem *was* hungry, but not half as hungry as the young man to whom he was going to be fed. Dal's hunger was three days old already. It happened on this wise.

Dalbert had been down into the valley to the village store, and had heard there the latest news. Now it

chanced that the latest news included the story of the night raid upon the house of Mrs. Felps, and the complete disappearance of Marshall Lane Rutherford. It did not include the clearing up of the mystery, which came a day or so after Dalbert's visit, and which sent a hearty, healthy laugh running back and forth through Big Creek Gap. To Dalbert the story was an indictment of his sister. Who but Naomi had given rise to the ill-feeling that had culminated in such a night's work? If Marshall were dead, who but Naomi was to blame?

Dalbert's purchases were never made. He left the store in a hurry, and rode straight back to the farm. His brain was in a whirl. Indignation and sorrow kept up a continued strain of comment upon the news he had heard. Could the originator of all this cruelty be Naomi, the girl who had risked her life to spare him danger? How could her heart have thus hardened, and against one whom she had known well,— nay, if he had not read her feelings wrongly, one who had not failed to lay successful siege to that heart itself?

Dal ate his dinner without knowing what he ate. He did not even remember that, when it was finished, there was hardly another mouthful of food in the house. It had been long since he had left his farm to go down to the village shop, and his store needed replenishing. He had gone to-day for the purpose. He came back as he went, except for a full heart and a harassed brain.

Brain and heart were in no more tranquil condition when he harnessed his mules and went out to plough a steep hillside at a distance from the house. It was a wonder how the mules scrambled up and down that slope. It was almost to be feared that if the corn came up in such ground it would one day take a sliding trip from the top to the bottom of the field. It needed a steady hand to guide the mules and the plough, and

Dalbert's hand was not steady. It was too much in sympathy with his heart.

It was not the fault of the mules, but rather of an impatient jerk at exactly the wrong moment, that they turned sharply on a knob of land, the steepest in the field, and that one of them in turning caught his foot against a piece of rock and came heavily down. It was not the fault of the mule that Dalbert was not quick enough to get out of the way. The mule was not the principal sufferer. The animal was soon on its feet again, turning its head to discover why its two-legged companion did not follow its example. He would have done so if the two legs had been in their normal condition; but with one of them lying broken under him, getting up was a matter that required some consideration.

The mules stood until they were tired of the exertion of holding themselves on the steep hill. Then they essayed to go down, but a peremptory voice restrained them. Dal was thinking out the situation.

There was not a house besides his own within a mile and a half of where he lay. It required some courage to drag himself on to the back of one of the mules and ride home, but there was nothing to be gained by delay. Once in his own cabin, he could wait until some one came that way.

How long it took him to accomplish his end Dal could not have told. It seemed to him that he slipped back a dozen times before the uninjured leg was thrown across the back of the quietest mule. For the time even Naomi was forgotten. The getting back to the house before his strength failed him was a vital question. It engrossed all his thoughts. But when he was before the door, he turned the heads of the mules away.

"There's no telling how soon ary person will come this way," he said. "The poor brutes shan't take the risk of suffering."

He guided them towards a grass field, near by the one in which his horse was already feeding, opened the gate at the cost of some additional pain, and then slid from the mule's back to the ground. He even succeeded in relieving the animals of their harness, and shutting them into the field. Then he crawled to the house, and for a time gave up the fight with pain.

All that was three days ago, and the first passer-by had not yet appeared. It was no wonder Dal was hungry, or that half the time, between weakness and pain, his brain wandered. The footsteps of Lem would be welcome when they came.

"What's she doin' thar?' questioned the boy, as he turned his back on Naomi. "How's he to go to farmin' alone? Hit hain't right."

By which decision Lem gave evidence that his sympathies were entirely with his hero, notwithstanding Naomi's friendliness towards himself, and her successful intervention in Dal's behalf in times past.

"Hit's a powerful long way, and I shall be awful proud when I git thar."

Lem's hunger was increasing. So was his weariness. At the last house he passed he had learned that Dal was "at home, likely, for he hadn't been daown the mountain for a right smart sight."

"If them fields are hisn, he's powerful behind with some of the ploughin'," commented the boy.

He quickened his steps when the cabin came in sight, and the weariness disappeared from his gait. "He warn't aimin' to let Dal see him all played aout."

Dal was past seeing anything, except that help was near. He lay near the window, half dozing, half unconscious; but the sound of footsteps aroused him. He raised himself on his elbow, and looked out. Was his brain wandering again, or was he back in Cedar Fork valley? The boy's face was familiar, but it had no connection with Big Creek Gap.

"Lem?"

The name came doubtfully. Dalbert was more than half inclined to believe that the apparent arrival was a delusion.

"Oh, lor! Why, thar's somethin' wrong!"

Lem did not go to the window to satisfy curiosity. He bounded in at the broken gate, and sent the house door back with a bang. Then he was standing beside Dalbert.

"Lor! I thought she was a-duin' a pretty thing a-stayin' thar and leavin' you to lueke aout for yourself," he said.

"Where did you come from?" asked Dal.

"Cedar Fork. Say, Dal, what's up? You got to be attended to right away."

"I reckon you're right, boy," said Dal, with a smile that trembled a little on his lips. "A broken leg wants seeing to in less than three days."

"Shucks! You hain't been layin' thar for three days, and nobody come near?" exclaimed Lem.

"Looks like it," said Dal.

"I'm goin' clar back to fetch her. She hain't knowin', or she wouldn't be stoppin' thar gittin' other men's grub, and leavin' you this away."

Lem had already started for the door.

"Lem!"

The tone was peremptory. The boy stopped.

"Where are you goin'?" asked Dal.

"To fetch *her*, of course."

"Who?"

"Why, Naomi."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," replied the young man. "I won't have her told. You come back here."

Lem's eyes opened wide. Were the skies about to fall? "Naomi Mozingo and Dal not hittin' hit?" Lem failed to understand things.

"You hain't goin' to tell her?" he asked.

"Certainly not," said Dal. "Lem, you go down to the nearest house,— you passed it a smart piece below,— and ask them to give you anything in the shape of victuals that they've got handy. Tell them it's three days since I've had any, to speak of."

"My lor!"

The boy was at the door again.

"And Lem! You can help yourself out of what they give you. I guess you're hungry too."

"Oh, I hain't hungry," said the boy, for the second time that day; and for the second time it would have been impossible to accuse him of speaking absolute truth.

"Lor, hit's a si-ight!" commented Lem, as the dust flew from under his feet. "Him a-layin' thar, and her cue-kin for other fellers!"

Lem was in the dark. All the way back up the hill, as he shouldered the bag into which sundry provisions had been hastily thrust, he was pondering the situation; and when he reached the cabin, he was still at a loss to understand it.

"Thar's a poke full," he said, bringing his bag down with a thud. "Now you'd better eat."

He tended his patient carefully; but when Dal was satisfied, and the weary look of pain returned to his eyes, the boy regarded him wistfully for a minute.

"Whar does the doctor live?" he asked. "I'm goin' atter him."

"Take Charley. He's running in the field. Ride till you get clear to the bottom of the hill. Anybody will tell you which way to turn after that," said Dal dreamily.

"All right," replied the boy. "You go to sleep. I'll bring him along."

His weary legs once astride Charley's back, Lem looked the world hopefully in the face again. He rode a few yards past the house, and looked down.

"I reckon this away's the quickest to the bottom," he said, and went down the side of the hill farthest from Big Creek Gap. Thus it happened that the doctor who set the broken limb was not the representative of medical science in Big Creek, and thus it also happened that a considerable time elapsed before Naomi heard of her brother's accident.

Lem assisted in the setting of the bone, and established himself as head nurse.

"I've come to lue-uke atter him," he said; and though his own face was pinched with weariness, Dalbert had a careful attendant that night.

"Thar's got to be some luekin' inter things done," decided Lem.

And Lem was the boy to do it. Before Dal was on his feet again, Lem knew all about Big Creek Gap, past and present. He had been down to inspect the old house in the hollow, and made a dive into the "bone cave." He knew the story that pertained to Marshall Rutherford and Nora Felps, and had made the acquaintance of both the principals in that adventure. It was he who set Dalbert's mind at rest about Marshall's safety, and told the story of the abduction with inimitable humour.

"Him and Norah's making up to each other," he announced later. "Lor! they'll be a powerful pretty pair. That gal's worth somethin'."

Dalbert's fields were not neglected. His nearest neighbour put in the remainder of the corn, and Lem worked like a young enthusiast in the cause. How he found time for excursions to the village, none but Lem could have told.

Dal was already recovering when Naomi stopped the boy to ask about him. His farm was miles away from the mill, and she had but lately heard of his accident.

"He's a-comin' on all ri-ight," said the boy loftily.

"You hain't no more cause to bother yourself abaout him naow than you had when he hadn't nobody to lueke atter him. Go and feed the fellers you're cuekin' and duin' for. He hain't layin' three days without ary thing to eat naow."

And Lem passed on haughtily.

Those were glorious days to Lem. He was not only useful, but essential, to his hero. He removed all uneasiness from Dalbert's mind with respect to the safety of the machinery left in the mill at Cedar Fork, and told him the news of the valley.

"Lor! they-uns has found hit hain't all gain to turn agin the man that's he'pin' put money in they-uns' pockets," he said. "They're a-growlin' naow 'cause times is hard and thar hain't no money in the valley. Lor! thar hain't like to be."

There were some things that Lem did not find out. He never learned of the dissatisfaction in Will Hollingsworth's mind, nor of his growing eagerness to win the girl who seemed to get further from him as the days passed. And he knew nothing of the bitterness in that girl's heart, or of the pain that had found a lodgment there.

Since she heard of Wash Forehand's exploit, Naomi had seen herself with Marshall Rutherford's eyes. She tried to talk to herself to justice, and of the wrong of letting a murderer go unpunished; but the attempt was a pitiful failure. She failed to convince herself that one murder was not as bad as another; and that Marshall Rutherford was alive to-day was surely not her fault. The words of Mrs. Felps would not be driven from her memory. It was she who had set the stone rolling. And that stone had struck — what? Naomi's proud head drooped as she acknowledged that it had struck her own heart.

CHAPTER XXV

"GIN two more days hev gone, the curse 'll be ended."

The heavy, rugged face had a solemn look in it. There *is* a certain solemnity in walking quietly up to the end of life and facing it squarely. Two months had almost passed since a certain dream had brought a look of peace to Abner Poteet's face. The peace had never left it.

"Hit'll be two months to-morrer, Norah," he continued.

His hand was on the girl's arm. He was looking wistfully into her face.

"I hain't forgittin'," she said, meeting his gaze with eyes that were sorrowful; "but I hain't willin' to believe hit. Thar may be a mistake."

"Thar hain't," he said confidently. "I hain't wantin' thar should be. Norah, that thar readin' said hit was the last stroke. I'm waitin' for hit. Hit'll *come*."

There was a sob in the girl's throat.

"Hit'll come," he continued. "Hit'll come plumb on me. Hit's whar hit oughter come. I was scart hit should reach further 'n me. I warn't knowin' how many sins thar was. I was fearin' the visitin' warn't over, and some of hit might fall on Marshall—and you. Hit hain't a-goin' to."

A note of triumph was recognisable in his voice.

"Hit warn't your fault, Ab. They warn't your sins," said the girl.

"Thar's enough of my own," he said sorrowfully.

"But hisn was worse. I hain't knowin' all thar was in 'em. I was fearin' they'd go inter the other world. They're comin' to an end. Thar 'll soon be a finish to the visitin' now."

The spell of the supernatural was on the girl as well as on Abner. She could not shake it off. She looked at the face above her with eyes that were full of tears. Shining through the mist of their own compassion, they had a drawing power stronger than ever for the big, tender hearted man looking down into them.

"Norah," he said gently, "thar 'll be a-plenty for you. I've settled hit all, and had everything drawn up accordin' to law. Thar couldn't never be no curse on the farm. Hit warn't hisn: hit was my mammy's. That's yourn now, Norah. And thar's the money I've saved aout o' my own makin's. Thar's a right smart of hit. Hit's all yourn atter enough's took aout of hit to put me away decent."

"I hain't wantin' the money, Ab," she said.

He smiled tenderly.

"Norah," he said, the words coming in slow, softly spoken sentences, "I useter think I'd maybe some day have courage to ask you to take hit. I useter think of you settin' afore the fire thar. The house warn't as good as yourn, but I could 'a fixed hit up. We'd 'a bought new things and made hit pretty. But thar was the curse that was restin' on me. And hit was to the third and fourth generation. Hit would 'a touched you. I warn't aimin' to let hit du tha-at."

He was looking into her eyes. She did not turn them away.

"Hit warn't safe," he said sorrowfully. "But the sins hev done been visited now. Thar hain't none left to fall on Marshall and you."

She heard the break in his voice. Even now it was not easy for him to give her up to his cousin, though

upon the first intimation of his own death he had been impatient to have Marshall's relation to the girl settled.

"Ab, I hain't believin' that dream; and I *won't!*"

The words burst from the girl's lips with the force of passion rather than of conviction. She *did* believe it—they all believed it. How could they help it, when the firm persuasion of its truth was in every line of Abner's face?

He smiled upon her.

"Hit'll come," he said. "But hit'll be the end. Thar won't be no more curse on the money then, and thar won't be no more danger in usin' hit. Hit's hisn, all of hit—and you're hisn—only *he'll* give hit to ye instead 'o me."

The last words came regretfully. He turned his head away, but only for a moment. He could not afford to lose the sight of the girl's face. He realised that it was a joy that was almost ended.

"We don't want the money," she said petulantly. "We'd rather have you."

He looked at her wistfully for a moment, then bent his head and kissed her forehead. It was the first time, and the colour dyed his face as if it had been a girl's.

It was on the following day that Naomi Mozingo met Norah in the valley road. She was struck by the delicate beauty of the girl's face. It had acquired a new charm of late. Naomi did not need to ask herself whence came the happiness that had put its imprint there. Her own heart clamoured to her the secret. To-day, however, there was a subtle change. The brilliancy of the beauty was shadowed. The eyes that looked up at Naomi's approach had lost their flash. They were not the less attractive for the change. The girl was, if anything, more beautiful, now that sorrow and awe mingled with the happiness that tempered pain. Norah, like Abner, was waiting for "the last stroke."

The greeting that passed between the two girls was scant. Naomi went on her way with an added weariness in her heart. And because her heart was weary, her steps were tireless. They carried her through the Gap, past the great castle-like rocks that could have told wild stories of occupation by Union and Confederate bands, and out into a picturesque hollow of the hills, sweeping back again behind the mountains that opened to form the gateway of the valley. Green and cool and inviting was that shut-in hollow of but a few acres all told. Naomi had not noticed it before, when she rode past it on Duke's back. Now curiosity turned her feet into the cleft among the hills, that looked so thoroughly out of the world that the girl felt a thrill of expectancy as she passed into the shadow and trod the soft grass. Across the open grass land her eye chanced upon a lightly marked foot-path.

"The feet that come this way are not many," mused the girl, as she turned into the barely suggested track.

Not until she had followed it for the full length of the little valley, and begun climbing a hill right ahead, did a mist of blue smoke explain the existence of the path. Naomi was curious. Who lived in this out-of-the-way nook, and why was the foot-path so dimly defined?

She came upon the brow of the hill, and looked down. Right below her the smoke came lazily from a low chimney, raised barely a foot above the roof of the cabin. Naomi could have jumped down clear on that roof if she had chosen, so precipitous was the rock upon which she stood. It was not necessary to jump, however, for the path led round the rock, and down by a circuitous but less break-neck route.

Did no premonition of danger warn the girl to stay her footsteps before she trod that circuitous path? Surely not. There was a thrill of excitement in her nerves, a feeling of being on the eve of a discovery. It

stimulated her, and for the moment made it possible to forget. She stood watching the smoke curl from the chimney, almost reluctant to take her eyes from the strangely hidden dwelling, and then set a light foot on the downward path.

Once started, her progress was necessarily rapid. She drew up, breathless, in a tangle of weeds and low bushes. The house was directly before her,—a little low hut with a pile of bark and roots and sticks beside the door.

"What a wonderful wood-pile!" said the girl, and went nearer to examine it.

Every conceivable thing that would burn was included in that heap. Broken chair-backs, spokes from wheels, old wooden stirrups, cracked gourds, bark, branches, twigs, weeds,—all had a place in the pile. It reached high above the girl's head as she stood by its side. She looked at it with amazement, and something like awe. Who had built it up, twig upon twig and weed upon weed?

Curiosity prompted her to examine further, and again that thrill of expectancy ran through her as she came to the door. It was shut; and she knocked gently, glancing at the same time at the rickety old shutter that closed the opening which should serve as a window. Though it was carefully shut, it hung so nearly off its hinges that Naomi had no difficulty in pushing it partly away.

"There's somebody inside," she said, after that peep into the mysterious cabin.

There had come no answer to her first knock; but she rapped again, and tried the door. It refused to yield to her touch.

And then a strange impulse seized her. She went back to the shutter, and once more pulled it partly away. After one long look she let it fall into position again,

and walked quickly to the rear of the house. She had seen light inside that room. Its presence betokened a window somewhere.

Who lived in this house? Did nobody ever walk round it? The weeds were knee-deep about it, as if they had been untrodden for years; and yet Naomi could have sworn that she had seen within the room a face lying upon a pillow somewhere where the light shone full upon it.

There had been no answer to her second knock, though she had distinctly heard a movement inside. Why should the door be kept locked so carefully in this lonely dwelling among the mountains?

A strong desire to enter the house possessed the girl. She went right round the building, looking for that window which had thrown light upon the face she had seen. There was no such window to be found. Except in front, neither door nor opening of any kind was in evidence. All who entered must enter by the door that was now securely locked, and all light must, so far as she could see, come in by that door also, or by the hole left open when the shutter was swung back. And yet she had distinctly seen a face upon which the light fell, and the face had sent through her nerves a thrill for which she could not account. She had not seen it plainly enough to understand the cause of that thrill, but she experienced an irresistible desire to see it again.

She went back to the door. It was still securely fastened. She turned from it to the shutter. One sharp wrench, and that dilapidated covering would fall from its hinges. The girl drew a quick breath. Had she courage for that wrench? She could make good the damage; but where was the excuse? And how about the temper of the owner? That was an unknown quantity. Naomi told herself she was foolish to wish to investigate this mystery among the mountains. What was it to her who lived in the house?

Nevertheless a moment later she drew herself up, set her feet firmly upon the weeds, and stood with the shutter in her hand and the opening fully disclosed. The deed was done, and the consequences to be met. But just now there was no thought of consequences in the girl's mind. There was no thought of the dwelling into which she was looking. All consciousness was concentrated upon the face that lay upon the pillow, with the light shining full upon it. She did not even see that the light fell from above, and that the window for which she had been looking was to be sought for in the roof. She had eyes for nothing but that face; and as she looked upon it, her hold upon the shutter relaxed, her hands went out towards it, and her lips quivered with excitement and love as they uttered the one word, "Father!"

She was so completely engrossed that her ears failed to warn her of footsteps that approached. Perhaps the ears were not altogether to blame, for they would have needed extraordinary keenness to detect the tread, stealthy as that of a panther, with which the coming figure drew near. If the girl had surprised that savage beast in its lair, it would hardly have met her with eyes that had in them a more dangerous gleam than those that glowered at the girl from beneath bushy, white eyebrows. With a long, noiseless stride the figure reached the opposite side of the wood-pile, and leant forward till the woman's breath might surely have been felt on the girl's cheek.

If strength of will and vigour of animosity could kill, Naomi would at that moment have been in imminent danger. But what will-power could not do, another force was set to accomplish. The woman drew back into the shelter of the wood-pile. Then the strong old arm went out, and selected from that pile a weapon. None but China Partins knew that that bit of wood was iron-bound. China had picked it up in the precincts of

the blacksmith's shop ten years before. She knew which piece to select. And she knew how to draw it from beneath the pile without disturbing the heterogeneous mass that rested upon it. The eyes gleamed again as the hand swung that long-preserved weapon round and up.

"I'm coming, father!"

Naomi's head was within the opening. Her hands were raising her for the effort to climb into the little window at the very moment when the blow descended. Had it been otherwise, the mystery of the cottage upon the mountains might have remained a mystery still. The shutter, hanging by its fastening, took the force of the blow, though the edge of the weapon glanced off to the girl's shoulder, and left a mark that was not effaced for many a day.

After all, it was not altogether that movement on Naomi's part that prevented a tragedy. The old woman had already sprung forward with arm uplifted, ready to strike again. It was a sound, half call, half moan, from within the cabin, that stopped that muscular arm. It brought a change, sudden and bewildering, into the face and attitude of the woman. Almost before Naomi had time to turn, with the cry that sudden blow had forced from her yet on her lips, the woman had sprung aside, and flung open the door.

The next moment the girl started back. Between her and the face upon which her eyes had been yearningly fixed stood a form not to be forgotten when once seen. It was tall, in spite of the bent shoulders, and commanding notwithstanding its unmistakable marks of age. It was not the figure, however, but the eyes — deep-set, gleaming, overshadowed by a mass of white bushy brows — that drew the girl's fascinated gaze. They burned like coals of fire,— burned as if they would consume the intruder. Yet, gazing into them,

Naomi felt no fear. There was room in her consciousness for nothing but the knowledge that her father was here, and that this woman stood between her and him.

The pain of the blow was forgotten, the cause of it not even understood. The girl looked into the old face keenly. What a face it was, with the experiences of a hundred years written upon it,— no, rather carved deeply into it! The wrinkles were not furrows merely: they were gullies hollowed out of the parchment-covered surface. Naomi had seen that face before, on the other side of her own window. Looking at it now, in the surroundings to which it evidently belonged, she read a different story in it. What was the relationship between her father and this old woman? How came he here, so evidently helpless?

She had barely time to ask herself the questions. For a moment the figure had turned from her, to bend over the pillow and speak low, crooning words as if to a child. Then the woman swept round and faced the girl again.

Was it charm — incantation — malediction,— that low hissing murmur with which she met the wondering gaze of the young eyes?

"What is the matter with him? He is my father!"

Naomi's voice was clear, and ringing with excitement. Her hands were trembling. That still face upon the pillow appalled her. It was her father's, but it made no movement in response to her call. It lay as it had lain when she wrenched off the shutter,— a face perfect in comeliness, hardly perceptibly older than when she looked into it and bade him good-by as he rode away from the mountain farm, but immovable as it had never been for her before. It had in it the life and strength of a man, combined with the stillness of death. It sent a chill though her veins and a sense of awe to her heart.

"Hush, gal! Git aout o' that winder!"

The brown, wrinkled hand pushed her back. She yielded, but it was only to appear at the door.

"Git aout o' thar! You'll fright him!"

But Naomi had darted past her, and was on her knees by the narrow bed.

"Father! Don't you know me? It's Naomi!"

The eyes were turned upon her,—those deep, dark eyes, so like her own. Was there a look of recognition in them, or was it the same fixed gaze that had been there from the first?

"Does he know?" she asked appealingly.

The woman looked down at her.

"No, he don't," she said savagely.

But even as she spoke there was that same sound, half moan, half cry, that had brought her to his side before. She pushed roughly against the girl.

"Git up!" she said. "You're disturbin' him."

Naomi did not move.

"Git up, gal! Don't you know hit's more than your life's worth to come here this away?"

The words were hissed into Naomi's ear.

"No," she replied in a voice that she tried in vain to steady. "What are you doing with him? He's my father."

The woman laughed,—a low, mocking laugh.

"Your father! Don't I know tha-at? Hain't I knowed hit since the day you rode through the Gap? Hain't I laid wait for ye? Gal, you come here at your peril!"

The vindictiveness throbbed through every word. If the thrill of the voice spoke truth, the woman would have liked to make those skinny fingers meet around the girl's throat. Yet there was a strange repression, a holding the passion within bounds, that Naomi would have found it hard to account for if she had been in

a mood for reasoning. Just now, however, even the passion was wasted upon her.

"Why should there be danger?" she asked wonderingly. "We have looked for him so long. I thought he was dead."

Again there came that low, mocking laugh.

"Yes — you thought Ken Poteet killed him — more fool you!"

Why did the words send the colour in one wild sweep across the girl's face, and then leave it white as death? She knelt as if stunned. Kennedy Poteet! She had called him her father's murderer!

If the hands with the long, claw-shaped nails *had* gripped her throat, they could hardly have stilled the beating of her heart more effectually than those words had done. Just how long it was before it began throbbing again, with a leap like a wild thing rebelling against fate, she did not know.

She had not been thinking, but through her brain in the interval had passed the sweep of a year. With the leap of her heart into action again, she put the vision from her. It could be met later. She looked up, and saw those angry eyes glaring at her; and a sudden impulse of defiance seized her.

"Why do you look at me so?" she cried. "I have never injured you. Tell me what you have done to my father. What is the matter with him?"

"Tell you what I've done to him?" The eyes fairly blazed. "Gal, I cain't! Whar should I begin? I've fought for him like a wild-cat, and tended him like a babe, and loved him like a mother, and hidden him like a treasure, and trembled like a fool for fear of losin' him,— lor! gal, what's the use tellin' *you-u?* You don't understand, and never would."

Her voice had risen with excitement. Her attitude was threatening. But once more into the midst of her

rising fury broke that inarticulate sound from the bed. Then it became evident why the old woman had restrained her passion. That cry had power to still the storm. Her voice dropped to a whisper, and the fury died out of it.

"Hush! He's listenin'."

"Then he *does* know?"

The old woman grunted. The sound might mean either assent or denial.

Naomi rose, and bent over the bed.

"Father, do you know me?" she asked. "If you do, make some sign. Oh, father dear, we've wanted you so!"

There was no response. The tears gathered in the girl's eyes, and one dropped warm on the still face. Did he know her? Naomi could not tell.

But when she turned away from the bed there came a startling change. The right arm of the man was lifted, and brought down upon a chair by his side. Naomi knew now from whence had come the sound that told her the house was inhabited.

"He can move!" she said breathlessly.

"Yes, with that arm. Thar hain't another bit o' stir in his body."

The woman spoke sullenly, but the passion was gone.

Again that right arm moved — impatiently.

"Git daown on yer knees agin — he wants ye!"

"Does he know?" asked the girl again, bending until her face almost touched his.

"Yes."

"Father! Dear father," she said softly.

Her hand touched his cheek. A sob forced its way through her lips. It was long before there was any movement in the room.

"Git up!" said the old woman at last; and there was a new tone in her voice. "You're safe. Thar hain't

nary person been in this house inside o' fifteen year. Thar hain't nary one would have gone aout alive if they had. *You* can go — and come."

"Why?" asked the girl.

"Because *he* wants you."

Naomi looked into the old face inquiringly.

"You love him," she said; and the words were not a question.

"Love him!" The fierceness had come back into the old eyes. They burned like a flame as the woman spoke. "What do *you* know abaout love? You say he's your father. What o' that? Have *you* watched him day and night for fifteen years? Have *you* learned to know what he wants by sounds that wouldn't mean nothin' to other people? Did *you* slide like a snake behind him that was aimin' to put a shot through him, and turn the death-dealer into a corpse? Did *you* lift the rocks that pinned him daown, and carry his crushed body away in your arms? Did *you* fight death while he lay like a log for weeks, neither movin' nor livin', but jist not dead? Did *you* stand thar plumb between him and dyin' till Death sneaked off worsted, and he begun to live? Did *you* teach him and yourself to understand, till you knew what he meant near as plain as if he could speak? Your *father!* Lor! he's child and home and life to me. Love him!"

They stood looking at each other for a long minute. Then the girl came up to the woman, close enough to touch her arm.

"Did you do that?" she asked, and she made no attempt to hide the tears that were in her eyes.

There was no answer. The fierce face before her was working strangely.

"What did you do it for? It was not his money."

"His money!"

Into the eyes there leapt the fire of overmastering

rage. There had been passion before, wild, ungovernable: this was of another nature, the fury of outraged love.

"Gal, if hit warn't for him, you'd 'a come to your last breath," said the low, hoarse voice. "Du for *him* for money! Git away, gal! Git nearer to *hi-im.* I hain't safe!"

Naomi did not move. Her eyes were looking into those burning depths before her.

"You don't understand," she said. "I *know* it was not his money. But what *was* it? He was nothing to you, then — when you began to help him. I'm not afraid of you," she added slowly. "You love him better than I do. But we both love him, and we could not hurt each other. Why did you do it — before you knew and loved him?"

The woman stood with hands clenched and face working. She was struggling with herself. Suddenly the fingers unclasped, and the hands fell.

"Thar was pain in his eyes," she said. "I couldn't pass hit by. I cain't now."

The tears that had been swimming in the girl's eyes — so like his — were falling freely.

"Tell me," she said; and she dropped on her knees by the bed, and laid her hand against her father's cheek."

"Hit was six weeks atter he come through with his mules," said the woman in a low, strained tone. "I seed him when he fust come here. I seed him agin the day the soldiers sot on him, and forced him to go with 'em."

"The soldiers? Which?" asked Naomi.

"The Southerners," replied the woman irritably. "Thar warn't no Union ones at Big Creek then. They come on him behind the Gap. He tried to git away, but they was too many for him. Thar was jist six weeks between then and the day I seed him agin."

She stopped.

"Where?" whispered Naomi.

"In the Gap, right under them biggest cliffts. He was crawlin' among the rocks — slippin' * — with the soldiers huntin' for him above."

She moved her brown, skinny fingers expressively. Movement and words brought the scene before the girl. She saw her father creeping through that wild pass, darting from rock to rock, hiding from the soldiers above,— risking his life to get back to the boy and girl waiting for him in the far away farm-house.

"Yes," she said softly.

"They'd done missed him, and was a-searchin'," continued the woman. "I was daown in the brush t' other side o' Big Creek. I warn't aimin' to let 'em see me. He was jist opposite whar I was, when he sot his foot on a rock that was tol'rable slick. Hit sent him slidin' aout clar inter the open. I knowed he was done for. Lor! them soldiers went for him like a streak! The bullets jist drapped raound him. He run, and then drapped. I knowed he warn't shammin'. He was hit. But he up and crawled away a bit later. They thought he was dead, and was goin' on. They'd 'a left him, but thar was one brute of a feller stopped to look over and make sure. He had to lay plumb daown to see whar he'd crawled to. Lor! I'd 'a give my eyes to 'a been behind him jist then. He seed him move. Lor me! my heart jumped clar inter my mouth when he tuk a rock and drapped hit daown, plumb atop o' *him*."

She stopped. Naomi's breath seemed to have stopped, too.

"Thar, that's done for ye, you deserter!" he yelled. And hit fell — flop. He was a man afore then, with the power to move himself, if he *was* wounded. He was a log atter."

* Stealing away.

Naomi's head went down, and sobs shook her.

"Father!" she murmured. "And we never knew."

The sobs had their way. The old woman stood looking at the father and daughter, and the minutes passed.

"Git up, gal. He's oneasy."

The words broke in sharply on Naomi's grief. She lifted her face, wet with tears, and looked at her father. She could see no change.

"Git up, I tell ye," snapped the old woman. "Hain't I knowin' better 'n you?"

"Yes," said the girl submissively.

She rose, and moved back. Old China Partins took her place. With words caressing as those of a mother to a sick child she bent over him, and it was long before she stood aside.

"He shain't be disturbed no more to-day," she said decisively. "You go and set on that chist yander. He can see ye if he wants, and you won't be near enough to worry him."

The "chist" was an old walnut construction standing upon stout legs.

Naomi sat down upon it as if stunned. The world, as she knew it before she came into this log hut, had vanished. The complexion of life had changed. She experienced a strange feeling of unreality as she watched the old woman. She wanted to ask questions about her father, but refrained. She perceived that the woman was acting under strong excitement. Impatience on her part would increase that excitement, and defeat the end she had in view. Her heart yearned over her father, so near to her, and yet seemingly so hopelessly far removed. Did he understand? It was hard for her to believe that the mind was even partially clear when the eyes looked at her so uncomprehendingly.

It was all inconceivable — bewildering. The strange figure moving about before her was not stranger than

the discoveries she had made since she sighted the little cabin. Naomi felt constrained to watch those movements, every one of which revealed something of the character of this peculiar being who for fifteen years had formed her father's one link with life.

She could only guess the object of the movements. First a handful of weeds, each no thicker than her finger, was brought from the pile without and laid across the embers of the fire. Then, with a skilful breath, the fuel was blown into a flame. Naomi could not help contrasting the height of the wood pile outside with the dimensions of that handful of weeds.

"I'm goin' to git supper. He's needin' hit."

The words broke the silence.

"You set jist whar you air," continued the hoarse, carefully guarded voice. "He's wantin' to see ye. I'll give ye some supper."

If Naomi had had leisure of mind for qualms respecting the biscuit mixed by those long, skinny, brown hands, such fears were presently set at rest. From beginning to end of the preparations the claw-like nails never touched the food. China Partins's biscuit was mixed with a spoon, moulded with the same implement, and in like manner deposited in the iron pot which in due time she buried beneath the coals upon the hearth. The unsmoked ham, lowered from its hook in a beam above, was with great dexterity cut without the contact of fingers with the meat, one sinewy old hand grasping the extreme end of the bone, while with a knife sharp enough for fell purposes the other sliced off layers of ham from the further extremity.

It was when the meat was sizzling in the pan, and the old woman, carefully holding the abnormally long handle thereof, had seated herself far back from the hearth, that the tension was relieved. Then the silence that had throbbed with excitement was broken.

"I've done watched for ye, and worked charms agin yer comin' for fifteen year, gal, and thar you air."

"Watched for me!"

Naomi's voice was sharp with surprise.

"Watched! Mercy, warn't thar need? Warn't hit for him more 'n myself? Could *you* 'a done what I done for him,— a slip of a gal with no more experience than a babe?"

"No," replied Naomi gently. "But how did you know anything about me?"

China Partins laughed,— a hoarse, angry laugh.

"Shucks! Thar hain't much I *don't* know, gal."

"Did *he* tell you?"

For a moment the old eyes looked at her savagely, and the lips set themselves together. It was not easy, after long years of silence, for this woman to admit any into her confidence.

"Maybe he did."

"Then he could speak?" said Naomi. "Oh, tell me about it. I love him, and I've lost all these years of his life."

Was it intuition that made her adopt the only line of argument that could have moved the strange being before her? The fierce eyes did not soften, but the lips unclosed again with a jerk.

"He spoke onct. Hit was afore the human snake that was atter him fired the second rock. I see he was aimin' to du hit, and I come through that brush right smart. The murderer warn't a-noticin' me. He was dead set on gittin' nearer to hi-im. He had to come daown a mighty steep place. I crossed Big Creek plumb afore him, and he never seed me. And then I slipped,— climbin' them rocks under cover so's to git near *him*. I done hit, and crouched under one on 'em right by him. He seed me. 'You're a woman,' he says, slow and painful, 'and a woman's heart's always

soft for the young uns. I'm dyin'. When I'm gone, see them rebels don't git the money that belongs to my boy and gal. Hit's in my belt.' 'Hush!' says I. 'I'll see to hit.' The words warn't aout o' my mouth when bang come another rock plumb on him agin. He never spoke atter."

Naomi's face was white.

"That man? Did he live?" she asked; and the words came in a tense whisper.

"Live!"

A low, blood-curdling laugh that at another time would have caused the girl to shudder seemed a fit accompaniment to the word. The old woman grasped the handle of the pan firmly, gave a sharp shake that deftly turned every slice of meat, and set the pan back on the fire.

"Maybe he's livin' with the devils he belonged to," she said slowly. "He warn't livin' nowhars else long atter he done tha-at."

The light that leapt into the girl's eyes was fierce enough to be a match for that in the old ones opposite to her. It expressed satisfaction,— yes, and savage delight.

"How did you do it?" she asked.

"He done hit himself. He warn't satisfied with knockin' him aout of all shape: he wanted to make sure thar warn't a spark o' life left. He come tearin' daown between them boulders. And, as he come daown, I watched my chance and crept up. I knowed whar he was aimin' to stop,— right on a flat stone over whar *he* lay. He could lay him daown on that, and lean over and shoot. I got thar fust, and drawed back behind a bit of risin' ground. He *co-ome*. I knowed he would. And he laid himself daown flat, and looked over with a leer on his face. That thar was the last o' hi-im, so fur as this world was concerned."

She stopped.

"How did you do it?" asked Naomi breathlessly.

"I had a knife,—a right smart good knife. I hain't a babe. I got *some* strength. If hit warn't druv clar through his heart, hit warn't the fault o' my arm. Lor! he hadn't time to yell afore *he* was done sent outer this world."

The girl drew a long breath. She had seen every movement, as the long, sinewy arm acted out the scene before her.

"And then you brought him home, here," she said after a short, expressive silence.

"Thar was the rocks to move fust," said the woman. "They was wedged in. Gal, I thought I was strong till then. Thar's a heap o' weight in rocks."

"Yes," replied Naomi.

"Lor! *you* don't know," said the old woman contemptuously. "You hain't never put yerself under them and lifted till the blood poured out from yer nose and the sweat rolled daown yer face in streams. I warn't as strong as a kitten when I done got them rocks offn him."

She stood up and took the pan from the fire, which had been replenished with another handful of weeds. Then she carried it to the table, and with one shake transferred its contents to a plate.

"I've done got to 'tend to *hi-im* fust," she said.

She fed him like a baby. He ate without sign of appreciation or enjoyment. The tears rolled quietly down Naomi's cheeks as she saw the completeness of the wreck that the savage instincts of war had wrought.

"You can come and set daown at the table. He won't notice you no more. Hit's done passed,—that noticin' time," said the old woman at last.

"What do you mean?" asked Naomi, as she came obediently forward.

"Thar hain't one day in ten he notices things as he's

done to-day," was the reply. "Thar 'll be days naow when he won't take no 'count o' nothin'. Nary thing can rouse him them times. They come as sure as darkness atter sunset, when he's had a noticin' turn this away."

"Poor father!"

Naomi forced herself to eat, that she might not displease her hostess. Her mind was revolving plans for the future. How could she part these two, after years of loving service on the part of this woman who was a stranger?

"You hain't no right to du hit! You *cain't* du hit!"

Were the low-spoken, decisive words an answer to her thought? She looked up hastily.

"He belongs to me more 'n he does to you," continued the hoarse voice.

There was defiance in the statement.

"He belongs to us both," said Naomi quietly. "I am his child: you are the saver of his life. What shall we do?"

"You can come, as often as you've a mind," said the old woman. "I've kep' this house shet agin everybody, friend and foe, for fifteen year. Hit warn't safe for ary man or woman to know he was here. I warn't aimin' to lose him. And I warn't aimin' to share him with nobody. But *you* can come."

The words came slowly, as if the concession were wrenched bit by bit out of the old heart. Naomi looked at her doubtfully.

"He is my father," she said. "I have wanted him so long."

"What is he to me? Can you tend him as I can? Gal, you *shain't* rob me. If hit was your life or hi-im, hit wouldn't take the first half of a lightnin' flash to decide between 'em."

The words were low, but they thrilled through the girl's nerves. She did not resent them. She could not, in the presence of that old, bent figure, that throbbed and quivered with love for the helpless man between whom and death it had stood for all these years as the sole barrier.

"I don't want. I shall never try," she said. "Whatever we decide, it must be what we both see is best. I owe you too much to forget your claim."

"I won't live without him, gal!"

It was her final decision, and Naomi knew it.

"Let it rest," she said. "I have no thought of disputing your claim. I *could* not. I must talk to my brother."

She spoke wearily. The strain of excitement was telling upon her.

"I will go now," she said, "and come back again to-morrow. It would be presumption to thank you."

"I hain't wantin' your thanks."

"No, I know. They are too small. You did it for *hi-im*, and for nothing else."

She went over to the bed, and pressed one long kiss on the manly forehead. The face was still as a statue. She turned from it with a sob, and without a word passed out into the daylight.

Was it only a few hours ago that she stood on the hill looking down upon that cabin? Only this morning that she met Norah Felps?

There came again that quick contraction of the heart as the image of Norah moved across the vision. Down upon her like an avalanche rushed the memory of the past months,—of Marshall Lane Rutherford and Abner Poteet and Norah Felps. She had set herself to drive out of Big Creek valley all related to Kennedy Poteet, on the charge that he had murdered her father. With a firm hand she had visited upon the family of the dead

man an uncommitted sin. The colour blazed across her face, and then left it very white. She had been so sure.

Naomi knew little of how the distance between the Gap and the boarding-house was passed. She saw nothing and heard nothing of all that was about her until a footstep sounded immediately behind. It was just as she was turning from the valley road into the hill path to the mill. There was no need for her to ask to whom the step belonged. She had come to know it well in the days when Marshall Lane Rutherford was her guest at the boarding-house.

His "good evening" was very grave. Naomi could find in it no trace of animosity. Was it possible that it would have pleased her better if she had? What was it she missed in that quiet, manly greeting? The eyes that for a moment looked at her had in them none of the light that was there before his illness. There was neither reproach nor entreaty to be discovered in them to-day. Was the girl's heart right when it translated the expression of those eyes, and whispered "indifference"?

Not altogether, perhaps. The heart that loves is too susceptible to the faintest influence to be a reliable guide. Barometer-like, it feels the change that is only approaching. Marshall Rutherford had not yet come to the time when he could meet this girl with indifference; but, as he passed her to-day, he fully realised that she had lost the power to set the chords of joy or pain vibrating anew. She had not yet become to him exactly as other girls. The consciousness of what might have been remained, as well as the forcible remembrance of what *had* been. His memories of this girl were potent; but he realised to-day that it was rather as a memory than as a personality that she drew him towards her. His thoughts went back to the days when he set himself to know the girl who was turning the feeling in Big

Creek Gap strongly against his cousin. He looked long and steadily at the individuality he had found then, the girl who had made his heart speak louder than his judgment when it suggested that there was a way to convince the young, strong will, and to turn it aside from its determined purpose.

Memory went on to the time when judgment was vindicated, and the heart shown its foolishness. They were two very different pictures, these that memory drew of the girl as he first knew her and the same girl when she set her face like a flint against him, and turned upon him, as well as upon his cousin, the full force of an antagonistic public sentiment.

Between his eyes and the face he had just passed there slowly came another, young, tender, with a yearning, sorrowful look in it, as he had seen it last, not an hour ago. It was the face of one who might know love and anger, and even passion, but who could never be steadily vindictive, as could that other.

"Norah, my girl, I'm content with the change," he said, and went on with a quickened step.

He had been too much engrossed to hear the voice that had spoken his name. It is true the sound lacked the decisive ring of Naomi's usual utterances. It died away quickly. It had come quickly, as an afterthought, when the mind had turned from its analysis of Marshall's greeting. It came too late.

CHAPTER XXVI

"LUCKY you didn't happen to be a moment later. The search party was tolerable near ready to start. Half Big Creek was plumb crazy to set aout to look for you."

Will Hollingsworth met Naomi at the door. Though there was a laugh in his eyes, they were keenly searching the girl's face.

"Didn't you get your supper?" she asked coldly.

"Supper!" he retorted. "Do you in your calm senses believe that anything so commonplace and comfortable as supper could enter into ary person's mind while you-u were away, nobody knew where?"

"Then you'd better go and eat it now," she said. "There is nothing to shame your appetite at the present moment. I am perfectly safe, so you may enjoy your supper with a clear conscience."

"Oh, supper has been over this hour," he said. Then in a different tone: "Naomi, what is it? Something has troubled you."

She turned her eyes full upon him. The coldness in them sent a chill over the enthusiasm of his feeling. How was it that the days, as they passed, seemed to put this girl further from him instead of bringing her nearer?

He had never recovered the position lost by his attack upon Marshall Rutherford. Only once after the evening on which she confronted him with his action in that very questionable affair had Naomi spoken upon the subject. It was on the following day. She stopped him as he was leaving the house after breakfast.

"I was short-sighted enough at one time to enter into

a compact with you that was plumb certain to make a fool of me," she said. "It has done it. I have had enough of it. For the future let the quarrel be all my own. I shall know what to do with it to suit my own taste — and my own ideas of honour. Hounding sick men to death meets neither."

He did not attempt to defend himself, though there was a gleam in his eye and a movement of his lips that pointed to neither calmness nor indifference.

"You are unjust," he said. "I have been your devoted servant. If I have gone further than you would have done, it was only through zeal in your cause. You may say what you will, and think what you will; I shall be your servant still."

She turned from him and walked carelessly away. And he ignored the ground of offence, and forced her into something of the old relations. But he had never recovered his lost footing.

To-night there was hot anger in his heart. What did the girl mean by keeping him at arm's length like this? Did she think he had served her for naught? Did she suppose he had let her have her own way, given in to her merest caprice, to be set aside thus lightly at her pleasure, put on the footing of the commonest acquaintance?

"If you do, you ain't knowing Will Hollingsworth yet," he said; but he said it very much in the secret places of his own heart.

To all appearance he was waiting patiently for her answer to his sympathetic question. It was long in coming.

"There is nothing that need bother you-u,— nothing that will in ary way affect your interests," she said slowly, and would have passed on, but he took a quick step forward, and stood in the way.

"Nothing that will affect me?" he said. "Naomi,

don't you know that everything that touches you affects me?"

"No — I did not know it," she said quietly. "I do not believe it. And if it were true, this is the worst possible time to tell it me. You are right. Something has put me aout. I am in a bad temper. You had better go and eat your supper."

She turned aside and passed him, going upstairs to her own room. He stood looking after her, a deepening scowl on his face. Two minutes later she had forgotten him, except as an acknowledged participator in the hot-headed quarrel with a dead man which had left her tingling with shame and burdened with remorse.

By the discoveries of to-day the whole motive of life at Big Creep Gap was changed. Life at Big Creek Gap! It had been one immense blunder. She had begun it full of determined confidence, sure of her own position and her power of judgment. Her decision allowed of neither doubt nor dissent. Kennedy Poteet was her father's murderer, and she was fulfilling a daughter's duty in dragging down upon him and his every form of obloquy. To-day she was a convicted blunderer,— "something worse than a fool," as she admitted scornfully.

The hot blood surged over her face as she recalled her last interview in that house with Marshall Lane Rutherford. "You have no cause to plead," she had said. How completely the tables were turned she did not need that any should tell her.

She had fastened her door and walked with a steady step half across the room. Then she had stopped, where the light from the window fell upon her,— stopped to face the situation. She was standing there when daylight took its last lingering look into the room. She was standing there when the stars grew bright in the deep night blue of the sky.

It was "a pretty night," as pretty as the one on which she had refused to go with Marshall down to the old house in the hollow. Except for the absence of the moon, and the increased heat of the air, there was little difference. But since that night all her world had changed. Dalbert was working his way alone. She had seen him but once since his accident, and the meeting had been cold and unsatisfactory. Dalbert could not forgive his sister for her part in the act which, but for the intervention of another girl, would have cost Marshall Rutherford his life. The old tie between the brother and sister seemed broken for ever.

Lem never passed her without a lifting of the head that revealed his inexpressible scorn for the girl who had so far missed the highest of life's ideals as to prefer a residence at the boarding-house, with Will Hollingsworth, to a share in the destiny of Dalbert Mozingo. She had never felt entirely out of sympathy with Lem in the controversy. To-night she agreed with him unreservedly.

The pursuit of justice had loomed very big that evening when she put it and Marshall Lane Rutherford side by side, and let her prejudices decide the choice. It dwindled to a mere trick word as she stood now, at the end of the chase, and realised that she had pursued and overtaken a shadow.

Justice! A fine name for the persecution of an innocent man! So far as *she* had any right to judge him, Kennedy Poteet stood acquitted to-night. And what of his son — the man she had followed like a bloodhound? "If ever thar was an innocent man, hit's Abner Poteet." The words sounded as plainly in her ears as when Marshall Rutherford stood looking into her face with those keen, reproachful eyes as he said them. There was no more possibility of denying the innocence. And she had pursued him with high-sounding words of

justice, and with implacable hatred. And through it all her father was living,— close to her.

It was no wonder the quiet "good evening" of Marshall's greeting lingered in her ears as a seal upon the accomplished past. She had wrought that past herself, moulded it after her own pattern. His acceptance of it and its consequences was made known to her in the calm indifference of those formal words. She had nothing to complain of. She had been in dead earnest in her determination to visit the sin of Kennedy Poteet upon his kinsmen, and by a strange fatality her own heart had been in the path of the blow.

A big, bright star was shining straight into the girl's eyes, had been shining into them for a long time, but she had not seen it. Now she walked to the window and looked out. She had turned from the past to the future.

"I must see Dalbert to-morrow," she said, and with the words a rush of longing affection went out towards the brother who until now had always been one with her in every plan.

"And Will Hollingsworth must find another housekeeper."

The words came later, after a long silence. There was in them a tone of relief.

She stood before the open window, and the night air blew in upon her. Her thoughts had gone to her father; and the hard, strained look faded.

"Poor father!" she said, and as she spoke she dropped upon her knees, and lifted up her face to the starlight. Just then across the valley came the low sighing sound of the rising wind. It blew damp and cold on the girl's head. The chill had already entered into her life.

The same cool night air had earlier found its way into Abner Poteet's cabin. Marshall Rutherford rose,

and put a stick of wood upon the embers yet smouldering on the hearth. Abner got up too.

"I'm goin' to lueke atter the mules," he said. "You'll hev to see to them to-morrer. They'll be luekin' for their food reg'lar. You won't forgit 'em?" he added. "They hain't used to neglect."

He stopped in the middle of the floor, and looked at his cousin. The rugged, sensitive face wore a look of expectancy.

"Nonsense! You'll feed them yourself to-morrow, as you've done to-day," replied Marshall cheerily. "I don't take no account of that dream."

"Hit'll come true," said Ab quietly.

Marshall looked at him fixedly. He was thinking of the girl he had passed that afternoon, and of her unconquerable hatred of this man.

"Hit takes more than a dream to kill a man," he said. "Look at me. Hit might have been all up with me if some people had had their way, but I'm alive yet."

"The curse warn't on you," replied Ab; and he went out into the darkness.

Under the stars he stopped. Darkness had no terrors for him to-night. The unseen world was so near now that it had lost its vague alarms. He drank in the cool night air.

"Thar shall be no more curse," he said, looking into the clear, deep blue of the sky.

Two hours later all Big Creek was abed, but Marshall and Abner still sat by the fire.

"Thar hain't nary face on earth like hern."

The words broke a long silence. Marshall looked up slowly.

"I know hit," he said.

The silence fell again. Only the crackle of burning wood marked the passage of time.

"Ab, old boy, you'd better 'a gone in and won," said Marshall at last. "Not but that I should have been the loser. But you've known her longer than I have."

Abner's eyes took to themselves a tender light.

"I couldn't," he said. "I was carin' too much abaout *he-er*. Hit'd 'a hurt me more to be fearin' the curse should fall on her than to shet her clar aout o' my life. She warn't for me. But she's for you, Marshall — and thar's no more curse."

The last words came with a triumphant ring. For a minute his face was radiant. Then his head drooped, and he gazed steadily into the fire.

"Tell her good-by for me, Marshall. The last stroke 'll soon fall."

The voice had grown weary. A long time had passed since he spoke last. Had the old fight for renunciation been waged again in those minutes wherein only the fire had represented the activity of life and thought?

Marshall looked up.

"Ab," he said, "if what you think should come true,— and mind you, I don't believe hit,— you may rest assured that while my arm can ward off evil, no curse shall ever fall on her. You love her, Ab,— and so do I."

If Marshall had been asking the question of his own heart that night, it had given him no uncertain answer.

The fire shot up a tongue of flame. The two men looked into each other's faces. Then Abner's hand went out and grasped that of his cousin.

"Hit's all as hit should be," he said. "Thar won't no suspicion of dishonour fall on her naow. You-u hain't *his* son."

The pressure of his fingers relaxed.

"I'll go to bed," he said. "My head's got a swimmin' in hit."

It was nearly morning when Marshall fell asleep.

His last look at Abner showed him the tender, mournful eyes still gazing expectantly into the semi-darkness of the cabin. When he awoke, the sun was streaming in at the window. He lifted himself up and looked at his cousin. The "last stroke" had fallen. The "visitin'" was ended.

The men had been at work for half an hour that morning when Will Hollingsworth went to the door of the mill to look out.

"Ah! I thought as much," he said, and walked briskly over to the boarding-house.

Naomi stood upon the steps, giving some last instructions to the elderly assistant whose presence made it possible for her to leave her household duties so early.

"What are you up to now, I wonder?" said Will, carrying on a mental conversation while his eyes were busy with the face and figure of the girl. "You don't go aout at this time of day for nothing."

"You're abroad early," he said aloud.

"Do you call this early?" she asked indifferently.

"Well — ye-es, for a busy person like the housekeeper for the mill," he said.

Her eyes turned upon him with a flash in them.

"The boarding-house can take care of itself now," she said slowly. "You ain't plumb in need of me ary longer. Mrs. Tiller can cook for you as well as I ca-an. I'm aimin' to let her do it. I'm going to see Da-al."

"How *long* are you aimin' to let her do it?" he asked; and there was a hardening of his face that did not escape the girl's eyes.

"For ever — if she's a mi-ind to, and you've a mind to let her," she said quietly.

"What do you mean by that?"

He had stopped in front of her, and stood looking up into her eyes. Her position on the lower of the two steps gave her an advantage over him.

"I'm going to see Dal," she said. "I think he needs a housekeeper more than you do."

"You're aimin' to leave the boarding-house—and me?"

She laughed—a low, cold laugh.

"You take it tragically," she said. "Did you suppose I was going to leave Dal to his own devices for ever? It did not answer my purpose to run the risk of starving with him; but he is making a fair crop, and it's time we turned our attention to earning more money than he's doing that way. We didn't come to Big Creek Gap to hang round and do nothing for ever."

She looked at him with eyes that were calmly critical.

"And am I to count for nothing?"

She gave her shoulders a little expressive movement, and looked at him with a smile.

"Mercy, no!" she said. "You count for a right smart—to yourself."

"And for nothing to you?"

He could not keep the passion out of his eyes, though he tried hard.

"To me-e," she said, with a long, reflective drawl. "Haven't I shown how much you count for by carrying my philanthropy to the point of sacrificing Dal to his fate? But my zeal is abating. You are in no more danger of starving. Mrs. Tiller will see to that."

She lifted her foot to descend the step. He stopped her by laying his hand on her arm.

"Do you think I care about tha-at?" he asked vehemently. "Do you suppose I built the boarding-house simply that I might get better dinners and breakfasts? Naomi, I built that house because I wanted you-u."

"Your wants are large," she returned lightly.

"They are,—very," he said. "Naomi, I want the biggest thing in this world. Can I have it?"

Certainly — if you can get it," she replied, and stepped down upon the ground.

"I am going to get it," he said. "Naomi, I want *you-u*."

She turned upon him eyes that had a laugh in them.

"Your wants are plumb aout of all reason," she said. "Even Will Hollingsworth cannot have ev-erything he sets his heart on."

"It's dead set on you-u."

The arrogance had gone from his voice. It sounded as if he were in earnest.

"That is unfortunate," she said.

"Why?"

"Because it will have to be unset."

He looked at her fixedly for a moment.

"Naomi," he said, "go and see Dal, and then come back to be mistress of the boarding-house. Tell Dal to come back too — if he's a mind. I don't care who's here, or who's not here, so long as I have you."

"He would not come," said Naomi calmly. "It would not meet his wishes — nor mine."

"Naomi!"

She met his gaze fully, but made him no answer.

"I *want* you," he said vehemently. "I have wanted you ever since you came to Big Creek Gap. Don't you know that that was why I desired to serve you, because by so doing I should serve myself?"

"Very disinterested," she commented, musingly.

"Disinterested? Do you suppose anybody could be disinterested where you are concerned?" he demanded. "I never was, and never shall be. I've worked for you — faithfully. I want my pay. Let me go and tell Dal to come down for the wedding. Then he can go back, or stay, as he pleases."

"You want pay — for serving me-e?"

Her eyes were flashing scornfully into his.

"Yes," he said. "There was one reward I worked for from the beginning. I claim it now."

"You are powerful modest," she said, in a low, slow drawl. "I'm plumb astonished you should ask so little for what you-u've done. The man that's made a fool of himself and me-e before all Big Creek Gap has a right to lueke for something bigger in the way of reward."

"Naomi, you don't mean it," he remonstrated. "You know how untiringly I've worked for you. Big Creek Gap would never have turned against Kennedy Poteet and all belonging to him in the way it has done if I hadn't used fair means and foul to accomplish my end."

"Mean it?" she said, ignoring all but his first words. "I mean, and have long meant, that I stumbled upon the biggest mistake of my life when I made it possible for you or ary other man to make a fool of me-e."

The passion was in his face now. He no longer tried to hide it."

"And you answer me thus, after all I have done?" he said, in a low, angry tone.

She looked at him with a slow, enigmatical smile.

"I answer you thus — after *all* you have *done*," she said.

"And you think this is the end of it?" The words burst from his lips red hot with rage. "You are mistaken. I've worked for a reward. You owe it to me, and I'll have it."

She smiled again, and walked on. And he stood looking after her, rage and disappointment so unmistakably evident in his face that the old woman who was left to keep house muttered as she peered through the window: "They're a-quarrellin'. Lor'! hit hain't no gue-ude his duin' tha-at. She's more 'n a match for hi-im."

Naomi had said she was going to see Dal. It was true; yet her feet, when she left the mill, did not lead

her in the direction of the Ridges. Down in the valley road she paused for a moment, and then turned towards Abner Poteet's cottage.

The gate was shut, and she fumbled for a minute over the latch. She heard the door of the house open, and felt, rather than saw, that it was not the owner of the dwelling who was coming towards her.

"I'll open hit for you."

She lifted her head with a proud gesture, and met the eyes of Marshall Rutherford.

"I wanted to see you and Abner Poteet," she said. "I wanted to tell Abner that I did him a wrong when I judged him and his father."

"Yes, you did him a wrong," said Marshall; and voice and manner were grave to sadness.

He was holding the gate open for her. She went in.

"I have been mistaken," she said slowly. "So far as I am concerned, I have nothing to say against any of the household of Poteet. The old man may or may not have done wrong. It is not for me to judge. My father is living."

He showed little surprise. His mind seemed pre-engrossed.

"I am glad — for your sake," he said. Then after a moment: "You wanted to tell Abner?"

"Yes. I did him an injustice. It is but right it should be acknowledged."

He was looking at her with a strange expression upon his face.

"Miss Mozingo," he said, "I tried once to tell you something of the character of the man to whom you did this injustice. May I tell you to-day?"

A slight movement of the head was her only answer.

"Abner, like you," continued Marshall, "was impressed with the certainty of his father's guilt. When very young, he saw a fight between Kennedy Poteet and

a stranger. That fight ended fatally for the stranger. Since then men have said much about my uncle that cannot be proved. The memory of the violence he had seen, and the words of men around him, preyed upon the mind of my cousin. Miss Mozingo, he took on his own shoulders the burden you so earnestly desired to put there. From a child he bore his father's sins. He deemed himself accursed for the old man's sake."

He spoke slowly and reflectively, his eyes fixed on the girl's face.

"If you had known as I knew the depth of sadness and suffering in that heart," he continued, "you would never have added to his sorrow. You once accused Ab of one of these possible sins. He did not deny hit. He never would. There was no curse that he did not think he merited for being the son of the old man whom he loved ever while he trembled over his evil deeds."

The blue eyes were very sad. Their look, and the words with which that look was accompanied, brought a mist to the dark ones opposite.

"I am sorry. I was unjust, but I did not know it," said Naomi. "I should like to tell him myself."

Marshall was still looking into her face.

"Miss Mozingo," he said gently, "there are times when our knowledge comes too late."

Then, as her eyes grew startled beneath his gaze, he added: "Will you come in? I cannot promise you that you will ever explain to Ab."

She followed him wonderingly. At the door he stood aside.

"Will you go in — to the inner room?" he said.

She stepped across the bare room where she had once waited so long for Abner, and came to the inner door. There she stopped, with a quick contraction of the heart.

Upon the bed lay the calm face of the man she had

come to see. No, she would never explain to Abner Poteet.

The face that she turned towards Marshall was white as the one upon the bed. She did not speak, but only lifted her eyes questioningly to his.

"He was expecting hit," said Marshall gently. "Two months ago he had a dream, a foreshadowing of this day. Miss Mozingo, his death was the bearing of the last of the sins of his father. He believed that hit would come as the final punishment of those sins. He believed hit would come last night."

"Was he ill?" asked the girl, in a low, awe-struck voice.

"He was in perfect health, so fur as we knew," replied Marshall. "But he waited for death — as the last stroke in the bearing of his father's sins. Hit came on the very night when he expected hit."

"And if he had known, it might have been different," said Naomi.

"I cannot tell," replied Marshall. "He died for his father's sins."

She stood looking at that still, calm face. It showed more happiness than had been seen upon it for months. A long, low sigh escaped her lips. She turned to Marshall.

"It is too late to undo the injury to him," she said. "But I injured you too. I acknowledge it. I was mistaken — and altogether in the wrong."

He looked at her for a moment. Then he held out his hand.

"Hit mattered less to me than to him," he said; "but hit *did* matter."

Was the slight stress on that "did" intentional? Was he telling her that though it mattered much then it mattered little to-day?

She turned away.

"I am very sorry — for your sorrow, and for my part in it," she said.

She went out of the door and along the valley road, not knowing which way she walked. She had said that the time should come when the son of Kennedy Poteet would be glad to leave the valley of Big Creek. He had left it, and the calm smile upon his face told her that he left it gladly.

CHAPTER XXVII

"HOWDY!"

Naomi looked up unseeingly. It was nearly half a minute before she realised that she was staring into the face of Lem Sutton.

"You down here?" she said, bringing tongue and brain again under a measure of control.

The boy nodded.

"We-uns hev got all the corn laid down," he explained. "We hain't so powerful hard druv naow. Goin' to start up for the Gap?"

It was proof of extraordinary preoccupation that the significance of the question escaped Naomi's notice.

"No, I'm going to see Dal," she said. "Is he at the farm?"

"Lor, no!" responded the boy. "He hain't thar. He's gone to Hickory Creek."

Now the way to Hickory Creek lay through the Gap.

"Is he coming back to-night?" asked Naomi.

"I reckon," replied Lem. "I hain't plumb sure. Dal's got powerful important business thar," he added, after a momentary silence. "He hain't calc'latin' to stop a right smart longer at the farm. We-all are aimin' to git the control of a mill."

He glanced casually at Naomi as he spoke, and carried his head no more proudly than was warrantable for a boy who had a right to say "we-all" in reference to Dalbert and himself.

Naomi did not smile, even to herself. She failed to appreciate the situation, except in so far as it pointed to a change of plan on the part of her brother.

"When he gets home, tell him to come and see me. There is something I want to talk to him about directly," she said.

She turned and walked back, and scarcely noticed that Lem passed her briskly, his bare feet kicking up the dust along the dry road. Presently she went in among the trees, and sat down to rest. A feeling of weariness had overtaken her. She could not see Dal to-day, and no decision could be arrived at without him. The necessity for action was over for the time being, and with it the stimulus it had afforded. Just at the moment nothing but the failure remained,—the failure of life at Big Creek. She sat thinking of it, or rather letting the consciousness of it come and go as it would, without volition on her part.

The two faces she had just seen blended in that retrospect, the calm, still countenance of Abner Poteet, and the other, from which the blue eyes had looked sadly. She had never really seen Abner until she saw him lying dead that morning. The face of the man she had persecuted had worn for her a look she failed to find to-day. She wondered now that its patient, sorrowful nobility had not convinced her. But she had not seen that nobility before, though it was stamped on every feature. She began to understand dimly that perfect sight requires an open heart as well as open eyes.

It was not until she heard footsteps approaching that she rose and went on towards the valley road. She had turned into a cross path that led in the direction of her brother's farm. Now she began to walk quickly. Across the vision had come the image of her father. A longing to pierce the silence that surrounded him possessed her. Had he really betrayed any knowledge of her presence, or did the manifestation of interest perceived by China Partins exist solely in her imagina-

tion? What was to be the outcome of it all? If the old woman could be persuaded to make any change, would it be for her father's good? Naomi did not for a moment question the right of China Partins to have a voice in the decision. Fifteen years of devoted service constituted a claim not to be lightly set aside. She must confer with her brother, and seek to evolve some plan for the future; but, after all, the real decision rested with China Partins.

Naomi was going to see the old woman now. She could not stay away. Yearning love for her father drew her towards the Gap. She wanted to be near him, to hear more about him. She knew that the unspeaking gaze of those dark eyes would send the blood chilled to her heart, and convince her anew of the hopelessness of her longing for one sign of recognition; but her feet carried her none the less swiftly to the cabin. She did not stop on the high rock to look down upon the dwelling as she had done yesterday. She descended the steep path at a run.

"Thar hain't nary bit o' use none on ye comin' here to-day."

China Partins stood in the doorway, defiant wrath stamped on every feature. The shutter had been replaced on its hinge, and was flung open wide, giving the summer breeze free access to the house. The attitude of the old woman suggested the thought that the breeze was the only thing that *was* free to enter there.

"There's nobody else coming," replied Naomi. "I have not seen my brother. He is away."

"He warn't away this mornin'," retorted the custodian of the door wrathfully.

Naomi looked up.

"Has he been here?" she asked wonderingly,

An expressive sniff was the sole response.

"Does he know? Did you tell him?"

Naomi's tone was eager.

"Tell him? No, I didn't." The words broke angrily from the old lips. "I didn't tell him nothin'. I hain't goin' to tell none on ye nothin'. You hain't no right here. This house hain't yourn — and *he* hain't yourn. He's mine."

"I'm not disputing your claim. I have no intention of disputing it," said Naomi quietly. "Your loving care of my father gives you the first right to a voice in the decision that must be arrived at. But you cannot deny that his children also have rights."

"Rights? Who said they hadn't?" retorted the old woman. "I hain't wantin' to deprive ye of yer rights. Hain't I kep' the money for ye all these years? That's *your* right. I hain't defrauding ye of hit. He asked me to keep hit for ye. I've kep' hit. You can come in and git hit."

Naomi looked at her steadily.

"The money he sold his mules for?" she asked.

"Yes, hit's yourn. *I* hain't wantin' to cheat ye aout o' none o' yer rights," was the indignant answer.

"And you have not used it all these years?" questioned the girl.

"Used hit?" retorted the old woman fiercely. "Du you think I was atter his money?"

"No — we are neither of us after it," said Naomi quietly. "We are both after something of more importance. But you had a right to use it — for him. You have fed and cared for him all these years."

"Fed him!" responded China Partins in an angry, scornful voice. "Would you have me count what went into *his* mouth? Gal, you hain't knowin' nothin'."

"Yes, I am," replied Naomi. "I know that your only thought was for him. I know it was pity and love that caused you to do it all. But that did not make it necessary to injure yourself."

"Thar hain't a cent of hit touched, and thar hain't like to be," said the woman fiercely. "That's yourn. But *he* hain't yourn. You hain't got no shadder of a claim by the side o' mine. Gal, thar hain't no power nowhars that can make me give him up."

"Did my brother ask it?" demanded Naomi gently.

The fierce eyes flamed.

"He didn't ask nothin'. He tuk hit for granted he'd a right to du jist what he said," she snapped.

"But not after you told him? Not when he knew?" persisted Naomi.

"I didn't tell him nary thing but to git aout o' my house. And he done hit," said the old woman significantly.

"When did he come?"

"This mornin'."

"How did he find aout? I have not seen him," exclaimed Naomi.

The contemptuous grunt that served as reply might be interpreted according to the discretion of the listener. China Partins still stood blocking the doorway.

"Did he see him?" asked Naomi.

"Yes."

The word passed the old lips with a savage snap.

"Do you think that my father knew him? You said that he knew me."

The question went out upon the summer air. If it reached the ears of China Partins, it elicited no response from her. Her tall, bent form filled the doorway as persistently as at first. Naomi looked at her with some perplexity.

"You told me I might come and go," she said. "If he is yours, he is mine too."

The sharp eyes under the shaggy white eyebrows looked down at her. China Partins neither stirred nor spoke.

"He belongs to us both," continued the young, clear voice. "You can no more deny me my right than I can deny yours."

The old eyes were still fixed on her face. They did not waver in their steady gaze, nor did the expression of the countenance change. But after a silence, in which Naomi's eyes met those others unflinchingly, China Partins suddenly moved aside. Naomi went into the cabin.

The girl did not repeat the question she had asked of the old woman. One glance at her father's face answered it for her. No, he had *not* recognised Dalbert. He would not recognise her. She knew now that there had been intelligence in the eyes that looked into hers yesterday,— knew it by the absence of that intelligence to-day. There was no more need to ask "Does he know?" His gaze was the stare of vacancy.

Her eyes, misty with tears, turned to the seamed face of the old woman.

"Is it often so?" she asked.

China Partins looked from the girl to the form of the man towards whom for fifteen years the strength of brain and heart had gone out in a ceaseless effort to force from injured nature a measure of concession, a partial reversal of her normal course; and into the time-hardened countenance came a look of sorrow.

"I told you you could come and go," she said slowly. "That was yesterday. I hain't sayin' hit to-day. Hit hain't all right with him. You done worked mischief."

Naomi looked at her with startled eyes.

"Is he ill?" she asked. "Is it something unusual, his lying thus?"

"His not takin' notice?" responded China Partins. "No, hit hain't. Hit comes atter every noticin' time. But he hain't well. He's been excited. Thar shain't nothin' from outside touch him no more. *You* hain't

knowin'. How should you? You cain't know; you're fools, both on ye. But I hain't no fool, and I've done stood betwixt him and harm this fifteen year. Hit hain't a slip of a gal and boy that's goin' to undo my work."

"We don't want to undo it," said Naomi. "Do you think we would hurt *him?*"

The old woman sniffed contemptuously.

"A smart sight *you* know whether you're hurtin' him or not," she said.

Then there was silence. Naomi was looking down at her father. Was it fancy, or was there a pallor about the flesh that had been absent yesterday? The right hand, the one that was not disabled, lay outside upon the bed-clothes. She touched it softly. As she did so, a low cry rose to her lips. She had been looking at that hand for a long time. She had only now discovered a ring upon the little finger.

A short, contemptuous laugh came as a response to the cry. China Partins did not ask what had forced that exclamation from the girl. She knew — even before it had fairly passed her lips.

"Findin' you're a bigger fool than you knowed, hain't ye?" she said.

"How did it come there?" gasped Naomi, stooping to look more closely at the thin gold circlet and its one common little stone.

"Hit never was nowhars else, exceptin' on his other hand," replied the old woman. "He done wanted hit on the hand he could move."

"But I found it — his ring — in the bone cave," said Naomi, her voice sharp with the note of perplexity.

China Partins laughed a low, hoarse laugh.

"You done seed what your eyes was luekin' for," she said scornfully. "Lor! gal, the ring *you* found hadn't sich a big stone as hisn by a smart sight. Hit was the same colour, and the settin' was the same, but the ring warn't worth as much as hisn."

The surprise in Naomi's eyes approached to awe. Was there no circumstance of her life in Big Creek that this woman was not familiar with?

"How did you know what it looked like,— the ring I found?" she asked.

"Lor! hit hain't an uncommon ring, or useter wasn't when I was young," said China Partins. "Thar was more 'n one had its match. Sixty year ago come June I bought me that ring."

"Then it was yours?" ejaculated Naomi.

"I reckon," came the emphatic reply. "I hain't knowin' whose hit's like to be if hit *hain't* mine. Leastways hit was lost tol'rable nigh to whar yourn was found."

"In the bone cave?" asked Naomi in astonishment.

"Thar warn't no call for hit to be inside. The edge o' the cave was nigh enough," said China Partins shortly.

"And you lost it there?"

"I reckon. Twenty-five year ago this next fust o' March was the day I done went aout with that ring on my finger and come back without hit. I calc'late thar wouldn't 'a been no sich convincin' evidence of Kennedy Poteet's guilt for you to unearth if I hadn't run a powerful big splinter inter my hand out thar in the woods grubbin' for roots. Gal, hit bled. Hit bled plumb bad. I had to use mighty strong Bible words to stop the flow o' blood. Thar wouldn't no ordinary means du hit. Hit stopped then — plumb. But I went home and done forgot my basket o' roots. And hit warn't till night that I missed the ring. Thar come a thunder shower that night, and a right smart o' rain."

"And it washed the ring into the cave?" said Naomi.

"Hit warn't outside atter that rain," replied China Partins significantly. "I done hunted over every inch o' the ground. Hit never seed daylight no more till you rubbed the mud offn hit and knowed hit sure for yourn."

"Why didn't you tell me?" questioned Naomi reproachfully. "It would have prevented much misunderstanding."

The old lips broadened into a contemptuous smile.

"Lor! I warn't in no hurry for ye to know," she said. "Hit warn't makin' no trouble for me-e. Thar's a lot o' guede in a fool's folly if you know how to git hit aout."

She shut her lips, and looked with those keen old eyes into the girl's face. It was not as well under control as usual. It had lost its calm confidence. Bit by bit the standing ground of Naomi's certainty had been swept away. There remained now not even the semblance of excuse for her determined attack upon Kennedy Poteet. "Knowed hit so sure for her own!" Was there anything she had *not* known for sure? And was there a single case in which her judgment had not been at fault?

She stood looking at the ring upon her father's hand.

"I reckon thar hain't no guede waitin'. You might as well take it to-day as ary other time."

The voice of China Partins broke the silence. Just how long it had lasted perhaps neither of the two could have told very positively.

"Take what?"

The girl's lips moved stiffly.

"The money. *I* hain't wantin' to defraud ye of none of yer rights."

"My rights!"

The laugh that accompanied the words was a mirthless one. Ever since she came to Big Creek Naomi had been pushing her claims to the front. She never felt less like urging them than to-day.

China Partins walked across to the broad hearth. With no trace of excitement she stooped over the dust-strewn bricks, and removed a couple from their place. Then, while she knelt before the hole, the claw-shaped nails went to scraping.

It was strange how little interest either of the two felt at that moment in the treasure which had been hidden under that hearth for years. To the woman who had concealed it, though she was no despiser of money as a rule, it was of less moment than the ashes that had sifted down upon its resting-place compared with the other treasure at issue. Naomi's thoughts were of the past,— the misguided, misinterpreted past that had shaped the present. She watched the old woman remove the gathered dust of years, and take out a slab of wood. If she had peered into the cavity thus laid bare, she would have seen nothing to draw her thoughts from that past. The long, muscular arm had to reach far under until it was buried to the elbow before it brought out a tin can, carefully tied down. But when the can was opened Naomi forgot the immediate past in her memories of the more remote. The old leather belt, with pouch attached, had many a time rested in her small hands in the days when the bag was her father's receptacle for his savings. The sight of it brought the tears to her eyes. China Partins brushed the dust from its surface, and held it out towards her.

"Thar, that's yourn; and thar hain't a cent missin'," she said.

Naomi took the leather bag, and turned it over with fingers that trembled.

"Count hit," said the old woman peremptorily. "I hain't aimin' to have no misunderstandin' abaout tha-at. Hit's all thar, jist as I got hit offn him at the fust."

Naomi emptied the pouch, turning the contents on to the table.

"Hit hain't Confederate money," said the old woman. "He done sold his mules to a Northerner."

A thrill went through the girl's fingers as they separated the money. The touch of it carried her back to the transaction to which it belonged. She remem-

bered the big drove of mules it represented, many of them raised on her father's farm, the rest bought from neighbours. She remembered her father's anxiety lest the venture should prove a failure, his plans for the disposal of the gains if it were a success.

"Five thousand dollars, hain't thar?"

The voice of China Partins broke in on her thoughts.

"Exactly five thousand."

"That's hit. Thar warn't neither more nor less in thar. That's what he wanted me to keep for you. I've kep' hit. Thar *is* more, though."

Advancing to the table, she shook the tin can over it. A packet wrapped in a piece of old newspaper fell out with a thud.

"That's the loose money he had in his pockets. I reckon he was a-savin' hit to git home with."

She stood in grim silence while the time-worn paper was unwrapped, disclosing five dollars and a few odd coins. Then she spoke.

"You cain't say *I'm* atter robbin' ye of yer rights!"

Naomi glanced from the money to the bed. She made no answer in words. When she looked back into the old face it had grown harder.

"You can take that money, and you can go," said China Partins. "And you needn't to come back. Till the mischief you've done managed to du is undone, thar shain't a soul on this earth enter my door. You can tell that brother of yourn so. I told you you could come. You can — when I call for ye. But, gal, if *you* try, or he tries, to git the better o' China Partins, you'll larn she hain't lived a hundred years for note."

"You won't let me come to see him?" asked Naomi quickly, a frown gathering upon the face that memories of the past had softened.

"No, I *won't*," said the woman savagely. "I hain't goin' to run the risk of lettin' harm come nigh him, if I

have to fight for him agin as I fit at the fust. Gal, don't you presume. Thar was danger when you come pokin' round here, breakin' off my shutter and pushin' yourself whar you hadn't a mite o' right to come. But that was powerful safe by the side of the danger o' duin' aught that could bring harm to hi-im. You *might* 'a lit on death then, thar won't be no 'might' abaout hit if hit comes to tha-at."

Naomi looked into those fierce, determined eyes, and believed that China Partins spoke truly. There *would* be no doubt of the result if any act of man or woman should work evil to that still figure upon the bed.

"To hurt him would be my loss as much as yours," she said. "You forget that I love him too."

"Love!" snorted the old woman contemptuously. "What do *you* know abaout tha-at? If thar *is* any love, you can show hit by stayin' away. I've got to have him to myself. I've done got to fight the sick aout of him. I hain't wantin' ye here, and you hain't comin'."

She advanced suddenly, and put both strong, muscular hands on the girl's shoulders. She spoke no word, but the old eyes looked into the young ones, which were held fascinated. Naomi had thought she had read those eyes before, at least in part. Now she knew that they were beyond her powers of deciphering.

"Now go!"

The hands were removed suddenly from her shoulders. Their hasty withdrawal caused her to stagger.

"If I go, it is because I am afraid of injuring *him*," she said quietly. "I would do anything, even to staying away from him, if it were for his good. But why should my coming harm him? I will leave you quite alone till after to-morrow. Then you must let me come. If I find that it hurts him, I will keep out of his sight."

They looked at each other.

"You won't come in here no more till thar's a change," said China Partins slowly. "And when that comes, I'll tell ye. Now take that thar money and go."

"Do you think it is worth any more to me than to you?" asked the girl.

"I hain't thinkin' nothin' abaout hit," was the reply. "Hit's yourn. I hain't wantin' hit. I'm wantin' the chance to du the best for hi-im."

Something in her tone won the day. Was it a touch of wistfulness, a faint breath of entreaty?

"I will go," said Naomi, and passed out of the door without approaching her father.

Even China Partins did not see two bright eyes that followed the girl's movements from the moment she appeared in the doorway till she stood upon the rock above. But China Partins was preoccupied, and her thoughts were not of so insignificant a subject as a half-grown lad. Moreover, Lem was good at hiding.

"I hain't set him on the track none too soon," muttered the boy. "Thar *is* somethin' betwixt 'em. I wonder what the sick feller with her eyes has got to du with hit. Whew!"

That shrill whistle betrayed two things,—the presence of Lem Sutton and the advent of a new idea. Lem dropped behind the rock that had hidden him.

"What are *you* duin' here?"

Claw-like fingers bent themselves round the boy's ear, and Lem had the choice of freedom, with the loss of a member that was in his case rather more than ordinarily useful, or present captivity to the fierce old woman whose eyes blazed down at him.

"Lor! I was only restin' a bit," he said. "My! hain't your nails sharp? Better be atter cuttin' 'em."

The answer was a tightening of those nails about his ear, every separate one digging into the flesh with a

savage certainty that Lem found more convincing than words. And when there had been time for the eloquence of the nails to take effect, the old lips opened, and words blood-curdling in their obscurity were hissed into the ear that was at leisure to receive them. What those words foretold, whether they were threat of future evil or promise of present retribution, Lem did not know. He did know that the old eyes drew his and held them, and that he was impelled to look into the flame of their fierce light.

The fingers relaxed before the eyes set him free. He was rubbing his ear and feeling of the dents as the blood came back to it, while yet he stood captive, held by those glaring old eyes so near his own.

"Thar's all Big Creek for you-u to kick yer heels in," said the old woman, after the sound of the charm had died away. "And thar hain't nary place no danger but thisn. Lor! boy, hain't you heared China Partins was a wi-itch? Thar don't nobody come near he-er without her knowin'. And thar don't nobody contrairy her for note. You better lueke aout plumb sharp. Thar's a hundred ways I can fix you-u. Lor! thar's no tellin' what *will* come to ye if you don't keep away from here."

She removed her eyes from his face. Lem stood for a moment dazed. Then he backed out of the reach of that long arm.

"You hain't knowin' plumb everything, if you are a witch," he said, and darted away.

"If she's so powerful knowin', why didn't she see me peek in t'other time?" demanded Lem, as he rubbed the unfortunate ear and made a quick and somewhat perilous descent into the Gap by a route less circuitous than that by which Naomi was returning to the village. "Lor me! I'm powerful glad I got on the scent. Hit's her dad. sure, the feller old Ken killed and stuck in the cave. Lor! hit was time I come to Big Creek."

And Lem struck the road like an India rubber ball, and almost ran over Will Hollingsworth.

"Been up above with your friend Naomi, eh?" asked Will, in an insinuating tone.

"Naomi Mozingo?" questioned the boy stonily. "Did she come this away? I seed her goin' to the Ridges atter Dal a right smart ago. I'm huntin' squirrels. Ever try to knock 'em down with a stone? Lor! you can du hit!"

He kicked a pair of bare heels in the dust, and left Will to his meditations, which lasted till the figure of a girl came in sight at the farthest point visible from where he stood. Then Will Hollingsworth also turned homeward, and left the pass to the girl.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IT does not take forty-eight hours to alter the fate of countries or mar the lives of individuals. The wheels of life move slowly, but there comes a specific turn that, while it carries them not a hair's breadth further than any previous revolution, alters the relative positions of the good, that like a light approached shone always ahead, and the evil, looming up vaguely portentous in the darkness beyond.

Naomi had promised to remain away from the cottage upon the mountain for the space of two days. She saw no actual necessity for the promise, but the will of China Partins was strong. Moreover the suggestion of the possibility that her appearance had injured her father made her unwilling to run any risk. She stayed down in the valley, and waited for the coming of Dalbert.

China Partins had insisted on being left alone with her charge. Her eye, trained to note every change in his condition, saw occasion for uneasiness. It suggested no ground for positive fear. She had confidence in her skill in fighting disease and injury. She had literally stood between her patient and death all these years, and she was rather anxious than fearful now. There had never been a time when it was absolutely safe to relax her vigilance. She was less inclined to do so at the present moment than ever before. "A gal and boy that hadn't enough sense to keep from makin' fools of themselves before the world warn't goin' to undo her work. If they didn't know what was for the guede of everybody concerned, she did. China Partins warn't no fool, and warn't to be got the best on by them that was."

She had turned out the disturbing causes, both in one day, and now she gave herself up to the care of her patient. In the coming of Naomi she had met with a measure of defeat. She was not looking for more. She had long ago foreseen danger in the appearance of the children of Dalbert Mozingo in the valley of Big Creek. When her eyes first rested upon the girl's face, she had had a vision of good — represented to her by the presence of that helpless being about whom every fibre of her heart had twisted and knotted itself in an abandonment of affection that grew out of her isolated and joyless life — coming within a measurable distance of its end. That she should be robbed of her charge was the biggest ill that life held for her. She had set herself to prevent the catastrophe. "Thar *was* means," and China Partins had made use of them. Charm and incantation, and the cunning perfected by a century's practice, had been brought into play to keep the girl from that lonely hut in the mountains. And now, with the game no longer in her own hands, China Partins was prepared for yet another struggle.

"They shain't cheat me of hi-im," she said; and the lips set themselves like rims of steel. "Thar shain't nobody rob me of him, nor nobody touch him. He's mine. He hain't theirn. They hain't no right to him, and they hain't goin' to have him. When China Partins is robbed of the one thing she ever sot store by in this world, thar 'll be somebody layin' dead araound this away."

The lips came to with a snap, and the eyes glittered. She knew what she was talking about. It would be no easy thing to rob her of her treasure. There were not many men who would have cared to storm the house of China Partins. She was known as an unerring shot, and gun and pistol were never far out of reach of her hand when the mistress of the log cabin was at home.

A short, contemptuous laugh was her comment on the thought that possibly Dalbert Mozingo might seek to enforce his claim by an appeal to the sheriff.

"Thar hain't no sheriff fool enough to try hit," she muttered. "The gal and boy have *got* to listen to reason."

And in the end defeat came suddenly, and not as a result of a refusal of the "gal and boy" to listen to reason. The wheels of life had reached the particular revolution that contained the dividing moment between the cherished joy, which became of the past, and the ill, that out of menacing obscurity leapt into the position of present reality.

China Partins was looking for difficulty — preparing for conflict. She was not looking for that which came.

The symptoms of failure on the part of her patient had increased in the day that followed Naomi's second visit to the cabin. She recognised the necessity for vigour in her fight against this new onslaught of evil. There was no danger that threatened her charge that did not find her on the alert. She was fighting this particular form of danger when the sun went down,— fighting it grimly enough, but with no real fear of the result. She was fighting it when the morning dawned. But when the sun lifted himself clear of the hills, and sent his bold beams across the cottage, she was fighting it no longer. The two principals in the conflict stood face to face, and China Partins was not the conqueror. The fifteen years' unceasing fight over the half dormant life of Dalbert Mozingo, the elder, was ended with strange suddenness. If the name of the bold aggressor had been any other than Death, China Partins had not been robbed of her treasure.

By intuition, as well as by close observation, the old woman had long known that the thread of life was liable to snap. Dalbert Mozingo was not weak in the sense

of general frailty. The face that had so long lain upon the pillow was that of a well-nourished and ordinarily strong man; but the injuries he had received had been of such a character that a strain upon the vital forces, a shock to the system, or an unforeseen accident, might at any time sever his connection with life. Yet it was not in death, but in the possible interference with her rights, that China Partins had seen the coming evil. She had cried, "Give place!" to Dalbert Mozingo's children. There was no giving place with death.

"He's done gone!"

The old woman stood over the bed with a wild surprise in her eyes. She had many a time fought for his life with greater fear than had possessed her that night.

"I shain't never stand betwixt him and death no more!"

The thin, wiry fingers bent themselves, and then struck out, as against an imaginary foe, with all the force of the sinewy arm behind them. There was fight enough left in that old heart yet to defy death himself.

The silence in the room was such as broods over a double death,—the departure of a life and the death of hope. Suddenly a hoarse voice broke the frozen silence with a low, passionate dirge, strange mixture of Bible phrases and heathen incantations, a wild, savage protest against fate. Incoherent, only half audible, it grew clear enough for the final words to be distinguished.

"A worm o' the dust, trod daown and beat inter the earth and bruised. Ay, sore bruised, but not crushed. Lor, no! thar's turn in the worm yit. The wisdom o' serpents. Lor! hit's true. Thar's critters grovellin' in the dust that hain't so easy got the better on as the worm. Conquered? Separated? Done forced to give him up? No!"

Then with a quick movement the whole figure changed its aspect. The tall form drew itself up with a mighty

effort till the contracted muscles acknowledged the compelling force and the bent shoulders straightened, lifting the head inches above its ordinary height; the long arm reached forth with the forefinger pointing into space; and the eyes, that had been vaguely wandering, shone with a peculiar light.

"You done thought to git the best o' me! You done aimed to separate us! Lor! you *cain't*. Hit'd take more 'n Death to du tha-at. All the world may be afraid on ye because your name's Death. *I* hain't. Thar *is* ways. China Partins hain't come to her last fight yit."

The arm dropped, the muscles of the figure relaxed, the shoulders bowed themselves more than ever before; and the old woman bent over the bed. Tenderly her fingers stroked the stiffening cheek, and the old eyes looked into those others that had not yet been closed.

"They're a-callin'," she said, and pressed the lids tenderly down.

Death had not been harsh. As China Partins set about the performance of the last services that would be needed at her hands, she saw no sign of struggle. Life had made but a mild flicker of opposition, a feeble enough protest against defeat. That one afternoon's consciousness of the things about it — whether it were full appreciation or a limited feeling after understanding — had been the last effort of the soul to find at once light and expression. The rest was the mere animal struggle for life, and that was not vigorous.

The sun sent a broad, jovial beam full in the face of China Partins. She turned, and looked out.

"Shinin' on the evil and on the guede," she said aloud. "Lor! thar hain't no guede left. Hit's plumb evil, the hull on hit."

She turned away, and finished her work. Then she swept up the cabin, and with a recklessness never wit-

nessed before went to the wood-pile and took therefrom an armful of wood,— not weeds. Skilfully she piled it on the embers, heaping ashes about it so that its consumption might be slow.

"She'll be a-comin' to-day. Thar hain't no keepin' he-er away," she said. "And she'll find life in *hit*. Thar 'll be no cold hearth in China Partins's house."

It was when the fire was banked to her satisfaction that she saw a shadow between herself and the sunlight. She saw nothing else, for Lem Sutton's ear had not yet lost the marks of the penetrating nails that had tried their strength with its tough skin, and the boy was proportionately watchful. The circumstances called for caution; but there were mysteries up here on the mountain, and mysteries that concerned Dal. Consequently it was Lem's business to investigate.

"He hain't no hand at findin' aout for himself," said the boy, as he followed in the track of Dal's horse to the Gap, a full hour after the horse itself had gone on to Hickory Creek. "Lor! hit takes a right smart o' sense to see *all* that's goin' on. Thar might piles o' things happen right under hi-is eyes and he'd never see 'em. I got to lueke aout powerful smart. She hain't a-thinkin' of *his* interests. She's a-runnin' her own concerns and a-duin' for the other feller. Shucks! Will Hollingsworth hain't a patch on Dal. She's a fool!"

Lem scrambled up a rock that was not manifestly in his way, and stood on its summit with a sense of master over nature and scorn of the girl who had mistaken the path of life represented by the pursuit and service of Dalbert Mozingo for the inferior by-way of any other occupation. Then he went on into the hollow at the back of the mountains and dodged the sharp eyes of China Partins.

"Thar hain't no guede hidin' plumb in the heart o' that blackberry thicket. Thar might some people's

eyes be deceived that away, but they hain't the eyes o' China Partins."

The old woman stood in the doorway. She had not seen Lem disappear behind that luxuriant clump of vines. It was not apparent how she managed to see him now, for the growth of tangled green that was massed between him and the speaker should have been dense enough to hide a more substantial figure.

There was no answer to the words, unless a scarcely perceptible quiver of the vines were an answer. Lem was performing a backward movement.

China Partins stood motionless for a considerable proportion of a minute. Then across her face there shot a peculiar light. She took a couple of steps forward.

"You can come right aout o' thar, and du what you was aimin' at duin'."

The ring in the sharp voice had in it no suggestion of defeat. It came across the space to Lem Sutton, and the passion in it increased for a moment the pace of his heart beats. Its next words stopped his hasty flight.

"You hain't hangin' raound this away for note. Lor! du you think I don't know? You done come to see. We-el, I hain't aimin' to stop ye. You can come and lueke. I hain't aimin' to hinder ye — nor to touch ye."

Was it recklessness, or something in the tone of the voice that made the boy act upon the last statement as if he believed it? He tore himself free of the bushes, with hair very much the worse for his close acquaintance with the same, and stood in full sight of the eyes that looked him, not over, but through.

"You come to see! Boy, you done come at the right time. Lor! thar hain't been a day for fifteen year when thar warn't danger for ary fool that come pokin' raound, spyin' on China Partins's concerns. Thar hain't been a day till this'n. Lor! that thar sun ought to shine blood to-day. Hit's a fool sun."

She shot a fierce glance at the shining orb, and stood between the boy and the house, tall, unyielding, aggressive, an effectual damper on any enthusiasm of curiosity that might possess the lad by reason of her words of invitation.

"You needn't to be scart," she said, moving back towards the end of the house, and leaving a free course to the open window. "I shain't touch ye."

"Shucks! I hain't scart," responded the boy, disdaining to glance in the direction of the danger as he walked up to the window.

"Thar, go right up and peek in," commanded the old woman. "Take a right smart lueke, so's you can tell what you seed. You done come to lueke. Lor! you didn't come for note."

She was watching the boy's face. She saw the shadow of awe pass over it, to be hastily effaced by an effort of will, and replaced by an expressionless stare.

"Lor! yes, he's dead," she said, in response to that first look. "Plumb dead! I done fit Death inch by inch. Boy, thar don't lueke no more the matter with him naow than thar did yesterday was a week. But me and Death's done wrastled over him, and Death screeched, 'Victory!' Lor! hit hain't so sure."

There was silence for a long minute. Lem's eyes gazed upon the stiffened face.

"I said I wouldn't live without him! And he's done gone clar away in spite of me. Lor!"

Lem was too fully occupied with the inside of the cabin to note the sudden lurid flash of the old eyes.

"Thar, you've done seed for yourself. Now go and tell *her*," said the old woman, in a low, commanding tone. "Tell her he's all ready for his buryin'. And tell her China Partins don't lie."

"My lor! what 'll she say? He was her dad!" ejaculated the boy.

"You go!"

The tall figure advanced towards the window. Lem effected a hasty retrograde movement.

"I'm goin'," he said, with a glance into those burning, undecipherable eyes.

"Mercy! they 'most scorched a hole through me," he exclaimed as he darted off out of their range. "Dead! Lor! hit's a sight."

His heels showed in brisk movement as he kicked them up behind him, and then took an equally useful but less prominent position while he stood on the rock above the cabin, and turned to look back to where a tall figure held itself in the doorway. Did he feel the scorching of those eyes still, or was it the outstretching of the finger suddenly thrust forth and pointed towards the valley that made him scamper on till he was fairly out of sight?

"Lor! what 'll *she* say — and Dal?" exclaimed the boy. "I thought he'd 'a stopped in thar as he went to Hickory Creek. Like as not he started off to see *her* instead. Thar hain't no bein' plumb sure he didn't, if he *did* say he warn't goin' to. He hain't a powerful guede hand at keepin' up a quarrel. If it was he-er" —

He broke off and turned in among the rocks. Given an easy and commonplace way to attain an object, and a perilous and out-of-the-ordinary method, there would never be a shade of hesitation about Lem's choice. On the present occasion he did *not* go down through the open valley to the road in the Gap. If he had done so, he might have met Naomi.

The hollow in the hills where the cottage stood looked as it had looked every summer day for fifteen years. But upon the face of China Partins was an expression that no previous day of the fifteen summers had witnessed.

"I've knowed thar was evil comin' ever since she sot

foot in the valley. Hit's been squallin' in the winds, and moanin' in the trees. Hit's done co-ome!"

She stood within the cabin, facing the light without. That bit of tangled hollow, with its bushes and weeds, and its clinging mass of blackberry vines immediately beyond, had met her eye year after year since she brought Dalbert Mozingo into the cabin and closed the door upon the world. His face inside, and that wild tangle of rock and greenery without, had been the limits of her interest. Now the foundation of life was shaken. The perishable green plants and the immovable rock remained, both alike stable enough to mock at the change within.

"China Partins don't lie! She hain't spoke for note!"

Had something more than the thread of one life been snapped in the last hours? Those old eyes had many a time burned with anger, or leaped into fiercer flame with sudden passion, yet they had never held such fire as scorched within them now. The light in their depths was lurid.

"I done been robbed of him at last!"

The low, hoarse words had a moan in them, like the sea when it whispers of death.

She went up to the bed, and touched the calm face. It was cold beneath her fingers.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE fire on the hearth had burst through its barriers and leaped into liberty, giving utterance to an aggressive snap and crackle almost in the face of the girl who stood but a foot or two from it. The position was peculiarly ill-chosen for a hot summer day. The breath of the fire was oppressive. The girl felt suffocated. Yet she did not step back, nor turn her face from its glare.

It was a face white and rigid, a match for that upon the bed, or for the other which was pillowed less softly on the cabin floor. The owner of the face was trembling. For the time being she had lost the strength of nerve, the power of self-domination that was the instinct of her life. She stood looking down at the flame, scarcely conscious that its heat oppressed her. The life of the fire answered to the beating life of her own heart, each in its way a protest against the domination of horror and death.

Facing the fire, she had her back to the room and that which it contained. When the details of that scene were taken into consideration, it was no wonder the hand she lifted to her forehead was unsteady, and the thoughts that rushed through her brain appalling.

"It's plumb sure he passed through the Gap this morning."

Her lips shook. There was enough to unnerve her, even without the thoughts that would not be dissociated from the surroundings into which she had stepped without a shadow of warning. The long, ghastly form lying limp and still on the boards within an arm's length of

her father's bed was not reassuring. In death, as in life, the face of China Partins was fierce.

"He'd be nearly certain to come here. And he didn't know."

She was still staring into the fire, with a suspicious intentness suggestive of fear that her eyes might wander to the spot where the owner of the lonely cabin in the hollow lay shot through the heart, dead by the side of her charge. To pass from the sunlit peace of the hollow without into the mystery-haunted gloom of a cabin given over to death, was an experience fruitful in the awakening of fears that set the girl's heart beating irregularly and her brain combating at the same moment that it drew into line certain propositions of the nature of convictions.

"Big Creek has never quarrelled with her in all these years. She has lived here unmolested in spite of her lack of sociability. Who should interfere with her to-day?"

The train of thought went on, shaped by the unexplained, but, to Naomi, not unexplainable tragedy the log cabin had witnessed that morning.

"And it is certain that he was near — that he turned into the valley from the Gap not many hours ago."

The one fact about which the whole argument turned was uppermost still. Her hand tried to steady itself as it unclosed and brought within range of her eyes a scrap of paper, found on her way to the cottage. It was part of an envelope, and bore the date of that very day, while upon the other side of it was her brother's name, — proof beyond contradiction that he had that morning left the road through the Gap and turned into the little valley leading to the cottage.

What of it? Nothing, until she pushed open the cabin door, and stood speechless, too much horrified at the moment for consecutive thought. The thought came later. It grew out of the scene.

Dalbert had been there — since the sun rose. Even in the first moment of bewilderment that one idea ranged itself by the side of the newly discovered horror. Dalbert had been there, and China Partins had been shot. Afterwards the two facts assumed a more definite relation.

Dalbert had come there to see his father, to demand of this woman an account of her actions with regard to him. He had come all unprepared for that which he found,— his father dead, and the body guarded, dragon like, by an old woman who on the only other occasion on which he had set foot in her cabin had fiercely ordered him out of its door. He had never heard the secret of China Partins's life. He knew her only as a witch, whom suspicion charged with divers deeds awesome and weird. He knew nothing of her devotion to her charge, nothing but that such women were dangerous, and that death had overtaken his father suddenly in her house.

"He was so completely in the dark that he was ready for any misconception," argued the girl. "With nothing but misleading facts to guide him it was no wonder he blundered on the wrong explanation. He could hardly help it."

She put up her hand to push back a refractory ring of hair. It lay damp and clinging on her forehead.

"Her words and her manner would be enough to confirm his worst imaginings. After *his* death she would be as wild as a savage animal robbed of its young. It was only my father's presence that made it safe for anybody to come near her. And she was not looking for his death. It must have been as great a shock to her as to anybody."

One half of the story of that death dominated cabin Naomi had read at a glance. Sudden as was the shock that came when her eye fell upon her father's face, it

brought with it no impulse to seek for life there. She recognised the presence of life's rival. And even in those early moments the calm peace of that sleep of death affected her less painfully than the unseeing gaze of his eyes had done when she was last at the cottage. The knowledge brought a sharp shock, a sudden contraction of the heart, but none of the horror that pertained to that other form, lifeless as his, to which, however, she sprang with a fierce longing to find some pulsation of life yet left, some flutter of breath still in the nostrils.

The longing came before the connected thought, before a certain train of reasoning set the girl's lips shaking and her hands trembling. The half acknowledged hope had faded quickly, and the fears that had sprung into being at that first glance had grown stronger and more definite as the minutes passed. She had turned away to the fire now, assured that in it was the only life that pertained to the cabin.

It was because she was looking so fixedly into the fire that she did not see the face of a man a few inches back from the window opening. The firelight was in her eyes, so that the shadow of Will Hollingsworth was not perceived.

Even *his* face blanched for a moment at the sight his eyes beheld. That young, lithe figure standing in the midst of death sent a shudder through him. Nevertheless he drew nearer.

"Her father, by all the witches in witchdom! The feller that old Ken Poteet was accused of putting underground!"

The words were not spoken aloud, and they came after a long, close scrutiny of the face upon the pillow. Even now, when the eyes that had been the most striking point of resemblance were closed, the likeness of that face to Naomi's was too plainly marked to leave

room for doubt of the relationship. Some things that had been enigmatical to Will became suddenly clear.

It was not a time for a girl to be left alone. There was enough of horror inside that cabin to make a stout heart quail. The figure of China Partins lay ghastly and terrible upon the floor. A pool of blood, not yet congealed, soaked slowly into her clothing, and her fingers — the long, claw-tipped fingers — were dabbled in its redness. Yet Will Hollingsworth made no movement to reassure the girl by announcing his presence. He was studying the situation, possibly studying also the necessary inference that would follow his manifestation of himself in this place.

Will had followed Naomi through the Gap,— always at a safe distance. It had been because the distance was safe that he had lost sight of her when she turned out of the road, and had consequently come late upon the scene. Notwithstanding the lateness, however, to Naomi's quick mind his appearance before the window would hardly fail to be suggestive of dogged footsteps. Yet it was not care for his own honour that kept Will's tongue silent. The expression of his face was not one of shame, neither did it betray concern for the girl he was watching. Slowly into the eyes that had for the last minute been resting on the back of Naomi's head came a look of triumph.

"Caught at last! It began to look like defeat."

He breathed a sigh of satisfaction. It may have been that sigh which caused the girl to look up; it may have been that the thread of the argument that her mind was weaving into shape carried her too conclusively to a point from which the mind recoiled. She turned round.

"You here?"

"Yes. Why not? We have always been partners in the avenging of the death of your father."

She moved back fully two steps, till the fire warned

her in friendly crackle that there was danger in a too close contact with itself.

The eyes that sought his inquiringly had lost the spark of defiance that had rarely been absent from them of late. He had never seen them less aggressive.

"I do not understand what you mean," she said slowly. "I have found my father — and lost him."

"And there was nothing left but the avenging."

She looked at him with startled questioning.

"We made a blunder about that,— a foolish blunder, as unjust as it was foolish," she said coldly. "I found it out too late to remedy it."

"Yes — I see," he answered. "But not too late to make more sure next time. The second attempt has not miscarried, whatever may have been the fate of the first."

His glance had travelled from the girl's face to the stiffening form of the old woman on the floor. If he had not been looking down, he must have seen the strange light that came into Naomi's eyes and then left them again. She drew herself up proudly.

"You think *I* had anything to do with that?"

She also was looking down now.

He smiled.

"What else should I think?" he asked.

There was a momentary hesitation. Then she spoke.

"True," she said. "What else should you think?"

He did not notice the slightest possible stress on the "you."

"Don't be alarmed. I am not prepared to think the worst of you," he said. "I know you too well to be altogether surprised — at this."

He was still looking at the dead face of China Partins.

"That is encouraging,— very."

He looked up then.

"It is to me," he said fiercely. "Naomi, we have too long been partners in — well, in a powerful big mistake, to object to being partners now in a crime."

"Have we?" she asked in an incomprehensible tone.

"Yes," he replied emphatically. "We cannot afford to offend each other. We have both too much to lose. And we have pulled together long enough to be in no danger of letting a little secret such as this become anything but a fairly unanswerable argument in favour of our joining forces for the rest of our lives."

She understood the threat in his words; but, with a return of her accustomed coolness, she ignored the last half of them.

"Too much to lose?" she said reflectively. "The chances at issue being — what?"

The way in which her eyes swept over to the window warned him that the defiance was not all dead. The two had retained their original positions, Naomi standing before the hearth, and Will looking in at the window. They had no fear of being overheard. The hollow in the mountain was absolutely deserted.

"The chances at stake for me?" he asked, with a savage laugh. "They are all summed up in one,— you. I'll swear man never had bigger. Do you want to know the other side, or is it tolerable plain to you? It should be. There's nobody better able to judge of it. All Big Creek has come round to Naomi Mozingo's way of thinking about the kind of justice that should fall on the head of a murderer. The chances at stake — with this suggestive bit of tragedy waiting to be revealed — don't seem hard to reckon up. It's plumb awkward, sometimes, to have been too successful in educating public morality."

There was no lack of aggression in her eyes now — nor of defiance. He would have been better satisfied if he could have decided what he saw there besides the defiance.

"You deal in pretty words," she said. "Where, in this case, do your astute eyes discover the head of the murderer, which is to prove a target for a too highly educated popular morality?"

He laughed.

"It isn't far to seek, is it?" he said. "Nobody has entered the old witch's cabin for an age. Unlucky for her that her first visitor chanced to be a strong believer in vengeance. The inference is powerful easy."

"Perhaps," she said quietly. "And who is to accuse me of murder?"

She spoke the word unflinchingly, with a little smile as she approached it."

"Who? Well, nobody, unless you make a second blunder bigger than the first," he said. "Who is there to do it? Nobody knows this little secret but you and me. The old hag hasn't a host of friends, I'll answer for it. It won't be a powerful big matter to bury her here, right under her own cabin, and — your father with her. It's the safest plan, if not the pleasantest. Nobody will be asking after her for a smart sight. And when they do, they'll think she has ridden off on a broomstick or some other steed usually appropriated by witches. Lucky for us the old woman led an unsociable life."

She made him no answer. Her eyes had dropped to the floor again. He was at a loss to know what inference to draw from her silence. He waited to give her time to weigh the situation. His faith in the circumstances that had at last played so conveniently into his hands was firm enough to give him confidence. Naomi was no fool. She knew when she was beaten.

"Your proposition is startling," she said at last,— "too startling. Your plan can be improved upon. My father merits a better burial. Since you see no obstacle to our working together, what is to hinder you

from dropping aout of the business, and going back to the valley as innocent of all knowledge of China Partins's cottage as before you came? Big Creek will not necessarily take it for granted that you followed me here."

If the last words struck home, they failed to produce any sign.

"But you?" returned Will. "How will you make yourself safe? This is a tolerable dangerous fix, if ary person finds it aout. It's of you I'm thinking."

"Are you?" she said; and there was a shade more of inquiry in the tone than was pleasant. "Then you may set your mind at rest. I can take care of myself. It is possibly an easier matter than you imagine. In twenty-four hours' time I shall call in all the spies of the village to take your place at that window and look in upon this scene. But it's plumb necessary to get time for my plans to mature. I have a story to tell Big Creek that will set it searching all creation before it charges Naomi Mozingo with the death of the woman who sheltered her father."

He looked at her doubtfully. She was strangely reckless,— far less influenced by fear than he had anticipated. But fear and Naomi Mozingo had never been close acquaintances.

"As you will," he said. "It looks powerful dangerous to me, but I'm ready to risk it. There's only one thing I won't risk, and that's losing you."

"You had better go back to the village," she said. "I shall stay here till you are gone. We don't want to be seen together. Go and look after the mill."

When he had gone, she turned and stared into the fire again.

"A plumb slap in the face by fate!"

Her laugh, mirthless and low, broke the long stillness.

"Kin to a murderer and personally accused of the crime! Looks tolerably suggestive of certain accusations coming home like chickens to roost."

She laughed scornfully again, and let the thought take root. She had never been slow to tell herself unpleasant truths.

Presently she went over, and drew the shutter to and fastened it. Then she stepped out into the hot air. She did not lock the door. With the exception of the closed shutter, she had left everything as she found it.

Anger at the trap in which Will Hollingsworth had caught her for the moment overpowered the gnawing pain at her heart. But for the conviction that the root of that pain was set in a certainty, she would have thrown his accusations back in his face. She was not at liberty to follow her inclination.

She had little doubt that, in a fit of what seemed to him righteous indignation, her brother had shot the old woman. He had undoubtedly been provoked. It was even possible that the deed had been done in self-defence. But the fact remained. The son of Dalbert Mozingo, the elder, had violently taken the life of the woman who for fifteen years had sheltered and cherished his father. It would be hard to prove that there was excuse for the deed.

The crime of murder lay against the name of Mozingo, and she was going to warn the murderer. For more than twelve months she had elaborated arguments in support of certain theories respecting the righteous punishment of the man who could take the life of another. To-day she was hurrying, with trembling limbs, to advise one such to keep out of the way while she distorted facts and skilfully covered a crime. So much for her theories.

That Dal would be wise enough not to return to the scene of danger was, in her estimation, too much to ex-

pect. It would be just like him, when the heat of passion was over, to come back and give himself up. It was this she was making it her business to prevent.

She did not know where to seek her brother. Notwithstanding the fact that he had been in the village the day before, she was in ignorance of his arrangements. She had waited for him to come to her, and he had failed her. She did not know in what part of Hickory Creek to look for him. On the whole, she preferred meeting him on the road beyond the Gap. Her plan was to lay in wait for him as he came back that night. She had a somewhat firm conviction that he would come back.

For the present she did not fear discovery. Nobody went into that hollow of the hills for months at a time; and if any did chance to wander thither on this particular day, he would leave the log cabin alone. The unsociable habits of China Partins were well understood.

Naomi could afford to put off all action till Dalbert came, let him be ever so late. To-morrow, when he was safely out of Big Creek, she would go up through the Gap and rediscover the tragedy of the old witch's death. When she had told the story of China Partins's devotion to the father of Dalbert and Naomi Mozingo, there would be few who would think to accuse the son of the dead man of the murder that had been committed.

The plan was not a hard one to carry out, but Dalbert must first be got out of the way. He was a most successful blunderer where deception was concerned.

The scheme had been perfect — until Will Hollingsworth appeared on the scene. Now there were complications. Nevertheless Naomi was on her way to carry out her original intention. Dalbert must be warned. The danger to him was imminent — in view of his own character. Afterwards there would be other matters to consider.

CHAPTER XXX

WHEN Naomi Mozingo left the hollow in the mountain, her intention was to go on towards Hickory Creek. In reality she turned in the opposite direction. She had seen Will Hollingsworth in the distance.

"He'll hang round till he spoils everything," she said angrily. "Does he think I'm going to run away?"

Perhaps he did, or something like it. He distrusted the look in her eyes. Because it was incomprehensible, he feared it.

"What is to prevent her meeting Dal and getting clear of the place before anybody's the wiser?" he said. "Dal's horse would carry double. It would be just like her to fool me yet."

His feet moved hurriedly, however, when she turned towards Big Creek. He was not anxious that she should overtake him. He was considerably nonplussed when he saw her enter the house that before her removal to the mill had been that of her nearest neighbour. He had not thought her in a mood for company.

He would perhaps have been a little more surprised if he had heard her announce to her hostess that her brother was going away immediately to start another mill, and "she was aimin' to keep house for him."

"Lor! what does Will Hollingsworth say?" demanded the woman.

Naomi shrugged her shoulders.

"There is all outside to come to an understanding with him in," she said. "Ary one house is too small."

"Mercy!" rejoined the woman. "I should say hit would be. I see him pass here twice this mornin'."

"He'll rest better when I'm gone — and so shall I," laughed Naomi. "Will you give me some dinner?"

Where in all the village *wouldn't* the girl have been welcome to dinner with such a suggestive bit of news to impart? For weeks now Big Creek had been agog; and since the death of Abner Poteet talk had grown lively. Every fresh piece of news was added with interest to the general fund, and the discoverer of the same became for the time being a person of importance.

Naomi stayed until the afternoon was fairly passed, maliciously conscious that for the present she had outwitted Will Hollingsworth. He had been forced to follow her advice, and go back to the mill. He could not well stay watching the house for hours.

"Lor! she's a cool one," said the neighbour, as Naomi stepped out into the slanting sunlight. "Thar don't nothin' upset her. She didn't feel mighty easy abaout the death of Ab Poteet, though. Lor! hit hain't likely she would. She was a plumb sight too hard on Ab, and I de*clar* she knows hit."

The good woman had not neglected to discuss recent topics of interest with her visitor. Why should she lose so favourable an opportunity? Events were happening thick and fast at Big Creek now, and opinion was changing at an unprecedented rate. Authoritative information was worth something.

"She'll tell it all over Big Creek in less than an hour," said Naomi. "It will prepare the way for future revelations."

She smiled mirthlessly as she imagined the effect of the rumour on Will Hollingsworth, when it should come to his ears, as it would hardly fail to do before long. Will was just now the unmanageable element in the difficulty.

He seemed a very persistent element; for when the girl had got well into the Gap, and with an apparently

careless movement had turned her head to look at the cloudless sky, she saw, as she swept her eyes down again, that which made her change her original plan. Instead of continuing her walk through the Gap, she disappeared suddenly from the roadway, seeking the shelter afforded by a sharp dip in the bank of the stream and a friendly tangle of bushes.

Big Creek lay low in its banks to-day. There was a point where flat rocks in its bed were uncovered, and it was possible to walk across the stream with only a step or two where the water came above the ankles. There was a strong feeling of irritation in Naomi's heart as she set her feet on the slippery rock bed, and trusted herself to the shallow water.

"Hunting for murderers seems to be a powerful popular amusement in Big Creek," she muttered. "That's what comes of setting the fashion."

In all the defeats of the last weeks the girl had never been quite as sore at heart as she was to-day. Will Hollingsworth's accusation had come as a climax. Naomi was proud, and fate was hitting her hard.

To Will Hollingsworth's opinion, as such, she was indifferent. It was that which Will did not know, that which his accusation must for the present be made to cover, that gave the real sting to the imputation. It would not be difficult for Naomi Mozingo to prove to the satisfaction of Big Creek that she was not the murderer of China Partins. If it had been half as easy to prove, to her own satisfaction, that she was not that despised, reprehensible person, the nearest of kin to a murderer, her heart would not have beat with such angry soreness to-day.

"You make no distinction?" Why should the words come up as clearly now as when she heard the voice of Marshall Rutherford utter them?

She bowed her head to her own verdict. She was

not the murderer of the old woman who lay dead in her long-defended stronghold, but, on her own showing, she was a sharer in the consequences of the crime. She could not get clear of her kinship with the man whose hand had been responsible for the ruin. Nay, she did not want to be clear of that kinship. She had said that she made no distinction. At this moment she forcibly realised that there *are* distinctions, even in crime.

The horror of the deed itself had entered her soul. That its victim was China Partins, a woman who had merited nothing but good at the hands of Dalbert Mozingo's children, seemed to her a cruel aggravation of the case. Her gratitude to the old woman had been strong. The terrible irony of the fate that had repaid the saver of a life with a violent death presented itself to her forcibly. She was mourning less for her father than for the woman who had lost him and her life in one day.

She had reached the opposite side of the stream. Big Creek lay between her and the road, and great ramparts of rock rose sheer before her. A huge, sloping wall of nature's masonry, of such a form that it was hard to believe it had not been part of a giant castle that had once held sway over this wild defile, invited her to its shelter. Even Will Hollingsworth's eyes might search for her long, when once she had gained a hiding-place in its cover.

That he had followed her into the pass was unfortunate. She must see Dalbert alone. His safety depended on it. If the worst came to the worst, it would have to come to a trial of strength between her and Will. The time when she could dictate terms had not entirely passed.

She had some hope of tiring him out, however. So long as he saw her ahead of him, he would follow. When he lost sight of her, there was a possibility that

he would grow weary of the chase. To search through a chaos of rock such as lay about her on every side would require the patience of a more persevering hunter than Will Hollingsworth. To tire him out, or elude him upon the mountain side and pass beyond him when the shadows of evening began to gather, was not an impossible outcome of the situation. In a minute Naomi was scrambling up between fallen boulders, seeking the most convenient hiding-place. With a sharp pang she remembered that it was among these very rocks her father had crouched, while the soldiers above hunted for his life.

She had a good view of the road round the corner of the rock she chose as shelter, and the silence of the pass was conducive to the hearing of distant sounds. She could hardly be surprised from either hand; and if Dalbert should come sooner than she expected, there would yet be time for her to cross the stream. Of Will she saw nothing. He might be waiting further down the Gap, or he might have returned to Big Creek. From the fact that he had not passed along the open stretch of road visible from her hiding-place,— which stretch included the greater part of the pass,— she concluded that he had given up the pursuit. Nevertheless she decided to retain her present position till the shadows of evening could be turned into allies.

It was very lonely here in the Gap as the sun sank lower. Nature has a trick of striking minor chords upon the heart that is oppressed with dread or heavy with sorrow. The grandeur and strength of the mountain wall above and before her spoke to Naomi less of safety than of insurmountability. The littleness of human personality in the midst of this all-embracing world of rock and trees and water oppressed her. The departing day had in it a pathos that brought tears to her eyes. She had never seen the sunset so before.

Supper had long been over in the village, and Big Creek was outside its doors, seeking for coolness. It was coming with the death of day and the damp inrush of night. And at the same time there was coming upon the breeze that in little puffs swept through the Gap the sound of a horse's feet. Naomi rose, and hastily descended the steep slope of the mountain. Dalbert was coming sooner than she expected.

Undoubtedly her breath came irregularly as she dipped her feet in the stream. It might not be Dalbert; but she thought she knew Charley's step, even in the distance. So did another listener not many yards away on the other side of Big Creek.

"Dalbert!"

Naomi had gone hastily forward to meet her brother. For several minutes the hoof-beats had been coming nearer.

"You here?"

He drew rein sharply. His face betrayed no pleasure at the meeting. Since the death of Abner Poteet, Dalbert had found it hard to forgive his sister. Recent discoveries had put that death in an unpleasant light. The present sudden encounter with Naomi brought no brotherly smile to his lips. She put her own construction upon the absence of welcome.

"I have been to the house of China Partins," she said hurriedly. "Why didn't you come to see me? Then all this would have been avoided, and she might have been alive now — instead"—

"Instead of lying stiff and stark, keeping horrid guard over the cabin that was never more effectually barred against intruders in the old hag's lifetime than it is now by the grim stare of her dead eyes," interrupted a strong voice immediately behind Naomi. "Dal," continued Will Hollingsworth, coming out from the cover of the thicket upon the mountain side, "this sister of

yours has had her will at last. Her fingers have been itching for the chance to put a bullet through the heart of her father's murderer. You may congratulate her to-day. They'll never itch that away again."

He looked at the girl with a malicious laugh on his lips. She was watching Dalbert, and did not see the look. Her first thought was to prevent her brother from criminating himself.

"What do you mean? What have you been up to?" Dalbert spoke sternly.

"Don't count me in," replied Will lightly. "I came on the scene after the last act was over."

"Better go off it again, if you value the success of your plans," said a girl's voice in low, meaning tones. "The mill is a safer place for the furtherance of your wishes than the Gap at the present moment."

Even while she spoke, Naomi was looking at Dalbert warningly. He misunderstood the look.

"I don't know what you came here for," he said, addressing his words to Will. "There's little enough but rascality you ever have a hand in. Stand aside! I'm going on to Big Creek to see what new abomination you have been concocting."

"No, you are not! Dalbert, don't be a fool!"

Naomi's hand was on Charley's nose. The touch was as effectual a barrier to progress as a stone wall would have been.

"Let it pass, Dalbert," she said, reaching up as if to speak caressing words to the horse. "Behave as if you believed it. I can get you out of this difficulty, and there is nothing to be gained by facing it. Don't you understand?" she added. "He does not know. Nobody knows. He thinks I did it. There is no suspicion that you were at her house this morning."

The low, clearly spoken sentences travelled no further than to her brother's ears. They had the opposite of the desired effect.

"I don't know what you are talking about," he said impatiently. "What are you trying to tell me? Say it openly. If you are afraid of this feller, I'm not. Whose house was I supposed to be in this morning?"

"You?"

Will stood looking in puzzled wonder from one to the other. Then he gave utterance to a shrill whistle.

"Mercy sakes! the plot thickens," he said. "Things are growing interesting."

"Dangerously so," replied Naomi quietly. "More than one plan is in plumb danger at the present moment."

He laughed.

"I'm not afraid," he said. "You can't afford to play me false. I'm here to look after you. I have the right now. Besides, I'm getting an insight into a powerful interesting subject."

"What does he mean? Speak out. I don't understand either your words or your signs. I'm not afraid of him. If you are, so much the worse for you."

It was Dalbert's answer to a last attempt to warn him. Naomi gave it up in despair.

"Don't be too sure of your ground, my fine feller," retorted Will, a savage intonation appearing in his voice. "Murder is an ugly thing at close quarters."

"Murder! What murder? You've been harping at that before. Do you want to accuse me of it?"

If Dalbert had desired to apprise the whole countryside of the accusation, he could hardly have spoken in less guarded tones.

"No. He restricts his charges to me."

Naomi's eyes were lifted to her brother's face. She had grown pale, even to the lips.

"Does he lie?"

She looked into his eyes, and her own spoke eloquently. He could not read their message.

"Does he lie?" he repeated.

She evaded the question. She was at a loss to understand his asking it.

"China Partins was shot in her own house this morning," she said. "Our father lay dead by her side. Will found me there, and drew his own conclusions. For the present you had better do the same."

"And you do not deny it?"

The question was thundered into the evening air.

"I neither deny it nor acknowledge it," she said quietly.

They stood looking at each other. Then Will burst into a loud laugh.

"I declare I don't know which is the murderer, after all," he said.

Naomi turned upon him with scornful eyes.

"You had better make your accusation broad enough to cover all contingencies," she said. "You are bent on undoing yourself."

Then softly, as Dalbert would have spoken, she added for her brother's benefit: "Hush! Let it rest as it is. I can throw it off better than you can. I tell you I can get aout of this if you will only listen to reason."

"Better than I can? What do you mean?" Light was at last dawning upon Dalbert's mind. "Do *you* think, does *he* think, I shot the old woman?"

She did not answer. For the moment she could not. She was staring at him in blank surprise.

"It might be either of you," said Will reflectively. "You both carry pistols; and you had about equal cause for a grudge against an old woman who, by arts better known to herself than to the rest of the world, got your esteemed relative and all he possessed into her power, and then finished him up in a hurry. It was perhaps as likely to be one as the other. But I confess I think

one pair of hands would be more ready to turn the grudge into a flying bullet than the other. I wouldn't swear to it, though."

The words, or the interval during which they were uttered, produced a very different effect on the two listeners. Naomi's lips had lost their stiffness. The smile that played upon them was enigmatical to Will.

"Dal," she began; but her brother interrupted her.

"I see," he said slowly. "China Partins is dead. One of us is supposed to be guilty of the murder. Better fetch the sheriff, and let him find aout which it is."

"Lor! hain't you all fools!"

Lem was surveying the group with eyes that twinkled in the evening light. Just how he had dropped down in the rear of Dal's horse nobody could have told.

"Lor me!" he continued. "Hit don't take long to git powerful mixed up when three on ye start to know plumb all abaout what hain't to be knowed. Mercy! You-uns hain't no call to quarrel over what pistol done hit. Hit's thar. You-all can lueke at hit. Hit's yander, under the chist, whar she throwed it when she done pulled the trigger. Lor! she *was* a one. She done shot herself plumb dead and throwed the pistol away with one move of her hand. She warn't alive a minute atter. Mercy sakes! she was a wi-itch, and no mistake!"

"You saw her die?"

Dalbert was off Charley's back, his hand on the boy's shoulder. Lem's eyes shone.

"See her? I reckon," he said. "She warn't a-knowin' hit, though. She done told me to lueke in at the winder to see as *he* was dead. I see a sight more 'n she reckoned on afore I was done. 'Go and tell *her*,' she says. 'Tell her China Partins don't lie.' I hain't knowin' what she meant. I'm a-tellin' ye what she *said*. I

hain't guede at fixin' and mixin'. Hit'd 'a tuk him to know plumb sure what she was aimin' at."

An emphatic jerk of the head in Will Hollingsworth's direction emphasised the words.

"She said she would never live without him!"

The words dropped from Naomi's lips without conscious volition. She hardly knew that she spoke them aloud.

"Lor! that was hit," ejaculated Lem. "I was plumb ure thar was mischief abaout, though I warn't knowin' what hit was. I seed hit in her eyes. 'I'm a-goin',' I says; and I went. But she didn't see me come back. She thought she knowed everything. She didn't. I'd got to know what was goin' on. Thar was Dal's interests at stake, and him away at Hickory Creek. We-all had a share in that cabin, with his dad a-layin' thar. Thar was nobody to look atter things but me. I'd a ri-ight to see, and I seed. And a plumb guede thing I did."

In spite of the weight of Dal's hand upon his shoulder, Lem was a little taller than usual at that moment.

"You're right, boy," said the young man, drawing a long breath. "It *was* a plumb good thing."

"I reckon," said the boy.

Naomi had not moved since Lem appeared on the scene. Her hand still fondled Charley's nose restrainingly. She had been listening — and thinking.

"It's not the first time I've been a fool," she said at last.

"And you weren't the only one."

Dalbert's voice had softened.

"Lor! no," interposed Lem, with a grin of humour, "nor the wust. You-uns hain't hurt powerful much by the misunderstandin'. Hit's the feller that loses that's fooled."

Lem's glances emphasised the words.

"Fooled! There's only your word for all this," shouted Will, for the first time since Naomi made his acquaintance completely losing control of his temper.

"And whose is thar that hit hain't so?" replied the boy. "You-u hain't a-goin' to run the risk o' luekin' more like a fool than you're duin' naow. I can tell a right smart that 'll bear luekin' into. And thar hain't nobody but you a-believin' that Naomi was atter murderin' anybody. Mercy sakes! Big Creek knows she warn't never a fool till she tuk up with you."

There was a moment's silence. Then a laugh, light as air and sharp as steel, came from Naomi's lips. Her eyes met those of Will Hollingsworth. As they did so, a fading ray of light fell full on her head. The pass was growing dim, but that ray lit up the girl's face.

"Lem is not far wrong," she said slowly. "It's powerful misleading to know too much. You think I had cause to hate China Partins. To quote Lem, 'You hain't knowin'.' Do you know what that woman did for my father?"

She turned and faced the rocks on the further side of the pass, those great boulders from the shelter of which she had watched the day die.

"Right there, among those stones," she said, "the soldiers battered aout his life. There was only a spark left, and a fiend was bending over one of those rocks to take that. The knife of China Partins found his heart — the first time any had found it since it began to beat. She saved my father from death, and out of the wreck of his life for fifteen years got something to love. He was helpless as a baby. She took him into her cabin and shut all the world aout. Do you know what kept that cottage barred for fifteen years? The fear that anybody should rob her of him. She gave her life to him. What for? Money? Every cent he had on him

when he was injured has been handed over to me. She grew wild at the mention of being compensated for what he had cost her. Do you think I should want to kill such a woman?"

Will Hollingsworth's eyes were fastened on the girl's face. The light upon it was different from any he had ever seen there before. It brought no answering glow. A scowl settled upon his features.

"Why did you let me think you had done it?" he asked savagely.

"I was a fool," she said.

He gave her another searching look, and turned away without a word, setting his face towards Big Creek.

Lem was right. He was "fooled the wust," for he had lost.

When Naomi removed her eyes from his retreating figure, it was to see Dalbert by her side. Lem had disappeared. Want of perception was not a failing of Lem Sutton's. The boy was at the farm when Dal saw him next.

"Will you come back with me? It won't be for long. We will start afresh."

Dalbert's hand was on her arm. He was trying to look into her eyes, but the light failed suddenly here in the Gap.

"We're in the same box," he said. "You had about as much faith in me as I had in you. Lem's right. We're a set of fools, only — it was no new thing for you to peril your own safety for one particular member of the set."

She breathed a long, low sigh, as if to shake off a nightmare of oppression.

"We will go," she said. "We can do nothing at the cabin to-night. To-morrow we will take witnesses. Dalbert, she has stood between him and death from the day she killed his would-be murderer. They must be

buried together. She would not live without him. They shall not be separated in their death. Afterwards we will go away, and move the machinery from Cedar Fork to a more promising place. There is money to start afresh now."

Darkness dropped like a veritable presence into the Gap. There was no sound but the light thud of Charley's hoofs, as Dalbert and Naomi walked side by side through the pass. There was much to tell, but they were thinking instead of talking.

Darkness was short-lived that night. By the time the brother and sister had left the village behind them, the moon was announcing its coming. Its broad, friendly disc surmounted an opposing hillside and sent the first unobstructed ray down into the valley as they approached the house of Kennedy Poteet. The old house showed dark in the hollow, as it had done on the night when Naomi and Marshall Rutherford stopped before it months ago. This evening, however, the gate stood open; and the moon discovered two figures beneath the apple trees. Its rays were not keen enough to reveal a pair of blue eyes that looked into dark ones.

"We'll open hit agin, Norah, and give hit a new lease of life. There shall be joy in the old house yet."

It was Marshall Rutherford's voice. Naomi was not the only one who was planning changes for the future.

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