

**BUCK CHARLES  
NEVILLE**

THE ROOF TREE

Charles Buck  
**The Roof Tree**

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**Buck C.**

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# The Roof Tree

## CHAPTER I

Between the smoke-darkened walls of the mountain cabin still murmured the last echoes of the pistol's bellowing, and it seemed a voice of everlasting duration to the shock-sickened nerves of those within.

First it had thundered with the deafening exaggeration of confined space, then its echo had beaten against the clay-chink wall timbers and rolled upward to the rafters. Now, dwindled to a ghostly whisper, it lingered and persisted.

But the house stood isolated, and outside the laurelled forests and porous cliffs soaked up the dissonance as a blotter soaks ink.

The picture seen through the open door, had there been any to see, was almost as motionless as a tableau, and it was a starkly grim one, with murky shadows against a fitful light. A ray of the setting sun forced its inquisitive way inward upon the semi-darkness of the interior. A red wavering from the open hearth, where supper preparations had been going forward, threw unsteady patches of fire reflection outward. In the pervading smell of dead smoke from a blackened chimney hung the more pungent sharpness of freshly burned gun-powder, and the man standing near the door gazed downward, with a dazed stare, at the floor by his feet, where lay the pistol which gave forth that acrid stench.

Across from him in the dead silence – dead save for the lingering of the echo's ghost – stood the woman, her hands clutched to her thin bosom, her eyes stunned and dilated, her body wavering on legs about to buckle in collapse.

On the puncheon floor between them stretched the woman's husband. The echo had outlasted his life and, because the muzzle had almost touched his breast, he sprawled in a dark welter that was still spreading.

His posture was so uncouth and grotesque as to filch from death its rightful dignity, and his face was turned downward.

The interminability of the tableau existed only in the unfocussed minds of the two living beings to whom the consequence of this moment was not measurable in time. Then from the woman's parted lips came a long, strangling moan that mounted to something like a muffled shriek. She remained a moment rocking on her feet, then wheeled and stumbled toward the quilt-covered four-poster bed in one dark corner of the cabin. Into its feather billows she flung herself and lay with her fingernails digging into her temples and her body racked with the incoherencies of hysteria.

The man stooped to pick up the pistol and walked slowly over to the rough table where he laid it down noiselessly, as though with that quietness he were doing something to offset the fatal blatancy with which it had just spoken. He looked down at the lifeless figure with burning eyes entirely devoid of pity, then went with a soundless tread, in spite of his heavy-soled boots, to the bed and spoke softly to the woman – who was his sister.

"Ye've got ter quit weepin' fer a spell, honey," he announced with a tense authority which sought to recall her to herself. "I'm obleeged ter take flight right speedily now, an' afore I goes thar's things ter be studied out an' sotted betwixt us."

But the half-stifled moan that came from the feather bed was a voice of collapse and chaos, to which speech was impossible.

So the brother lifted her in arms that remained unshaken and sat on the edge of the bed looking into her eyes with an almost hypnotic forcefulness.

"Ef ye don't hearken ter me now, I'm bound ter tarry till ye does," he reminded her, "an' I'm in right tormentin' haste. Hit means life and death ter me."

As if groping her tortured way back from pits of madness, the woman strove to focus her senses, but her wild eyes encountered the dark and crumpled mass on the floor and again a low shriek broke from her. She turned her horrified face away and surrendered to a fresh paroxysm, but at length she stammered between gasps that wrenched her tightened throat:

"Kiver him up first, Ken. Kiver him up ... I kain't endure ter look at him thetaway!"

Although the moments were pricelessly valuable, the man straightened the contorted limbs of the dead body and covered it decently with a quilt. Then he stood again by the bed.

"Ef I'd got hyar a minute sooner, Sally," he said, slowly, and there was a trace of self-accusation in his voice, "hit moun't hev happened. I war jest a mite too tardy – but I knows ye hed ter kill him. I knows ye acted in self-defence."

From the bed came again the half-insane response of hysterical moaning, and the young mountaineer straightened his shoulders.

"His folks," he said in a level voice, "won't skeercely listen ter no reason... They'll be hell-bent on makin' somebody pay... They'll plum hev ter hang some person, an' hit kain't be *you*."

The woman only shuddered and twisted spasmodically as she lay there while her brother went doggedly on:

"Hit kain't be *you* ... with yore baby ter be borned, Sally. Hit's been punishment enough fer ye ter endure him this long ... ter hev been wedded with a brute ... but ther child's got hits life ter live ... an' hit kain't be borned in no jail house!"

"I reckon – " the response came weakly from the heaped-up covers – "I reckon hit's *got* ter be thetaway, Ken."

"By God, no! Yore baby's got ter w'ar a bad man's name – but hit'll hev a good woman's blood in hits veins. They'll low I kilt him, Sally. Let 'em b'lieve hit. I hain't got no woman nor no child of my own ter think erbout ... I kin git away an' start fresh in some other place. I loves ye, Sally, but even more'n thet, I'm thinkin' of thet child thet hain't borned yit – a child thet hain't accountable fer none of this."

\* \* \*

That had been yesterday.

Now, Kenneth Thornton, though that was not to be his name any longer, stood alone near the peak of a divide, and the mists of early morning lay thick below him. They obliterated, under their dispiriting gray, the valleys and lower forest-reaches, and his face, which was young and resolutely featured, held a kindred mood of shadowing depression. Beneath that miasma cloak of morning fog twisted a river from which the sun would strike darts of laughing light – when the sun had routed the opaqueness suspended between night and day.

In the clear gray eyes of the man were pools of laughter, too, but now they were stilled and shaded under bitter reflections.

Something else stretched along the hidden river-bed, but even the mid-day light would give it no ocular marking. That something which the eye denied and the law acknowledged meant more to this man, who had slipped the pack from his wearied shoulders, than did the river or the park-like woods that hedged the river.

There ran the border line between the State of Virginia and the State of Kentucky and he would cross it when he crossed the river.

So the stream became a Rubicon to him, and on the other side he would leave behind him the name of Kenneth Thornton and take up the less damning one of Cal Maggard.

He had the heels of his pursuers and, once across the state line, he would be beyond their grasp until the Sheriff's huntsmen had whistled in their pack and gone grumbling back to conform with the law's intricate requirements. At that point the man-hunt fell into another jurisdiction and extradition papers would involve correspondence between a governor at Richmond and a governor at Frankfort.

During such an interlude the fugitive hoped with confidence to have lost himself in a taciturn and apathetic wilderness of peak-broken land where his discovery would be as haphazard an undertaking as the accurate aiming of a lightning bolt.

But mere escape from courts and prisons does not assure full measure of content. He had heard all his life that this border line separated the sheep of his own nativity from the goats of a meaner race, and to this narrow tenet he had given unquestioning belief.

"I disgusts Kaintuck'!" exclaimed the refugee half aloud as his strong hands clenched themselves, one hanging free and the other still grasping the rifle which as yet he had no intent of laying aside. "I plum disgusts Kaintuck'!"

The sun was climbing now and its pallid disk was slowly flushing to the wakefulness of fiery rose. The sky overhead was livening to turquoise light and here and there along the upper slopes were gossamer dashes of opal and amethyst, but this beauty of unveiling turrets and gold-touched crests was lost on eyes in which dwelt a nightmare from which there was no hope of awakening.

To-day the sparsely settled countryside that he had put behind him would buzz with a wrath like that of swarming bees along its creek-bed roads, and the posse would be out. To-day also he would be far over in Kentucky.

"I mout hev' tarried thar an' fronted hit out," he bitterly reflected, "fer God in Heaven knows he needed killin'!" But there he broke off into a bitter laugh.

"God in Heaven knows hit ... *I* knows hit an' *she* knows hit, but nairy another soul don't know an' ef they did hit wouldn't skeercely make no differ."

He threw back his head and sought to review the situation through the eyes of others and to analyze it all as an outsider would analyze it. To his simplicity of nature came no thought that the assumption of a guilt not his own was a generous or heroic thing.

His sister's pride had silenced her lips as to the brutality of this husband whose friends in that neighbourhood were among the little czars of influence. Her suffering under an endless reign of terror was a well-kept secret which only her brother shared. The big, crudely handsome brute had been "jobial" and suave of manner among his fellows and was held in favourable esteem. Only a day or two ago, when the brother had remonstrated in a low voice against some recent cruelty, the husband's wrath had blazed out. Witnesses to that wordy encounter had seen Thornton go white with a rage that was ominous and then bite off his unspoken retort and turn away. Those witnesses had not heard what was first said and had learned only what was revealed in the indignant husband's raised voice at the end.

"Don't aim ter threaten me, Ken. I don't suffer no man ter do thet – an' don't never darken my door henceforward."

Now it must seem that Thornton had not only threatened but executed, and no one would suspect the wife.

He saw in his mind's eye the "High Court" that would try the alleged slayer of John Turk; a court dominated by the dead man's friends; a court where witnesses and jurors would be terror-blinded against the defendant and where a farce would be staged: a sacrifice offered up.

There had been in that log house three persons. One of them was dead and his death would speak for him with an eloquence louder than any living tongue. There were, also, the woman and Thornton himself. Between them must lie the responsibility. Conscientiously the fugitive summarized the circumstances as the prosecution would marshal and present them.

A man had been shot. On the table lay a pistol with one empty "hull" in its chamber. The woman was the dead man's wife, not long since a bride and shortly to become the mother of his child. If she

had been the murdered man's deadly enemy why had she not left him; why had she not complained? But the brother had been heard to threaten the husband only a day or two since. He was in the dead man's house, after being forbidden to shadow its threshold.

"Hell!" cried Thornton aloud. "Ef I stayed she'd hev ter come inter C'ote an' sw'ar either fer me or ergin me – an' like es not, she'd break down an' confess. Anyhow, ef they put her in ther jail-house I reckon ther child would hev hits bornin' thar. Hell – no!"

He turned once more to gaze on the vague cone of a mountain that stood uplifted above its fellows far behind him. He had started his journey at its base. Then he looked westward where ridge after ridge, emerging now into full summer greenery, went off in endless billows to the sky, and he went down the slope toward the river on whose other side he was to become another man.

Kenneth Thornton was pushing his way West, the quarry of a man-hunt, but long before him another Kenneth Thornton had come from Virginia to Kentucky, an ancestor so far lost in the mists of antiquity that his descendant had never heard of him; and that man, too, had been making a sacrifice.

## CHAPTER II

Sprung from a race which had gone to seed like plants in a long-abandoned garden, once splendid and vigorous, old Caleb Harper was a patriarchal figure nearing the sunset of his life.

His forebears had been mountaineers of the Kentucky Cumberlands since the vanguard of white life had ventured westward from the seaboard. From pioneers who had led the march of progress that stock had relapsed into the decay of mountain-hedged isolation and feudal lawlessness, but here and there among the wastage, like survivors over the weed-choked garden of neglect, emerged such exceptions as Old Caleb; paradoxes of rudeness and dignity, of bigotry and nobility.

Caleb's house stood on the rising ground above the river, a substantial structure grown by occasional additions from the nucleus that his ancestor Caleb Parish had founded in revolutionary times, and it marked a contrast with its less provident neighbours. Many cabins scattered along these slopes were dismal and makeshift abodes which appeared to proclaim the despair and squalor of their builders and occupants.

Just now a young girl stood in the large unfurnished room that served the house as an attic – and she held a folded paper in her hand.

She had drawn out of its dusty corner a small and quaintly shaped horsehide trunk upon which, in spots, the hair still adhered. The storage-room that could furnish forth its mate must be one whose proprietors held inviolate relics of long-gone days, for its like has not been made since the life of America was slenderly strung along the Atlantic seaboard and the bison ranged about his salt licks east of the Mississippi.

Into the lock the girl fitted a cumbersome brass key and then for a long minute she stood there breathing the forenoon air that eddied in currents of fresh warmth. The June sunlight came, too, in a golden flood and the soft radiance of it played upon her hair and cheeks.

Outside, almost brushing the eaves with the plumes of its farthest flung branches, stood a gigantic walnut tree whose fresh leafage filtered a mottling of sunlight upon the age-tempered walls.

The girl herself, in her red dress, was slim and colourful enough and dewy-fresh enough to endure the searching illumination of the June morning.

Dark hair crowned the head that she threw back to gaze upward into the venerable branches of the tree, and her eyes were as dark as her hair and as deep as a soft night sky.

Over beetling summits and sunlit valley the girl's glance went lightly and contentedly, but when it came back to nearer distances it dwelt with an absorbed tenderness on the gnarled old veteran of storm-tested generations that stood there before the house: the walnut which the people of her family had always called the "roof tree" because some fanciful grandmother had so named it in the long ago.

"I reckon ye're safe now, old roof tree," she murmured, for to her the tree was human enough to deserve actual address, and as she spoke she sighed as one sighs who is relieved of an old anxiety.

Then, recalled to the mission that had brought her here, she thought of the folded paper that she held in her hand.

So she drew the ancient trunk nearer to the window and lifted its cover.

It was full of things so old that she paused reverently before handling them.

Once the grandmother who had died when she was still a small child had allowed her to glimpse some of these ancient treasures but memory was vague as to their character.

Both father and mother were shadowy and half-mythical beings of hearsay to her, because just before her birth her father had been murdered from ambush. The mother had survived him only long enough to bring her baby into the world and then die broken-hearted because the child was not a boy whom she might suckle from the hatred in her own breast and rear as a zealot dedicated to avenging his father.

The chest had always held for this girl intriguing possibilities of exploration which had never been satisfied. The gentle grandfather had withheld the key until she should be old enough to treat with respect those sentimental odds and ends which his women-folk had held sacred, and when the girl herself had "grown up" – she was eighteen now – some whimsey of clinging to the illusions and delights of anticipation had stayed her and held the curb upon her curiosity. Once opened the old trunk would no longer beckon with its mystery, and in this isolated life mysteries must not be lightly wasted.

But this morning old Caleb Harper had prosaically settled the question for her. He had put that paper into her hand before he went over the ridge to the cornfield with his mule and plow.

"Thet thar paper's right p'intedly valuable, leetle gal," he had told her. "I wants ye ter put hit away safe somewhars." He had paused there and then added reflectively, "I reckon ther handiest place would be in ther old horsehide chist thet our fore-parents fetched over ther mountings from Virginny."

She had asked no questions about the paper itself because, to her, the opening of the trunk was more important, but she heard the old man explaining, unasked:

"I've done paid off what I owes Bas Rowlett an' thet paper's a full receipt. I knows right well he's my trusty friend, an' hit's my notion thet he's got his hopes of bein' even more'n thet ter *you*– but still a debt sets mighty heavy on me, be hit ter friend or foe, an' hit pleasures me thet hit's sotted."

The girl passed diplomatically over the allusion to herself and the elder's expression of favour for a particular suitor, but without words she had made the mental reservation: "Bas Rowlett's brash and uppety enough withouten us bein' beholden ter him fer no money debt. Like as not he'll be more humble-like a'tter this when he comes a-sparkin'."

Now she sat on a heavy cross-beam and looked down upon the packed contents while into her nostrils crept subtly the odour of old herbs and spicy defences against moth and mould which had been renewed from time to time through the lagging decades until her own day.

First, there came out a soft package wrapped in a threadbare shawl and carefully bound with home-twisted twine and this she deposited on her knees and began to unfasten with trembling fingers of expectancy. When she had opened up the thing she rose eagerly and shook out a gown that was as brittle and sere as a leaf in autumn and that rustled frigidly as the stiffened folds straightened.

"I'll wager now, hit war a *weddin'* dress," she exclaimed as she held it excitedly up to the light and appraised the fineness of the ancient silk with eyes more accustomed to homespun.

Then came something flat that fell rustling to the floor and spread into a sheaf of paper bound between home-made covers of cloth, but when the girl opened the improvised book, with the presentiment that here was the message out of the past that would explain the rest, she knitted her brows and sat studying it in perplexed engrossment.

The ink had rusted, in the six score years and more since its inscribing, to a reddish faintness which shrank dimly and without contrast into the darkened background, yet difficulties only whetted her discoverer's appetite, so that when, after an hour, she had studied out the beginning of the document, she was deep in a world of romance-freighted history. Here was a journal written by a woman in the brave and tragic days of the nation's birth.

That part which she was now reading seemed to be a sort of preamble to the rest, and before the girl had progressed far she found a sentence which, for her, infused life and the warmth of intimacy into the document.

"It may be that God in His goodnesse will call me to His house which is in Heaven before I have fully written ye matters which I would sett downe in this journall," began the record. "Since I can not tell whether or not I shall survive ye cominge of that new life upon which all my thoughtes are sett and shoulde such judgement be His Wille, I want that ye deare childe shall have this recorde of ye days its father and I spent here in these forest hills so remote from ye sea and ye rivers of our deare Virginia, and ye gentle refinements we put behind us to become pioneers."

There was something else there that she could not make out because of its blurring, and she wondered if the blotted pages had been moistened by tears as well as ink, but soon she deciphered this unusual statement.

"Much will be founde in this journall, touching ye tree which I planted in ye first dayes and which we have named ye roofe tree after a fancy of my owne. I have ye strong faithe that whilst that tree stands and growes stronge and weathers ye thunder and wind and is revered, ye stem and branches of our family also will waxe stronge and robust, but that when it falls, likewise will disaster fall upon our house."

One thing became at once outstandingly certain to the unsophisticated reader.

This place in the days of its founding had been an abode of love unshaken by perils, for of the man who had been its head she found such a portrait as love alone could have painted. He was described as to the modelling of his features, the light and expression of his eyes; the way his dark hair fell over his "broade browe" – even the cleft of his chin was mentioned.

That fondly inspired pen paused in its narrative of incredible adventures and more than Spartan hardships to assure the future reader that, "ye peale of his laugh was as clear and tuneful as ye fox horn with which our Virginia gentry were wont to go afield with horse and hound." There had possibly been a touch of wistfulness in that mention of a renounced life of greater affluence and pleasure for hard upon it followed the observation:

"Here, where our faces are graven with anxieties that besette our waking and sleeping, it seemeth that most men have forgotten ye very fashion of laughter. Joy seemes killed out of them, as by a bitter frost, yet *he* hath ever kept ye clear peale of merriment in his voice and its flash in his eye and ye smile that showes his white teeth."

Somehow the girl seemed to see that face as though it had a more direct presentment before her eyes than this faded portraiture of words penned by a hand long ago dead.

He must have been, she romantically reflected, a handsome figure of a man. Then naïvely the writer had passed on to a second description: "If I have any favour of comeliness it can matter naught to me save as it giveth pleasure to my deare husbande, yet I shall endeavour to sette downe truly my own appearance alsoe."

The girl read and re-read the description of this ancestress, then gasped.

"Why, hit mout be *me* she was a-writin' erbout," she murmured, "save only I hain't purty."

In that demure assertion she failed of justice to herself, but her eyes were sparkling. She knew that hereabout in this rude world of hers her people were accounted both godly and worthy of respect, but after all it was a drab and poverty-ridden world with slow and torpid pulses of being. Here, she found, in indisputable proof, the record of her "fore-parents". Once they, too, had been ladies and gentlemen familiar with elegant ways and circumstances as vague to her as fable. Henceforth when she boasted that hers were "ther best folk in ther world" she would speak not in empty defiance but in full confidence!

But as she rose at length from her revery she wondered if after all she had not been actually dreaming, because a sound had come to her ears that was unfamiliar and that seemed of a piece with her reading. It was the laugh of a man, and its peal was as clear and as merry as the note of a fox horn.

The girl was speedily at the window looking out, and there by the roadside stood her grandfather in conversation with a stranger.

He was a tall young man and though plainly a mountaineer there was a declaration of something distinct in the character of his clothing and the easy grace of his bearing. Instead of the jeans overalls and the coatless shoulders to which she was accustomed, she saw a white shirt and a dark coat, dust-stained and travel-soiled, yet proclaiming a certain predilection toward personal neatness.

The traveller had taken off his black felt hat as he talked and his black hair fell in a long lock over his broad, low forehead. He was smiling, too, and she caught the flash of white teeth and even – since the distance was short – the deep cleft of his firm chin.

Framed there at the window the girl caught her hands to her breast and exclaimed in a stifled whisper, "Land o' Canaan! He's jest walked spang outen them written pages – he's ther spittin' image of that man my dead and gone great-great-great-gran'-mammy married."

It was at that instant that the young man looked up and for a moment their eyes met. The stranger's words halted midway in their utterance and his lips remained for a moment parted, then he recovered his conversational balance and carried forward his talk with the gray-beard.

The girl drew back into the shadow, but she stood watching until he had gone and the bend in the road hid him. Then she placed the receipt that had brought her to the attic in the old manuscript, marking the place where her reading had been interrupted, and after locking the trunk ran lightly down the stairs.

"Gran'pap," she breathlessly demanded, "I seed ye a-talkin' with a stranger out thar. Did ye find out who *is* he?"

"He give ther name of Cal Maggard," answered the old man, casually, as he crumbled leaf tobacco into his pipe. "He lows he's going ter dwell in ther old Burrell Thornton house over on ther nigh spur of Defeated Creek."

That night while the patriarch dozed in his hickory withed chair with his pipe drooping from his wrinkled lips his granddaughter slipped quietly out of the house and went over to the tree.

Out there magic was making under an early summer moon that clothed the peaks in silvery softness and painted shadows of cobalt in the hollows. The river flashed its response and crooned its lullaby, and like children answering the maternal voice, the frogs gave chorus and the whippoorwills called plaintively from the woods.

The branches of the great walnut were etched against a sky that would have been bright with stars were it not that the moon paled them, and she gazed up with a hand resting lightly on the broad-girthed bole of the stalwart veteran. Often she had wondered why she loved this particular tree so much. It had always seemed to her a companion, a guardian, a personality, when its innumerable fellows in the forest were – nothing but trees.

Now she knew. She had only failed to understand the language with which it had spoken to her from childhood, and all the while, when the wind had made every leaf a whispering tongue, it had been trying to tell her many ancient stories.

"I knows, now, old roof tree," she murmured. "I've done found out erbout ye," and her hand patted the close-knit bark.

Then, in the subtle influence of the moonlight and the night that awoke all the young fires of dreaming, she half closed her eyes and seemed to see a woman who looked like herself yet who – in the phantasy of that moment – was arrayed in a gown of silk and small satin slippers, looking up into the eyes of a man whose hair was dark and whose chin was cleft and whose smile flashed upon white teeth. Only as the dream took hold upon her its spirit changed and the other woman seemed to be herself and the man seemed to be the one whom she had glimpsed to-day.

Then her reveries were broken. In the shallow water of the ford down at the river splashed a horse's hoofs and she heard a voice singing in the weird falsetto of mountain minstrelsy an old ballade which, like much else of the life there, was a heritage from other times.

So the girl brushed an impatient hand over rudely awakened eyes and turned back to the door, knowing that Bas Rowlett had come sparking.

## CHAPTER III

It was a distraite maiden who greeted the visiting swain that night and one so inattentive to his wooing that his silences became long, under discouragement, and his temper sullen. Earlier than was his custom he bade her good-night and took himself moodily away.

Then Dorothy Harper kindled a lamp and hastened to the attic where she sat with her head bowed over the old diary while the house, save for herself, slept and the moon rode down toward the west.

Often her eyes wandered away from the bone-yellow pages of the ancient document and grew pensive in dreamy meditation. This record was opening, for her, the door of intimately wrought history upon the past of her family and her nation when both had been in their bravest youth.

She did not read it all nor even a substantial part of it because between scraps of difficult perusal came long and alluring intervals of easy revery. Had she followed its sequence more steadily many things would have been made manifest to her which she only came to know later, paying for the knowledge with a usury of experience and suffering.

Yet since that old diary not only set out essential matters in the lives of her ancestors but also things integral and germane to her own life and that of the stranger who had to-day laughed in the road, it may be as well to take note of its contents.

The quaint phrasing of the writer may be discarded and only the substance which concerned her narrative taken into account, for her sheaf of yellow pages was a door upon the remote reaches of the past, yet a past which this girl was not to find a thing ended and buried but rather a ghost that still walked and held a continuing dominion.

In those far-off days when the Crown still governed us there had stood in Virginia a manor house built of brick brought overseas from England.

In it Colonel John Parish lived as had his father, and in it he died in those stirring times of a nation's painful birth. He had been old and stubborn and his emotions were so mixed between conflicting loyalties that the pain of his hard choice hastened his end. Tradition tells that, on his deathbed, his emaciated hand clutched at a letter from Washington himself, but that just at the final moment his eyes turned toward the portrait of the King which still hung above his mantel shelf, and that his lips shaped reverent sentiments as he died.

Later that same day his two sons met in the wainscoted room hallowed by their father's books and filled with his lingering spirit – a library noted in a land where books were still few enough to distinguish their owner.

Between them, even in this hour of common bereavement, stood a coolness, an embarrassment which must be faced when two men, bound by blood, yet parted by an unconfessed feud, arrive at the parting of their ways.

Though he had been true to every requirement of honour and punctilio, John the elder had never entirely recovered from the wound he had suffered when Dorothy Calmer had chosen his younger brother Caleb instead of himself. He had indeed never quite been able to forgive it.

"So soon as my father has been laid to rest, I purpose to repair to Mount Vernon," came the thoughtful words of the younger brother as their interview, which had been studiously courteous but devoid of warmth ended, and the elder halted, turning on the threshold to listen.

"There was, as you may recall, a message in General Washington's letter to my father indicating that an enterprise of moment awaited my undertaking," went on Caleb. "I should be remiss if I failed of prompt response."

\* \* \*

Kentucky! Until the fever of war with Great Britain had heated man's blood to the exclusion of all else Virginia had rung with that name.

La Salle had ventured there in the century before, seeking a mythical river running west to China. Boone and the Long Hunters had trod the trails of mystery and brought back corroborative tales of wonder and Ophir richness.

Of these things, General Washington and Captain Caleb Parish were talking on a day when the summer afternoon held its breath in hot and fragrant stillness over the house at Mount Vernon.

On a map the general indicated the southward running ranges of the Alleghanies, and the hinterland of wilderness.

"Beyond that line," he said, gravely, "lies the future! Those who have already dared the western trails and struck their roots into the soil must not be deserted, sir. They are fiercely self-reliant and liberty-loving, but if they be not sustained we risk their loyalty and our back doors will be thrown open to defeat."

Parish bowed. "And I, sir," he questioned, "am to stand guard in these forests?"

George Washington swept out his hand in a gesture of reluctant affirmation.

"Behind the mountains our settlers face a long purgatory of peril and privation, Captain Parish," came the sober response. "Without powder, lead, and salt, they cannot live. The ways must be held open. Communication must remain intact. Forts must be maintained – and the two paths are here – and here."

His finger indicated the headwaters of the Ohio and the ink-marked spot where the steep ridges broke at Cumberland Gap.

Parish's eyes narrowed painfully as he stood looking over the stretches of Washington's estate. The vista typified many well-beloved things that he was being called upon to leave behind him – ordered acres, books, the human contacts of kindred association. It was when he thought of his young wife and his daughter that he flinched. 'Twould go hard with them, who had been gently nurtured.

"Do women and children go, too?" inquired Parish, brusquely.

"There are women and children there," came the swift reply. "We seek to lay foundations of permanence and without the family we build on quicksand."

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Endless barriers of wilderness peaks rose sheer and forbidding about a valley through which a narrow river flashed its thin loop of water. Down the steep slopes from a rain-darkened sky hung ragged fringes of cloud-streamer and fog-wraith.

Toward a settlement, somewhere westward through the forest, a drenched and travel-sore cortège was plodding outward. A handful of lean and briar-infested cattle stumbled in advance, yet themselves preceded by a vanguard of scouting riflemen, and back of the beef-animals came ponies, galled of wither and lean of rib under long-borne pack saddles.

Behind lay memories of hard and seemingly endless journeying, of alarms, of discouragement. Ahead lay a precarious future – and the wilderness.

The two Dorotheys, Captain Caleb Parish's wife and daughter, were ending their journey on foot, for upon them lay the duties of example and *noblesse oblige* – but the prideful tilt of their chins was maintained with an ache of effort, and when the cortège halted that the beasts might blow, Caleb Parish hastened back from his place at the front to his wife and daughter.

"It's not far now," he encouraged. "To-night, at least, we shall sleep behind walls – even though they be only those of a block-house – and under a roof tree."

Both of them smiled at him – yet in his self-accusing heart he wondered whether the wife whose fortitude he was so severely taxing would not have done better to choose his brother.

While the halted outfit stood relaxed, there sounded through the immense voicelessness of the wilderness a long-drawn, far-carrying shout, at which the more timid women started flutteringly, but which the vanguard recognized and answered, and a moment later there appeared on the ledge of an overhanging cliff the lithe, straight figure of a boy.

He stood statuesquely upright, waving his coonskin cap, and between his long deerskin leggins and breech clout the flesh of his slim legs showed bare, almost as bronze-dark as that of an Indian.

"That is our herald of welcome," smiled Caleb Parish. "It's young Peter Doane – the youngest man we brought with us – and one of our staunchest as well. You remember him, don't you, child?"

The younger Dorothy at first shook her head perplexedly and sought to recall this youthful frontiersman; then a flash of recognition broke over her face.

"He's the boy that lived on the woods farm, isn't he? His father was Lige Doane of the forest, wasn't he?"

"And still is." Caleb repressed his smile and spoke gravely, for he caught the unconscious note of condescension with which the girl used the term of class distinction. "Only here in Kentucky, child, it is as well to forget social grades and remember that we be all 'men of the forest.' We are all freemen and we know no other scale."

That fall, when the mountains were painted giants, magnificently glorified from the brush and palette of the frost; when the first crops had been gathered, a spirit of festivity and cheer descended on the block-houses of Fort Parish. Then into the outlying cabins emboldened spirits began moving in escape from the cramp of stockade life.

Against the palisades of Wautaga besieging red men had struck and been thrown back. Cheering tidings had come of Colonel William Christian's expedition against the Indian towns.

The Otari, or hill warriors, had set their feet into the out-trail of flight and acknowledged the chagrin of defeat, all except Dragging Canoe, the ablest and most implacable of their chiefs who, sullenly refusing to smoke the pipe, had drawn far away to the south, to sulk out his wrath and await more promising auspices.

Then Caleb Parish's log house had risen by the river bank a half mile distant from the stockade, and more and more he came to rely on the one soul in his little garrison whose life seemed talisman-guarded and whose woodcraft was a sublimation of instinct and acquired lore which even the young braves of the Otari envied.

Young Peter Doane, son of "Lige Doane of the forest," and not yet a man in years, came and went through the wilderness as surely and fleetly as the wild things, and more than once he returned with a scalp at his belt – for in those days the whites learned warfare from their foes and accepted their rules. The little community nodded approving heads and asked no questions. It learned valuable things because of Peter's adventurings.

But when he dropped back after a moon of absence, it was always to Caleb Parish's hearthstone that Peter carried his report. It was over Caleb Parish's fire that he smoked his silent pipe, and it was upon Caleb Parish's little daughter that he bent his silently adoring glances.

Dorothy would sit silent with lowered lashes while she dutifully sought to banish aloofness and the condescension which still lingered in her heart – and the months rounded into seasons.

The time of famine long known as the "hard winter" came. The salt gave out, the powder and lead were perilously low.

The "traces" to and through the Wilderness road were snow-blocked or slimy with intermittent thaws, and the elder Dorothy Parish fell ill.

Learned physicians might have found and reached the cause of her malady – but there were no such physicians. Perhaps the longings that she repressed and the loneliness that she hid under her smile were costing her too dearly in their levies upon strength and vitality. She, who had been always

fearless, became prey to a hundred unconfessed dreads. She feared for her husband, and with a frenzy of terror for her daughter. She woke trembling out of atrocious nightmares. She was wasting to a shadow, and always pretending that the life was what she would have chosen.

It was on a bitter night after a day of blizzard and sleet. Caleb Parish sat before his fire, and his eyes went constantly to the bed where his wife lay half-conscious and to the seated figure of the tirelessly watchful daughter.

Softly against the window sounded a guarded rap. The man looked quickly up and inclined his ear. Again it came with the four successive taps to which every pioneer had trained himself to waken, wide-eyed, out of his most exhausted sleep.

Caleb Parish strode to the door and opened it cautiously. Out of the night, shaking the snow from his buckskin hunting shirt, stepped Peter Doane with his stoical face fatigue drawn as he eased down a bulky pack from galled shoulders.

"Injins," he said, crisply. "Get your women inside the fort right speedily!"

The young man slipped again into the darkness, and Parish, lifting the half-conscious figure from the bed, wrapped it in a bear-skin rug and carried it out into the sleety bluster.

That night spent itself through a tensivity of waiting until dawn.

When the east grew a bit pale, Caleb Parish returned from his varied duties and laid a hand on his wife's forehead to find it fever-hot. The woman opened her eyes and essayed a smile, but at the same moment there rode piercingly through the still air the long and hideous challenge of a war-whoop.

Dorothy Parish, the elder, flinched as though under a blow and a look of horror stamped itself on her face that remained when she had died.

\* \* \*

Spring again – and a fitful period of peace – but peace with disquieting rumours.

Word came out of the North of mighty preparations among the Six Nations and up from the South sped the report that Dragging Canoe had laid aside his mantle of sullen mourning and painted his face for war.

Dorothy Parish, the wife, had been buried before the cabin built by the river bank, and Dorothy, the daughter, kept house for the father whom these months had aged out of all resemblance to the former self in knee breeches and powdered wig with lips that broke quickly into smiling.

And Peter, watching the bud of Dorothy's childhood swell to the slim charms of girlhood, held his own counsel and worshipped her dumbly. Perhaps he remembered the gulf that had separated his father's log cabin from her uncle's manor house in the old Virginia days, but of these things no one spoke in Kentucky.

Three years had passed, and along the wilderness road was swelling a fuller tide of emigration, hot with the fever of the west.

Meeting it in counter-current went the opposite flow of the faint-hearted who sought only to put behind them the memory of hardship and suffering – but that was a light and negligible back-wash from an onswEEPing wave.

Caleb Parish smiled grimly. This spelled the beginning of success. The battle was not over – his own work was far from ended – but substantial victory had been won over wilderness and savage. The back doors of a young nation had suffered assault and had held secure.

Stories drifted in nowadays of the great future of the more fertile tablelands to the west, but Caleb Parish had been stationed here and had not been relieved.

The pack train upon which the little community depended for needed supplies had been long overdue, and at Caleb's side as he stood in front of his house looking anxiously east was his daughter Dorothy, grown tall and pliantly straight as a lifted lance.

Her dark eyes and heavy hair, the poise of her head, her gracious sweetness and gentle courage were, to her father, all powerful reminders of the woman whom he had loved first and last – this girl's mother. For a moment he turned away his head.

"Some day," he said, abruptly, "if Providence permits it, I purpose to set a fitting stone here at her head."

"Meanwhile – if we can't raise a stone," the girl's voice came soft and vibrant, "we can do something else. We can plant a tree."

"A tree!" exclaimed the man, almost irritably. "It sometimes seems to me that we are being strangled to death by trees! They conceal our enemies – they choke us under their blankets of wet and shadow."

But Dorothy shook her head in resolute dissent.

"Those are just trees of the forest," she said, whimsically reverting to the old class distinction. "This will be a manor-house tree planted and tended by loving hands. It will throw shade over a sacred spot." Her eyes began to glow with the growth of her conception.

"Don't you remember how dearly Mother loved the great walnut tree that shaded the veranda at home? She would sit gazing out over the river, then up into its branches – dreaming happy things. She used to tell me that she found my fairy stories there among its leaves – and there was always a smile on her lips then."

The spring was abundantly young and where the distances lengthened they lay in violet dreams.

"Don't you remember?" repeated the girl, but Caleb Parish looked suddenly away. His ear had caught a distant sound of tinkling pony bells drifting down wind and he said devoutly, "Thank God, the pack train is coming."

It was an hour later when the loaded horses came into view herded by fagged woodsmen and piloted by Peter Doane, who strode silently, tirelessly, at their head. But with Peter walked another young man of different stamp – a young man who had never been here before.

Like his fellows he wore the backwoodsman's garb, but unlike them his tan was of newer wind-burning. Unlike them, too, he bowed with a ceremony foreign to the wilderness and swept his coonskin cap clear of his head.

"This man," announced Peter, brusquely, "gives the name of Kenneth Thornton and hears a message for Captain Parish!"

The young stranger smiled, and his engaging face was quickened with the flash of white teeth. A dark lock of hair fell over his forehead and his firm chin was deeply cleft.

"I have the honour of bearing a letter from your brother, Sir," he said, "and one from General Washington himself."

Peter Doane looked on, and when he saw Dorothy's eyes encounter those of the stranger and her lashes droop and her cheeks flush pink, he turned on his heel and with the stiffness of an affronted Indian strode silently away.

"This letter from General Washington," said Caleb Parish, looking up from his reading, "informs me that you have already served creditably with our troops in the east and that you are now desirous to cast your lot with us here. I welcome you, Sir."

Kenneth Thornton was swift to learn and when he went abroad with hunting parties or to swing the axe in the clearings, his stern and exacting task-masters found no fault with his strength or spirit.

Their ardent and humourless democracy detected in him no taint of the patronizing or supercilious, and if he was new to the backwoods, he paid his arrears of knowledge with the ready coin of eagerness.

So Kenneth Thornton was speedily accepted into full brotherhood and became a favourite. The cheery peal of his laugh and his even cordiality opened an easy road to popularity and confidence.

Thornton had been schooled in England until the war clouds lowered, and as he talked of his boyish days there, and of the sights and festivities of London town, he found in Caleb Parish and his daughter receptive listeners, but in young Doane a stiff-necked monument of wordless resentment.

One summer night when the skies had spilt day-long torrents of rain and the sun had set red with the woods still sobbing and chill, a great fire roared on Caleb Parish's hearth. Before it sat the householder with his daughter and Kenneth Thornton; as usual, too, silent and morose yet stubbornly present, was Peter Doane.

Oddly enough they were talking of the minuet, and Kenneth rose to illustrate a step and bow that he had seen used in England.

Suddenly the girl came to her feet and faced him with a curtsey.

Kenneth Thornton bent low from the waist, and, with a stately gesture, carried her fingers to his lips.

"Now, my lord," she commanded, "show the newest steps that they dance at court."

"Your humble servant, Mistress Dorothy," he replied, gravely.

Then they both laughed, and Caleb Parish was divided between smile and tears – but Peter Doane glowered and sat rigid, thinking of freshly reared barriers that democracy should have levelled.

## CHAPTER IV

A week later Dorothy led Kenneth Thornton and Peter Doane to a place where beside a huge boulder a "spring-branch" gushed into a natural basin of stone. The ferns grew thick there, and the moss lay deep and green, but over the spot, with branches spreading nobly and its head high-reared, stood an ancient walnut and in the narrow circle of open ground at its base grew a young tree perhaps three feet tall.

"I want to move that baby tree," said Dorothy, and now her voice became vibrant, "to a place where, when it has grown tall, it can stand as a monument over my mother's grave."

She paused, and the two young men offered no comment. Each was watching the glow in her eyes and feeling that, to her, this ceremony meant something more than the mere setting out of a random seedling.

"It will stand guard over our home," she went on, and her eyes took on an almost dreamy far-awayness. "It will be shade in summer and a reminder of coming spring in winter. It will look down on people as they live and die – and are born. At last," she concluded, "when I come to die myself, I want to be buried under it, too."

When the young walnut had been lifted clear and its roots packed with some of its own native earth Kenneth Thornton started away carrying it in advance while Dorothy and Peter followed.

But before they came to the open space young Doane stopped on the path and barred the girl's way. "Dorothy," he began, awkwardly, and with painful embarrassment, "I've got something that must needs be said – an' I don't rightly know how to say it."

She looked up into his set face and smiled.

"Can I help you say it?" she inquired, and he burst out passionately, "Until *he* come, you seemed to like me. Now you don't think of nobody else but jest him ... and I hates him."

"If it's hatred you want to talk about," she said, reproachfully, "I don't think I can help you after all."

"Hatred of him," he hastened to explain. "I've done lived in the woods – an' I ain't never learned pretty graces ... but I can't live without you, an' if he comes betwixt us..."

The girl raised a hand.

"Peter," she said, slowly, "we've been good friends, you and I. I want to go on being good friends with you ... but that's all I can say."

"And him," demanded the young man, with white cheeks and passion-shaken voice, "what of him?"

"He asked me an hour ago," she answered, frankly. "We're going to be married."

The face of the backwoodsman worked spasmodically for a moment with an agitation against which his stoic training was no defense. When his passion permitted speech he said briefly, "I wishes ye joy of him – damn him!"

Then he wheeled and disappeared in the tangle.

"I'm sorry, dearest," declared Thornton when she had told him the story and his arms had slipped tenderly about her, "that I've cost you a friend, but I'm proud beyond telling that this tree was planted on the day you declared for me. To me too, it's a monument now."

That night the moon was clouded until late but broke through its shrouding before Dorothy went to bed, and she slipped out to look at the young shoot and perhaps to think of the man who had taken her in his arms there.

But as she approached she saw no standing shape and when she reached the spot she found that the freshly placed earth had been dug up. The tree had been spitefully dragged from its place and left lying with its roots extending up instead of its branches. Plainly it was an act of mean vandalism and Dorothy feared an emblem of deeper threat as well.

Already in the girl's thought this newly planted monument had become a sacred thing. To let it be so soon destroyed would be an evil augury and submission to a desecration. To tell Kenneth Thornton would kindle his resentment and provoke a dangerous quarrel. She herself must remedy the matter. So Dorothy Parish went for her spade, and late into the night she laboured at that second transplanting.

The roots had not had time to dry or burn, because they had been upturned so short a time, and before the girl went to her bed the task was finished, and she dreamed of birds nesting in broad branches and other home-making thoughts more intimate, but also of vague dangers and grudge-bearings.

But the next morning her face blanched when her father roused her before dawn.

"Kenneth Thornton was waylaid and shot last night," he said, briefly. "They fear he's dying. He's been asking for you."

About the door of Thornton's cabin in the gray freshness of that summer dawn stood a clump of silent men in whose indignant eyes burned a sombre light which boded no good for the would-be murderer if he were found. As the girl came up, with her face pale and grief-stricken, they drew back on either side opening passageway for her, and Dorothy went directly to the bed.

Caleb, though, halted at the threshold in response to a hand laid detainingly on his fringed sleeve.

"We hates to accuse a white man of a deed like this," said Jake Rowlett, a time-gnawed old Indian fighter, "but Thornton made a statement to us – under oath. He recognized Peter Doane – and Peter would of scalped him as well as shot him only he heard somebody rustlin' the brush an' got away."

"Peter Doane!" Caleb pressed a shaken hand to his bewildered forehead. "Peter Doane – but I can't credit that! Peter has sat by my hearth night after night ... Peter has eaten my salt ... Peter has been our staunchest reliance!"

Caleb's glance travelled searchingly about the circle of faces and read there unanimous conviction and grim determination.

"Peter has done growed to be half Injin hisself," came the decided answer. "Thornton didn't swear to no lie when he knew he mout be dyin'."

Caleb straightened decisively and his eyes blazed in spurts of wrath.

"Go after him then," he ordered. "It won't do to let him get away."

The pursuit parties that spread into the woods travelled fast and studiously – yet with little hope of success.

No man better than Peter Doane himself would recognize his desperation of plight – and if he had "gone bad" there was but one road for his feet and the security of the colony depended upon his thwarting.

Pioneer chronicles crowned with anathema unspeakable their small but infamous roster of white renegades, headed by the hated name of Samuel Girty; renegades who had "painted their faces and gone to the Indians!"

These were the unforgivably damned!

Now at the council-fires of Yellow-Jacket, even at the war-lodge of Dragging Canoe himself, the voluntary coming of Peter Doane would mean feasting and jubilation and a promise of future atrocities.

Inside Dorothy bent over the bed and saw the eyes of her lover open slowly and painfully. His lips parted in a ghost of his old, flashing smile.

"Is the tree safe?" he whispered.

The girl stooped and slipped an arm under the man's shoulders. The masses of her night-dark hair fell brushing his face in a fragrant cascade and her deep eyes were wide, unmasking to his gaze all the candid fears and intensities of her love. Then as her lips met his in the first kiss she had ever

given him, unasked, it seemed to him that a current of exaltation and vitality swept into him that death could not overcome.

"I'm going to get well," he told her. "Life is too full – and without you, heaven would be empty."

The next pack train did not arrive. But several weeks later a single, half-famished survivor stumbled into the fort. His hands were bound, his tongue swollen from thirst, and about his shoulders dangled a hideous necklace of white scalps. When he had been restored to speech he delivered the message for which his life had been spared.

"This is what's left of your pack train," was the insolent word that Peter Doane – now calling himself Chief Mad-dog, had sent back to his former comrades. "The balance has gone on to Yellow Jacket, but some day I will come back for Thornton's scalp – and my squaw."

As the summer waned the young walnut tree sent down its roots to vigour and imperceptibly lifted its crest. Its leaves did not wither but gained in greenness and lustre, and as it prospered so Kenneth Thornton also prospered, until when the season of corn shucking came again, he and Dorothy stood beside it, and Caleb, who had received his credentials as a justice of the peace, read for them the ritual of marriage.

At the adze-smoothed table of a house which, for all its pioneer crudity, reflected the spirit of tradition-loving inhabitants, sat a young woman whose dark hair hung braided and whose dark eyes looked up from time to time in thoughtful reminiscence.

She was writing with a goose-quill which she dipped into an ink-horn, and as she nibbled at the end of her pen one might have seen that whatever she was setting down lay close to her heart.

"Since I can not tell," she wrote, "whether or not I shall survive ye comings of that new life upon which all my thoughts are set and should such judgment be His Wille, I want that ye deare child shall have this record of ye days its father and I spent here in these forest hills so remote from ye sea and ye rivers of our dear Virginia and ye gentle refinements we put behind us to become pioneers. This wish leads me to the writing of a journall."

A shadow in the doorway cut the shaft of sunlight and the woman at the writing table turned. On the threshold stood Kenneth Thornton and by the hand he held a savage-visaged child clad in breech clout and moccasins, but otherwise naked. Its eyes held the beady sharpness of the Indian, and though hardly past babyhood, it stood haughtily rigid and expressionless.

The face of the man was not flashing its smile now, but deeply grave, and as his wife's gaze questioned him he spoke slowly.

"This is Peter Doane's boy," he said, briefly.

Dorothy Thornton shrank back with a gesture of repulsion, and the man went on:

"A squaw with a travelling party of friendly Indians brought him in. Mad-dog Doane is dead. His life ended in a drunken brawl in an Otari village – but before he died he asked that the child be brought back to us."

"Why?"

"Because," Thornton spoke seriously, "blood can't be silenced when death comes. The squaw said Chief Mad-dog wanted his boy raised to be a white brave... He's half white, of course."

"And *he* ventured to ask favours of *us*!" The woman's voice, ordinarily gentle, hardened, and the man led the child over and laid his own hand on her shoulder.

"The child is not to blame," he reminded her. "He's the fruit of madness – but he has human life."

Dorothy rose, inclining her head in reluctant assent.

"I'll fetch him a white child's clothes," she said.

This was the story that the faded pages told and a small part of which Dorothy Harper read as she sat in the lamplight of the attic a century and a quarter later.

## CHAPTER V

The old Thornton house on Defeated Creek had for almost two decades stood vacant save for an occasional and temporary tenant. A long time back a formal truce had been declared in the feud that had split in sharp and bitter cleavage the family connections of the Harpers and the Doanes. Back into the limbo of tradition and vagueness went the origin of that "war".

The one unclouded certainty was that the hatred had grown until even in this land of vendetta its levy of violent deaths had been appalling beyond those of other enmities.

Yet, paradoxically enough, the Harpers in the later feud stages had followed a man named Thornton and the Doanes had fought at the behest of a Rowlett. Now on the same night that Dorothy read in her attic smoke rose from the chimney of the long-empty house and a stranger, whose right of possession no one questioned, was to be its occupant. He sat now, in the moonlight, on the broken millstone that served his house as a doorstep – and as yet he had not slept under the rotting roof. About him was a dooryard gone to a weed-jungle and a farm that must be reclaimed from utter wildness. His square jaw was grimly set and the hands that rested on his knees were tensely clenched. His eyes held a far-away and haunted fixity, for they were seeing again the cabin he had left in Virginia with its ugly picture of sudden and violent death and the body of a man he hated lying on the blood-stained floor.

The hysteria-shaken figure of the woman he had left alone with that grisly companionship refused, too, to soften the troubling vividness of its remembered misery.

He himself had not escaped his pursuers by too wide a margin, but he *had* escaped. He had come by a circuitous course to this place where he hoped to find quiet under his assumed name of Maggard, nor was his choice of refuge haphazard.

A distantly related branch of his own family had once lived here, and the property had passed down to him, but the Thornton who had first owned the place he had never known.

The Kentucky history of his blood was as unfamiliar to him as genealogies on Mars, and while the night voices sounded in tempered cadences about him and the hills stood up in their spectral majesty of moonlight, he sat with a drawn brow. Yet, because the vitality of his youth was strong and resilient, other and less grim influences gradually stole over him and he rose after a while with the scowl clearing from his face.

Into the field of his thoughts, like sunlight into a storm sky, came a new image: the image of a girl in a red dress looking at him from an attic window. The tight lips loosened, softened, and parted in a smile.

"Afore God," he declared in a low voice, "she war a comely gal!"

Kenneth Thornton – now self rechristened Cal Maggard, was up and his coffee pot was steaming on the live coals long before the next morning's sun had pierced its shafts into the gray opaqueness that cloaked the valleys. He squatted on his heels before the fire, honing the ancient blade of the scythe that he had found in the cock loft, and that blade was swinging against the stubborn resistance of weed and briar-trailer before the drench of the dew had begun to dry.

He did not stop often to rest, and before noon he straightened and stood breathing deep but rhythmically to survey a levelled space where he had encountered an impenetrable thicket.

Then Cal Maggard leaned his scythe and axe against a young hickory and went over to the corner of the yard where a spring poured with a crystal flow into a natural basin under the gnarled roots of a sycamore. Kneeling there, stripped to the waist, he began laving his chest and shoulders and dipping his face deep into the cold water.

So intent was he that he failed to hear the light thud of hoofs along the sand-cushioned and half-obliterated road which skirted his dilapidated fence line, and he straightened up at length to see a horseman who had drawn rein there and who now sat sidewise gazing at him with one leg thrown across his pommel.

The horseman, tall and knit for tremendous strength, was clad in jeans overalls and a blue cotton shirt. His unshaven face was swarthy and high of cheekbone and his black hat, though shapeless and weather-stained, sat on his head with a jauntiness that seemed almost a challenge. Eyes, both shrewd and determined, gave the impression of missing nothing, but his voice was pleasant as he introduced himself.

"My name's Bas Rowlett, an' I reckon *you're* Cal Maggard, hain't ye? I've done heered ye 'lowed ter dwell amongst us."

Maggard nodded. "Come inside an' set ye a cheer," he invited, and the horseman vaulted to the ground as lightly as though he carried no weight, flinging his bridle rein over a picket of the fence.

For a short space when the host had donned his shirt and provided his guest with a chair by the door the conversation ran laggingly between these two newly met sons of a taciturn race, yet beneath their almost morose paucity of words lay an itch of curiosity. They were gauging, measuring, estimating each other under wary mantles of indifference.

Rowlett set down in his appraisal, with a touch of scorn, the clean-shaven face and general neatness of the other, but as against this effeminacy he offset the steady-eyed fearlessness of gaze and the smooth power of shoulders and torso that he had seen stripped.

Maggard's rifle stood leaning against the chinked log wall near to the visitor's hand and lazily he lifted and inspected it, setting its heel-plate to his shoulder and sighting the weapon here and there.

"Thet rifle-gun balances up right nice," he approved, then seeing a red squirrel that sat chattering on a walnut tree far beyond the road he squinted over the sights and questioned musingly, "I wonder now, could I knock thet boomer outen thet thar tree over yon."

"Not skeercely, I reckon. Hit's a kinderly long, onhandy shot," answered Maggard, "but ye mout try, though."

Rowlett had hoped for such an invitation. He knew that it was more than an "unhandy" shot. It was indeed a spectacularly difficult one – but he knew also that he could do it twice out of three times, and he was not averse to demonstrating his master-skill.

The rifle barked and the squirrel dropped, shot through the head, but Maggard said nothing and Rowlett only spat and set the gun down.

After that he relighted his pipe. Had this newcomer from across the Virginia border been his peer in marksmanship, he reasoned, he would not have let the exploit rest there without contest, and his own competitive spirit prompted him to goad the obviously inferior stranger.

"Thar's an old cock-of-the woods hammerin' away atter grubs up yon," he suggested. "Why don't ye try yore own hand at him – jest fer the fun of the thing?"

He pointed to a dead tree-top perhaps ten yards more distant than his own target had been, where hung one of those great ivory-billed woodpeckers that are near extinction now except in the solitudes of these wild hills.

Maggard smiled again, as he shook his head noncommittally – yet he reached for the rifle. That silent smile of his was beginning to become provocative to his companion, as though in it dwelt something of quiet self-superiority.

The weapon came to the stranger's shoulder with a cat-like quickness of motion and cracked with seemingly no interval of aim-taking, and the bird fell as the squirrel had done.

Rowlett flushed to his high cheekbones. This was a country of riflemen where skill was the rule and its lack the exception, yet even here few men could duplicate that achievement, or, without seeing it, believe it possible. It had been characterized, too, by the incredible swiftness of a sleight-of-hand performance.

"Hell's red hole," came the visitor's eruptive outburst of amazement. "Ef the man-person thet used ter dwell in this hyar house, and his kinfolks, hed of shot thet fashion, I reckon mebbly the Rowletts wouldn't never hev run old Burrell Thornton outen these mountings."

"Did they run him out?"

Rowlett studied his companion much as he might have studied someone who calmly admits a stultifying ignorance.

"Hain't ye niver heered tell of ther Harper-Doane war?" he demanded and Maggard shook an unabashed head.

"I hain't niver heered no jedgmatic details," he amended, "I knowed thar was sich-like warfare goin' on here one time. My folks used ter dwell in Kaintuck onc't but hit war afore my own day."

"Come on over hyar," prompted Rowlett, and he led the way to the back of the house where half-buried in the tangle that had overrun the place stood the ruins of a heavy and rotting log stockade.

"Old Burrell Thornton dwelt hyar in ther old days," he vouchsafed, "an' old Burrell bore ther repute of being ther meanest man in these parts. He dastn't walk in his own backyard withouten he kept the log wall betwixt hisself an' ther mounting-side. So long as him an' old Mose Rowlett both lived thar warn't no peace feasible nohow. Cuss-fights an' shootin's an' laywayin's went on without no eend, twell finely hit come on ter be sich a hell-fired mommick thet ther two outfits met up an' fit a master battle in Claytown. Hit lasted nigh on ter two days."

"What war ther upcome of ther matter?" inquired the householder, and the narrator went on:

"Ther Harpers an' Thorntons went inside ther co'te house an' made a pint-blank fort outen hit, an' ther Rowletts tuck up *thar* stand in ther stores an' streets. They frayed on, thet fashion, twell ther Doanes wearied of hit an' sot ther co'te house afire. Some score of fellers war shot, countin' men an' boys, and old Mose Rowlett, thet was headin' ther Doanes, war kilt dead. Then – when both sides war plum frazzled ragged they patched up a truce betwixt 'em an' ther gist of ther matter war that old Burrell Thornton agreed ter leave Kaintuck an' not never ter come back no more. He war too pizen mean fer folks ter abide him, an' his goin' away balanced up ther deadenin' of Mose Rowlett."

"Ye sez thet old hellion used ter dwell in this hyar house onc't?"

"Yes, sir, thet's what I'm noratin' ter ye. Atter he put out his fire an' called his dawgs an' went away Caleb Harper tuck over ther leadin' of ther Harpers and my uncle Jim Rowlett did likewise fer ther Doanes. Both on 'em war men thet loved law-abidin' right good an' when they struck hands an' pledged a peace they aimed ter see thet hit endured – an' hit did. But till word come thet old Burrell Thornton war dead an' buried, folks didn't skeercely breathe easy nohow. They used ter keep hearin' thet he aimed ter come back an' they knowed ef he did –"

There the speaker broke off and shrugged his powerful shoulders.

A brief silence fell, and through the sunflecks and the deep woodland shadows came the little voices that were all of peace, but into Rowlett's eyes flashed a sudden-born ghost of suspicion.

"How come *you* ter git possession of ther place hyar?" he demanded. "Ye didn't heir hit from Old Burrell Thornton's folks, did ye?"

The new occupant was prepared for this line of interrogation and he laughed easily.

"Long erbout a year back," he said, "a feller named Thornton thet dwelt over thar in Virginny got inter debt ter me an' couldn't pay out. He give me a lease on this hyar place, but I didn't hev no chanst ter come over hyar an' look at hit afore now."

Rowlett nodded a reassured head and declared heartily:

"I'm right glad ye hain't one of thet thar sorry brood. Nobody couldn't confidence *them*."

Rowlett, as he rekindled the pipe that had died in the ardour of his narration, studied the other through eyes studiously narrowed against the flare of his match.

The newcomer himself, lost in thought, was oblivious of this scrutiny, and it was as one speaking from reverry that he launched his next inquiry.

"Ther gal thet dwells with old man Harper... She hain't his wife, air she?"

The questioner missed the sudden tensely challenged interest that flashed in the other's eyes and the hot wave of brick-red that surged over the cheeks and neck of his visitor.

But Bas Rowlett was too adroit to betray by more than a single unguarded flash his jealous reaction to mention of the girl and he responded quietly and unemotionally enough.

"She hain't no man's wife ... yit. Old Caleb's her grandpap."

"I've done seed some powerful comely gals in my day an' time," mused Maggard, abstractedly, "but I hain't niver seed ther like of *her* afore."

Bas thoughtfully fingered his pipe, and when he spoke his words came soberly.

"Seein' es how ye're a stranger hyarabouts," he suggested, "I reckon hit hain't no more then plain charity ter forewarn ye. She's got a lavish of lovers an' thar's some several amongst 'em that's pizen mean – mean enough ter prove up vi'lent and murderous ter any new man thet comes trespassin'."

"Oh, pshaw, thet's always liable ter happen. Anyhow, I reckon I don't have ter worrit myself 'bout thet yit."

"Suit yoreself." This time the native spoke dryly. "But what ye says sounds unthoughted ter me. Ef a man's mean enough ter foller murderin' somebody over a gal, he's more like ter do hit afore ther feller gits his holt on her then a'tterwards. When did ye see ther gal?"

Maggard shook himself like a dog roused from contented sleep and sat up straight.

"I hain't niver seed her but jest one time, an' I hain't niver passed no word of speech with her," he replied. "When I come by ther house an' tarried ter make my manners with ther old man, she was a-standin' in an upstairs winder lookin' out an' I seed her thar through ther branches of that big old walnuck tree. She hed on a dress thet made me think of a red-bird, an' her checks minded me right shrewdly of ivy blooms."

"Does ye aim ter name hit ter her thet she puts ye in mind of – them things?"

"I kinderly hed hit in head ter tell her." Suddenly Maggard's frank laugh broke out disconcertingly as he added an inquiry so direct that it caused the other to flush.

"Rowlett, be ye one of these hyar lavish of lovers ye jest told me erbout?"

The mountaineer is, by nature, secretive to furtiveness, and under so outright a questioning the visitor stiffened with affront. But at once his expression cleared of displeasure and he met frankness with a show of equal candour.

"I'm one of ther fellers thet's seekin' ter wed with her, ef thet's what ye means, albeit hit's my own business, I reckon," he said, evenly. "But I hain't one of them I warned ye erginst on account of meanness. Myself I believes in every person havin' a fair chanst an' ther best man winnin'."

The other nodded gravely.

"I didn't aim at no offense," he hastened to declare. "I hain't niver met ther gal an' like as not she wouldn't favour me with no second look nohow."

"I loves ter see a man talk out-right," avowed the Kentuckian with cordial responsiveness. "Es fer me, I've done made me some sev'ral right hateful enemies, myself, because I seeks ter wed with her, an' I 'lowed ter warn ye in good time thet ye mout run foul of like perils."

"I'm beholden ter ye fer forewarnin' me," came Maggard's grave response. "Ther old man hes done invited me ter sa'nter over thar an' sot me a cheer some time, though – an' I reckon I'll go."

Rowlett rose and with a good-humoured grin stretched his giant body. In the gesture was all the lazy power of a great cat.

"I hain't got no license ter dissuade ye, ner ter fault ye," he declared, "but I hopes ter Goddlemighty she hain't got no time of day fer ye."

That afternoon Maggard sat before the doorstep of Old Caleb Harper's house when the setting sun was splashing from a gorgeous palette above the ragged crests of the ridges. It was colour that changed and grew in splendour with ash of rose and purpled cloud border and glowing orange streamer. Against those fires the great tree stood with druid dignity, keeping vigil over the roof it sheltered.

At length Maggard heard a rustle and turned his head to see the girl standing in the doorway.

He was a mountain man and mountain men are not schooled in the etiquette of rising when a woman presents herself. Yet now he came to his feet, responding to no dictate of courtesy but lifted as by some nameless exaltation at the sight of her – some impulse entirely new to him and inexplicable.

She stood there a little shyly at first, as slender and as gracefully upright as a birch, and her dark hair caught the fire of the sinking sun with a bronze glow like that of the turkey's wing. Her eyes, over which heavy lashes drooped diffidently, were bafflingly deep, as with rich colour drowned in duskiness.

"This hyar's my gal, Dorothy," announced the old man and then she disappeared.

That night Maggard walked home with a chest rounded to the deep draughts of night air which he was drinking, and a heady elation in the currents of his veins. She had slipped in and out of the room as he had talked with the patriarch, after supper, flitting like some illusive shadow of shyness. He had had hardly a score of words with her, but the future would plentifully mend that famine.

In the brilliant moonlight he vaulted the picket fence of his own place and saw the front of the cube-like house, standing before him, streaked with the dark of the logs and the white of the chinking. About it was the patch of scythe-cleared ground as blue as cobalt in the bright night, and back of it the inky rampart of the mountainside.

But as he approached the door of the cabin the silver bath of light picked out and emphasized a white patch at its centre, and he made out that a sheet of paper was pinned there.

"I reckon Rowlett's done left me some message or other," he reflected as he took the missive down and went inside to light his lantern and build a fire on the hearth – since even the summer nights were shrewdly chilling here in the hills.

When the logs were snapping and he had kicked off his heavy boots and kindled his pipe, he sprawled luxuriously in a back-tilted chair and held his paper to the flare of the blaze to read it.

At first he laughed derisively, then his brows gathered in a frown of perplexity and finally his jaw stiffened into grimness.

The note was set down in crudely printed characters, as though to evade the identifying quality of handwriting, and this was its truculent message:

No trespassin'. The gal ain't fer *you*. Once more of goin' over yon and they'll find you stretched dead in a creek bed. This is writ with God in Heaven bearin' witness that it's true.

## CHAPTER VI

Cal Maggard sat gazing into the blaze that leaped and eddied fitfully under the blackened chimney. In one hand drooped the sheet of paper that he had found fastened to his door and in the other the pipe which had been forgotten and had died.

He looked over his shoulder at the door which he had left ajar. Through its slit he could see a moonlit strip of sky, and rising slowly he circled the room, holding the protection of the shadowy walls until he reached and barred it. That much was his concession to the danger of the threat, and it was the only concession he meant to make.

Into this place he had come unknown and under this roof he had slept only one night. He had injured no man, offended no woman or child, yet the malevolent spirit of circumstance that had made a refugee of him in Virginia seemed to have pursued him and found him out.

Perhaps Rowlett had been right. The Harper girl was, among other mountain women, like a moon among stars. Her local admirers might hate and threaten one another, but against an intruder from elsewhere they would unite as allies. Such a prize would be fought for, murdered for if need be – but one ray of encouragement played among the clouds. Any lover who felt confidence in his own success would not have found such tactics needful – and if she herself were not committed, she was not yet won by any rival. In that conclusion lay solace.

The next morning found Maggard busied about his dooryard, albeit with his rifle standing ready to hand, and to-day he wore his shirt with the arm-pit pistol holster under its cover.

His vigilance, too, was quietly alert, and when a mule came in sight along the trail which looped over the ridge a half mile distant and was promptly swallowed again by the woods, his ears followed its approach by little sounds that would have been silent to a less sensitively trained hearing.

It was a smallish, mouse-coloured mule that emerged at length to view and it looked even smaller than it was because the man who straddled it dwarfed it with his own ponderous stature and a girth which was almost an anomaly in a country of raw-boned gauntness.

The big man slid down, and his thick neck and round face were red and sweat-damp though the day was young and cool.

"I made a soon start this mornin'," he enlightened: "ter git me some gryste ground, an' I didn't eat me no vittles save only a few peanuts. I'm sich a fool 'bout them things thet most folks round hyar calls me by ther name of 'Peanuts.'"

"I reckon I kin convenience ye with some sort of snack," Maggard assured him. "Ef so be ye're hungry – an' kin enjoy what I've got."

Fed and refreshed, "Peanuts" Causey started on again and before he had been long gone Bas Rowlett appeared and sent his long halloo ahead of him in announcement of his coming.

"I jist lowed I'd ride over an' see could I tender ye any neighbourly act," he began affably and Maggard laughed.

"Thet thar's right clever of ye," he declared. "Fer one thing, ye kin tell me who air ther big, jobial-seeming body thet gives ther name of Peanuts Causey. I reckon ye knows him?"

Rowlett grunted. "He's a kind of loaferer thet goes broguein' 'round scatterin' peanut hulls an' brash talk everywhich way an' yon," he gave enlightenment. "Folks don't esteem him no turrible plenty. Hit's all right fer hawgs ter fatten but hit don't become a man none. Myself I disgusts gutty fellers."

Cal Maggard had drawn out his pipe and was slowly filling it. As though the thought were an amusing one he inquired drawlingly:

"Be he one of ther fellers thet seeks ter wed Harper's gal, too?"

At that question Rowlett snorted his disdain.

"Him? Thet tub of fat-meat? Wa'al now ye names hit ter me, I reckon he does loiter 'round thar erbout all he das't – he's ther hang-roundin'est feller ye ever seed – but ther only chanst he's got air fer every other man ter fall down an' die."

"I fared over thar last night," said Maggard with a level glance at his companion, "an' I met ther gal. She seemed right shy-like an' didn't hev much ter say one way ner t'other."

As he spoke he searched the face of his visitor but the only expression that it gave forth in response to the announcement was one of livened and amiable interest. Then, after a brief pause, the Virginian laid a hand on the elbow of his neighbour and lowered his voice.

"I wisht ye'd come inside a minute. Thar's a matter I'd love ter hev ye counsel me erbout."

With a nod of acquiescence the visitor followed the householder through the door, and Maggard's face grew soberly intent as he picked up a sheet of paper from the table and held it out.

"Yestiddy ye forewarned me thet ef I went over thar I'd gain me some enemies," he said. "Hit 'pears like ye made a right shrewd guess ... read thet... I found hit nailed ter my door when I come home last night."

Hewlett took the paper and corrugated his brows over its vindictive message; then his high cheekbones flushed and from his unshaven lips gushed a cascade of oath-embroidered denunciation.

"Afore God Almighty," he ripped out in conclusion, "kin any man comprehend ther sneakin', low-down meanness of a feller thet seeks ter terrify somebody sich fashion es thet? He don't das't disclose hisself and yit he seeks ter run ye off!"

"He hain't a' goin' ter run me off none – whosoever he be," was the calm rejoinder, and Rowlett looked up quickly.

"Then ye aims ter go right ahead?"

"I aims ter go over thar ergin termorrer evenin'... I'd go terday only I don't seek ter w'ar my welcome out."

Rowlett nodded. His voice came with convincing earnestness.

"I told ye yestiddy thet I aimed ter wed with thet gal myself ef so be I proved lucky at sweetheartin' her. I hain't got no gay int'rest in aidin' ner abettin' ye, but yit I don't hold with no such bull-doizin' methods. What does ye aim ter do erbout hit?"

"I aims ter pin this hyar answer on ther door whar I found ther letter at," replied Maggard, crisply, "An' ef hit comes ter gun-battlin' in ther bresh – I don't seek ter brag none – but ye seed me shoot yestiddy."

Rowlett took and slowly read the defiant response which the other had pencilled and a grim smile of approval came to his face:

To whoever it consarns. I aim to stay here and go wherever I takes the notion.

I aim to be as peaceable as I'm suffered to be – and as warlike as I has to be.

*Cal Maggard.*

"I wonders, now," mused Rowlett, half-aloud, "who that damn craven mout be?"

Suddenly his swarthy face brightened with an idea and he volunteered: "Let me hev thet thar paper. I won't betray ter no man what's in hit but mebby I mout compare them words with ther handwrite of some fellers I knows – an' git at ther gist of the matter, thet fashion."

It seemed a slender chance yet a possibility. A man who was everywhere acquainted might make use of it, whereas the stranger himself could hardly hope to do so.

But as Maggard thrust the note forward in compliance he took second thought – and withdrew it.

"No," he said, slowly. "I'm obleeged ter ye – but ye mout lose this hyar paper an' like es not, I'll hev need of hit herea'tter."

With evident disappointment Rowlett conceded the argument by a nod of his head.

"Mebby ye're right," he said. "But anyhow we'd better s'arch round about. Ef thar's a shoe-print left anywheres in ther mud or any sich-like thing, I'd be more like ter know what hit denotes then what a stranger would."

Together they went up and down the road, studying the dusty and rock-strewn surface with backwoods eyes to which little things were more illuminating than large print.

They circled back of the ruined stockade and raked the rising laurel tangles with searching scrutiny. Finally Rowlett, who was several paces in advance, beckoned to the other and gave a low whistle of discovery.

Behind a low rock the thick grass was downpressed as though some huge rabbit had been huddled there.

"Some person's done fixed hisself a nestie hyar – ter spy on yore dwellin' house," he confidently asserted, then as he stood studying the spot he reached into the matted tangle and drew out a hand closed on some small object.

For a moment he held it open before his own eyes, then tossed over to Maggard a broken peanut shell.

Neither of them made any comment just then, but as they turned away Rowlett murmured, as though to himself:

"Of course, *any* feller kin eat peanuts."

All that afternoon Cal Maggard lay hidden in the thicket overlooking his front door and, as a volunteer co-sentinel, Bas Rowlett lay in a "laurel-hell" watching from the rear, but their vigilante was unrewarded.

That night, though, while Maggard sat alone, smoking his pipe by his hearth, two shadowy figures detached themselves, at separate times and points, from the sooty tangle of the mountain woods some mile and a half away, and met at the rendezvous of a deserted cabin whose roof was half collapsed.

They held the shadows and avoided the moonlight and they moved like silhouettes without visible features. They struck no matches and conferred in low and guarded tones, squatting on their heels and haunches in the abandoned interior.

"He went over ter Harper's house yestiddy evenin', an' he's like ter go right soon ergin'," said one.

"All ye've got ter do air ter keep in tech with me – so any time I needs ye I kin git ye. I hain't plum made up my mind yit."

The other shadowy and hunched figure growled unpleasantly, then bit from a tobacco twist and spat before he answered.

"I hain't got no hankerin' fer no more laywayin's," he objected. "Ef ye resolves that he needs killin', why don't ye do hit yoreself? Hit hain't nothin' ter me."

"I've done told ye why I kain't handily do hit myself. Nobody hain't ergoin' ter suspicion *you*— an' es fer what's in hit fer ye – ef so be I calls on ye – we've done sotted that."

The other remained churlishly silent for awhile. Palpably he had little stomach for this jackal task and it was equally obvious that he feared refusal even more than acceptance of the stewardship.

"Hit hain't like as if I was seekin' ter fo'ce ye ter do suthin' ye hedn't done afore," the persuasive voice reminded him, and again the snarling response growled out its displeasure.

"No, an' ye hain't said nothin' cons'arnin' what ye knows erbout me, nuther. Ye hain't even drapped a hint thet any time ye takes ther notion ter talk out ter ther High-cote ye kin penitenshery me – but thet's jest because ye knows ye don't haf ter. By God, sometimes I think's hit would well-nigh profit me ter layway *you* an' be shet of ye."

The second voice was purring now, with a hint of the claw-power under the softness.

"Thet would be a right smart pity, though. Thar *is* one other body thet knows – an' ef so be I got kilt he'd be right speedy ter guess ther man thet done hit – an' ther reason, too. I reckon hit'll profit ye better ter go on bein' friends with me."

Again long silence, then grudgingly the murderer-elect rose to his feet and nodded reluctant assent.

"So be it," he grumbled. "I gives ye my hand ter deaden him whensoever ye says ther word. But afore we parts company let's talk ther matter over a leetle more. I wouldn't love ter hev ye censure me for makin' no error."

"Ther main thing," came the instruction of the employer, "air this: I wants ter be able ter get ye quick an' hev ye ack quick – ef so be I needs ye, no matter when that be."

## CHAPTER VII

When Cal Maggard closed and locked his cabin door late the next afternoon he stood regarding with sombre eyes his message of defiance which, it seemed, no one had come to read.

Yet, as he turned his back a smile replaced the scowl, for he was going to see a girl.

At the bend where the trail crossed the shallow creek, and a stray razor-back wallowed at the roadside, Maggard saw a figure leaning indolently against the fence.

"I suspicioned ye'd be right likely ter happen along erbout this time," enlightened Bas Rowlett as he waved his hand in greeting. "So I 'lowed I'd tarry an' santer along with ye."

"I'm beholden ter ye," responded Maggard, but he knew what the other had been too polite to say: That this pretended casualness marked the kindly motive of affording escort because of the danger under which he himself was travelling unfamiliar roads.

Over the crests heavy banks of clouds were settling in ominous piles of blackness and lying still-heaped in the breathlessness that precedes a tempest, but the sun still shone and Rowlett who was leading the way turned into a forest trail.

As they went, single file, through a gorge into which the sun never struck save from the zenith; where the ferns grew lush and the great leaves of the "cucumber tree" hung motionless, they halted without a word and a comprehending glance shot between them.

When two setters, trained to perfect team work, come unexpectedly upon the quail scent in stubble, that one which first catches the nostril-warning becomes rigid as though a breath had petrified him – and at once his fellow drops to the stiff posture of accord.

So now, as if one hand had pulled two strings, Cal Maggard and Bas Rowlett ceased to be upright animals. The sound of a crackled twig off to the right had come to their ears, and it was a sound that carried the quality of furtiveness.

Instantly they had dropped to their bellies and wriggled snake-like away from the spots where they had stood. Instantly, too, they became almost invisible and two drawn weapons were thrust forward.

There they lay for perhaps two minutes, with ears straining into the silence, neither exaggerating nor under-estimating the menace that might have caused that sound in the underbrush. After a while Rowlett whispered, "What did ye hear?"

"'Peared like ter me," responded Maggard, guardedly, "a twig cracked back thar in ther la'rel."

Rowlett nodded but after a space he rose, shaking his head.

"Ef so be thar's anybody a-layin' back thar in ther bresh, I reckon he's done concluded ter wait twell he gits ye by yourself," he decided. "Let's be santerin' along."

So they went forward until they came to a point where they stood on the unforested patch of a "bald knob." There Rowlett halted again and pointed downward. Beneath them spread the valley with the band of the river winding tenuously through the bottoms of the Harper farm. About that green bowl the first voices of the coming storm were already rumbling with the constant growl of thunder.

"Thar's ther house – and thar's ther big tree in front of hit," said Rowlett. "Ef I owned ther place I'd shorely throw ther axe inter hit afore it drewed a lightnin' bolt down on ther roof."

Cal Maggard, who had known walnuts only growing in the forest, gazed down now with something of wonderment at this one which stood alone. A sense of its spreading magnificence was borne in upon him, and though the simile was foreign to his mind, it seemed as distinct and separate from the thousands of other trees that blended in the leagues of surrounding forestry as might a mounted and sashed field marshal in the centre of an army of common soldiery.

Even in the dark atmosphere of gathering storm its spread of foliage held a living, golden quality of green and its trunk an inky blackness that gave a startling vividness.

He did not know that this tree which grows stiff of head and narrow of shoulder in the woods alters its character when man provides it with a spacious setting, and that it becomes the noblest of our native growths. He did not know that when Ovid wrote of folk in the Golden Age, who lived upon:

Acorns that had fallen  
From the towering trees of Jove,

he called acorns what we call nuts, and that it was not the oak but the walnut that he celebrated.

But Maggard did know it had been through the leafage of that splendid tree that he had first glimpsed the girl's face, and he did know that never before had he seen a thing of trunk and branch and leaf that had so impressed him with its stateliness and vital beauty.

If he were master at that house, he thought, he would not cut it down.

"I'm obleeged ter ye fer comin' thus fur with me," he observed, then supplemented drily, "an' still more fer not comin' no further."

The other laughed. "I hain't ergoin' ter 'cumber yore projeck's none ternight," he declared, good-humouredly, then added fairly enough, "but termorrer night *I* aims ter go sparkin' thar myself – an' I looks ter ye to do as much fer me an' give me a cl'ar road."

Maggard had hardly reached the house when, with all the passionate violence of the hills, the tempest broke. Safe inside, he talked and smoked with the patriarch and his thoughts wandered, as he sat there by the hearth, back to the room from which now and then drifted a fragment of plaintively crooning song.

The stag horns over the fireplace and the flintlock gun that lay across their prongs spoke of days long past, before the deer and bear had been "dogged to death" in the Cumberland. There were a few pewter pieces, too – and these the visitor knew were found only in houses that went back to revolutionary days.

This, mused Kenneth Thornton, was the best house and the most fertile farm in all the wild surrounding country, and irony crept into his smile with the thought that it was a place he could not enter save under an anonymous threat of death.

By the time supper had been eaten, the storm voices had dwindled from boisterous violence to exhausted quiet, and even the soft patter of warm rain died away until through the door, which now stood ajar, the visitor could see the moonlight and the soft stars that seemed to hang just out of arm's reach.

Dorothy had slipped quietly into the room and chosen a seat at the chimney corner where she sat as voiceless as a nun who has taken vows of silence. Soon the old man's head began to nod in drowsy contentment. At first he made dutiful resistance against the pleasant temptation of languor – then succumbed.

The young man, who had been burning with impatience for this moment, made a pretense of refilling his pipe. Over there out of the direct flare and leaping of the flames the girl sat in shadow and he wanted to see her face. Yet upon him had descended an unaccustomed embarrassment which found no easy door opening upon conversation.

So they sat in a diffident silence that stretched itself to greater awkwardness, until at last Dorothy rose abruptly to her feet and Thornton feared that she meant to take flight.

"Pears like ter me," she asserted, suddenly, "hit's nigh suffocatin' hot in hyar."

"I war jest a-studyin' erbout thet myself," affirmed Maggard whose quickness of uptake was more eager than truthful. "Ther moon's a-shinin' outdoors. Let's go out thar an' breathe free."

As though breathing free were the most immediate of her needs, the girl rose and stood for a moment with the firelight catching the pink of her cheeks and bronzing her heavy hair, then she turned and led the way out to the porch where, in the moisture of the fresh-washed air, the honeysuckle vines were heavy with fragrance.

The walnut tree, no longer lashed into storm incantations, stood now in quiet majesty, solitary though, at a respectful distance, surrounded. The frogs and whippoorwills were voiceful, and from the silvery foreground, shadow-blotted with cobalt, to the indigo-deep walls of the ranges, the earth spilled over influences of sentient youth.

Maggard gazed down at the girl and the girl, with a hand resting on a porch post, stood looking off out of eyes that caught and gave back the soft light from the moon. To Maggard she seemed unconditionally lovely, but the fetters of shyness still held them both.

"I don't know many folks hyarabouts yit," he said with impetuous suddenness. "I'd plumb love ter hev ye befriend me."

Dorothy turned toward him and her lips relaxed their shyness into a friendly smile – then impulsively she demanded: "Did yore foreparents dwell hyarabouts a long time back?"

Thornton's face, with the moonlight upon it, stiffened into a mask-like reticence at this touching upon the sensitive topic which threatened his identification as a hunted man.

"I've done heered that they lived somewhars in Kaintuck ginerations afore my time," he made evasive answer. "What made ye ask me that question?"

Then it was she who became hesitant but after a little she suggested, "Come on down hyar under the old walnuck tree. Seems like I kin talk freer thar."

Together they went to the place where the shadows lay deep, like an island in a lake of moonshine, and the girl talked on in the hurried, shy fashion of one with a new secret and the need of a confidant.

"Ther mornin' ye fust come by ... an' stopped thar in ther high road ... I'd jest been readin' somethin' thet ... was writ by one of my foreparents ... way back, upwards of a hundred y'ars ago, I reckon." She paused but he nodded his interest so sympathetically that she went on, reassured; "She told how come she planted this hyar tree ... in them days when ther Injins still scalped folks ... an' she writ down jest what her husband looked like."

"What *did* he look like?" inquired the man, gravely, and the girl found herself no longer bashful with him but at ease, as with an old friend.

"Hit war right then I looked out an' seed ye," she said, simply, "an' 'peared like ye'd plum bodily walked outen them pages of handwrite. Thet's why I asked whether yore folks didn't dwell hyar onc't. Mebby we mout be kin."

Cal Maggard shook his head.

"My folks moved away to Virginny so fur back," he informed her, "thet hit's apt ter be right distant kinship."

"This was all fur back," she reminded him, and in order that the sound of her voice might continue, he begged:

"Tell me somethin' else erbout this tree ... an' what ye read in ther book."

She was standing close to him, and as she talked it seemed to him that the combined fragrances of the freshly washed night all came from her. He was conscious of the whippoorwill calls and the soft crooning of the river, but only as far-away voices of accompaniment, and she, answering to dreamy influences, too, went on with her recitals from the journal of the woman who had been a lady in Virginia and who probably lay buried under the spot on which they stood.

"Hit's right amazin' ter listen at ye," he said at length. "But plentiful amazin' things comes ter pass."

An amazing thing was coming to pass with him at that moment, for his arms were twitching with an eagerness to close about her, and he seemed struggling against forces of impulse stronger than himself.

It was amazing because he had sworn to avoid the folly of chancing everything on too hasty a love declaration, and because the discipline of patient self-control was strong in him. It was amazing,

too, because, with a warning recently received and appreciated, his ears had become deaf to all sounds save her voice, and when the thicket stirred some fifty yards away he heard nothing.

Even the girl herself would ordinarily have paused to bend her head and listen to an unaccustomed sound, but in her as well as in him the close-centred magic was working absorption.

Each of them felt the tense, new something that neither fully understood, but which set them vibrating to a single impulse as the two prongs of a tuning fork answer to one note. Neither of them thought of the figure that hitched its way toward them – more cautious after that first warning rustle – to watch and listen – the figure of an armed man.

For the girl reality seemed to recede into the gossamer of dreams. She could fancy herself the other woman who had lived and died before her – and the face of the man in the moonlight might have been that of the pioneer Thornton. Fancy was stronger than actuality.

"Hit almost seems like," she whispered, "that ther old tree's got a spell in hit – ter bewitch folks with."

"Ef hit has ... hit's a spell I loves right good," he fervently protested.

He heard her breath come quick and sudden, as if under a hypnotic force, and following the prompting of some instinctive mentor, he held out his arms toward her.

Still she stood with the wide-eyed raptness of a sleepwalker, and when Cal Maggard moved slowly forward, she, who had been so shy an hour ago, made no retreat.

It was all as though each of them reacted to the command of some controlling volition beyond themselves. The man's arms closed about her slender body and pressed it close to his breast. His lips met her upturned ones, and held them in a long kiss that was returned. Each felt the stir of the other's breath. To each came the fluttering tumult of the other's heart. Then after a long while they drew apart, and the girl's hands went spasmodically to her face.

"What hev we been doin', Cal?" she demanded in the bewildered tone of returning realization. "I don't skeercely know ye yit, nuther."

"Mebby hit war ther spell," he answered in a low but triumphant voice. "Ef hit war, I reckon God Hissself worked hit."

The figure in the tangle had drawn noiselessly back now and slipped off into the woods a few hundred yards away where it joined another that stood waiting there.

"I hain't mad with ye, Cal," said Dorothy, slowly. "I hain't even mortified, albeit I reckon I ought ter be sick with shame ... but I wants ye ter go home now. I've got need ter think."

As they stood together at the fence they heard Bas Rowlett's voice singing down the road, and soon his figure came striding along and stopped by the stile.

"Howdy, Dorothy," he called, then recognizing that this was a leave-taking he added, "Cal, ef ye're startin' home, I'll go long with ye, fer comp'ny."

The moon was westering when the two men reached the turn of the road and there Rowlett paused and began speaking in a cautious undertone.

"I didn't come along accidental, Cal. I done hit a-purpose. I got ter studyin' 'bout that cracklin' twig we heered in ther bresh an' hit worried me ter think of yore goin' home by yoreself. I concluded ter tarry fer ye an' guide ye over a trace thet circles round thet gorge without techin' hit."

"I'm right sensibly beholden ter ye," answered Maggard, the more embarrassed because he now knew this generous fellow to be a vanquished rival. "But 'atter ternight ye've got ter suffer me ter take my own chances."

Together they climbed the mountainside until they reached the edge of a thicket that seemed impassable but through which the guide discovered a narrow way. Before they had come far they halted, breathing deep from the steep ascent, and found themselves on a shelf of open rock that commanded a view of the valley and the roof of the Harper house, on which the moonlight slept.

"Thar's ther last glimpse we gits ternight of ther house an' ther old tree," said Rowlett who stood a few feet away and, as Maggard turned to look, the night stillness broke into a bellowing that echoed against the precipice and the newcomer lurched forward like an ox struck with a sledge.

As he fell Maggard's hand gripped convulsively at his breast and at the corners of his mouth a thin trickle of blood began to ooze.

But before his senses went under the closing tide of darkness and insensibility the victim heard Rowlett's pistol barking ferociously back into the timber from which the ambushed rifle had spoken. He heard Rowlett's reckless and noisy haste as he plowed into the laurel where he, too, might encounter death, and raising his voice in a feeble effort of warning he tried to shout out: "Heed yoreself, Bas ... hit's too late ter save me."

## CHAPTER VIII

To the man lying in the soaked grass and moss of the sandstone ledge came flashes of realization that were without definite beginning or end, separated by gaps of insensibility. Out of his limbs all power and volition seemed to have evaporated, and his breath was an obstructed struggle as though the mountain upon which he lay were lying instead upon his breast. Through him went hot waves of pain under which he clenched his teeth until he swooned again into a merciful numbness.

He heard in an interval of consciousness the thrashing of his companion's boots through the tangle and the curses with which his companion was vainly challenging his assailant to stand out and fight in the open.

Then, for a little while, he dropped endlessly down through pits of darkness and after that opened his eyes to recognize that he was being held with his head on Rowlett's knee. Rowlett saw the fluttering of the lids and whispered:

"I'm goin' ter tote ye back thar – ter Harper's house. Hit's ther only chanst – an' I reckon I've got ter hurt ye right sensibly."

Bas rose and hefted him slowly and laboriously, straightening up with a muscle-straining effort, until he stood with one arm under the limp knees and one under the blood-wet shoulders of his charge.

For a moment he stood balancing himself with his feet wide apart, and then he started staggering doggedly down the stony grade, groping, at each step, for a foothold. In the light of the sinking moon the slowly plodding rescuer offered an inviting target, with both hands engaged beyond the possibility of drawing or using a weapon, but no shot was fired.

The distance was not great, but the pace was slow, and the low moon would shortly drop behind the spruce fringe of the ridges. Then the burden-bearer would have to stumble forward through confused blackness – so he hastened his steps until his own breath rattled into an exhausted rasp and his own heart hammered with the bursting ache of effort.

When he had reached the half-way point he put his load down and shouted clamorously for help, until the black wall of the Harper house showed an oblong of red light and the girl's voice came back in answer.

"I've got a dyin' man hyar," he called, briefly, "an' I needs aid."

Then as Maggard lay insensible in the mud, Bas squatted on his heels beside him and wiped the sweat drench from his face with his shirt-sleeve.

It was with unsteady eyes that he watched a lantern crawling toward him: eyes to which it seemed to weave the tortuous course of a purposeless glow-worm.

Then the moon dipped suddenly and the hills, ceasing to be visible shapes, were felt like masses of close crowded walls, but at length the lantern approached and, in its shallow circle of sickly yellow, it showed two figures – that of the old man and the girl.

Dorothy carried the light, and when she held it high and let its rays fall on the two figures, one sitting stooped with weariness and the other stretched unconscious, her eyes dilated in a terror that choked her, and her face went white.

But she said nothing. She only put down the lantern and slipped her arms under the shoulders that lay in the wet grass, shuddering as her hands closed on the warm moisture of blood, and Rowlett rose with an effort and rallied his spent strength to lift the inert knees. While the old man lighted their footsteps the little procession made its painful way down what was left of the mountainside, across the road, and up into the house.

\* \* \*

When Haggard opened his eyes again he was lying with his wounds already bathed and roughly bandaged. Plainly he was in a woman's room, for its clean particularity and its huge old four-poster bed spread with a craftily wrought "coverlet" proclaimed a feminine proprietorship. A freshly built fire roared on a generous hearth, giving a sense of space broadening and narrowing with fickle boundaries of shadow.

The orange brightness fell, too, on a figure that stood at the foot-board looking down at him with anxiety-tortured eyes; a figure whose heavy hair caught a bronze glimmering like a nimbus, and whose hands were held to her breast with a clutching little suspended gesture of dread.

Voices vaguely heard in disjointed fragments of talk called him back to actuality.

The old man was speaking:

"... I fears me he kain't live long... 'Pears like ther shot war a shore deadener..." and from Rowlett came an indignant response "... I heered ther crack from right spang behind us ... I wheeled 'round an' shot three shoots back at ther flash."

Then Maggard heard, so low that it seemed a joyous and musical whisper, the announcement from the foot of his bed:

"I'm goin' ter fetch Uncle Jase Burrell now, ter tend yore hurts, Cal," she said, softly. "I jest couldn't endure ter start away twell I seed ye open yore eyes, though."

Maggard glanced toward Bas Rowlett who stood looking solicitously down at him and licked his lips. There was an acknowledgment which decency required his making in their presence, and he keyed himself for a feeble effort to speak.

"Rowlett thar..." he began, faintly, and a cough seemed to start fresh agonies in his chest so that he had to wait awhile before he went on.

"Mighty few men would hev stood by me ... like he done... Ef I'd been his own blood-brother..." there he gulped, choked, and drifted off again.

Cal Maggard next awoke with a strangely refreshed sense of recovery and a blessed absence of pain. He seemed still unable to move, and he said nothing, for in that strange realization of a brain brought back to focus came a shock of new amazement.

Bas Rowlett bent above his pillow, but with a transformed face. The eyes that were for the moment turned toward the door burned with a baleful hatred and the lips were drawn into a vicious snarl.

This, too, must be part of the light-headedness, thought Maggard, but instinctively he continued to simulate unconsciousness. This man had been his steadfast and self-forgetful friend. So the wounded man fought back the sense of clear and persistent reality, which had altered kindly features into a gargoyle of vindictiveness, and lay unmoving until Rowlett rose and turned his back.

Then, through the slits of warily screened eyes, he swept a hasty glance about the room and found that except for the man who had carried him in and himself it was empty. Probably that hate-blackness on the other face was for the would-be assassin and not for himself, argued Maggard.

Rowlett went over and stood by the hearth, staring into the fire, his hands clenching and unclenching in spasmodic violence.

This was a queer dream, mused Maggard, and more and more insistently it refused to seem a dream.

More surely as he watched the face which the other turned to glare at him did the instinct grow that he himself was the object of that bitter animosity of expression.

He lay still and watched Rowlett thrust a hand into his overalls pocket and scatter peanut shells upon the fire – objects which he evidently wished to destroy. As he did this the standing figure laughed shortly under his breath – and full realization came to the wounded man.

The revelation was as complete as it was ugly. As long as he lay unmoving the pain seemed quiescent, and his head felt crystal clear – his thought efficient. Perhaps he was dying – most probably he was. If so this was a lucid interval before death, and in it his mind was playing him no tricks. The supposed friend loomed in an unmasked and traitorous light which even the preconceived idea could not confuse or mitigate. Maggard did not want to give credence to the certainty that was shaping itself – and yet the conviction had been born and could not be thrust back into the womb of the unborn. All of Rowlett's friendliness and loyalty had been only an alibi! It had been Rowlett who had led him, unsuspecting, into ambush!

Maggard's coat and pistol-holster hung at the headboard of his bed. Now with a cat-soft tread upon the creaking puncheons of the floor Rowlett approached them. He paused first, bending to look searchingly down at the white face on the pillow, and the eyes in that face remained almost but not quite closed. The hand that rested outside the coverlet, too, lay still and limp like a dead hand.

Reassured by these evidences of unconsciousness, Bas Rowlett drew a deep breath of satisfaction. The diabolical thought had come to him that by shaking the prone figure he could cause a hemorrhage that would assure death – and the evil fire in his eyes as his hands stole out toward his intended victim betrayed his reflection.

The seemingly insensible listener, with a Spartan effort, held his pale face empty of betrayal as the two impulsive hands came closer.

But as quickly the arms drew back, and the expression clouded with doubt.

"No..." reflected Bas without words. "No, hit ain't needful nohow ... an' Jase Burrell mout detect I'd done hit."

The bending figure straightened again and its hands began calmly rifling the pockets of the wounded man's coat.

Through the narrow slits of eyes that dissembled sleep Maggard watched, while Rowlett opened and recognized the threatening letter that had been nailed to the door. The purloiner nodded, and his lips twisted into a smile of triumph, as he thrust the sheet of paper into his own pocket.

No longer now could there remain any vestige of doubt in Maggard's mind – no illusion of mistaking the true for the untrue, and in the vengeful fury that blazed eruptively through him he forgot the hurt of his wounding.

He could not rise from his bed and give battle. Had the other not reconsidered his diabolical impulse to shake him into a fatal hemorrhage he could not even have defended himself. His voice, in all likelihood, would not carry to the door of the next room – if indeed any one were there.

Physically, he was defenseless and inert, but all of him beyond the flesh was galvanized into quicksilver acuteness and determination. He was praying for a reprieve of life sufficient to call this Judas friend to an accounting – and if that failed, for strength enough to die with his denunciation spoken. Yet he realized the need of conserving his tenuous powers and so, gauging his abilities, he lay motionless and to all seeming unconscious, while the tall figure continued to tower over him.

Cal Maggard had some things to say and if his power of speech forsook him before he finished it was better not to make the start. These chances he was calculating, and after Rowlett had turned his back, the man in the bed opened his eyes and experimented with the one word, "Bas!"

He found that the monosyllable not only sounded clear, but had the quiet and determined quality of tone at which he had striven, and as it sounded the other wheeled, flinching as if the word had been a bullet.

But at once he was back by the bed, and Maggard's estimate of him as a master of perfidy mounted to admiration, for the passion clouds had in that flash of time been swept from his eyes and left them disguised again with solicitude and friendliness.

"By God, Cal!" The exclamation bore a counterfeited heartiness. "I didn't skeercely suffer myself ter hope y'd ever speak out ergin!"

"I'm obleeged, Bas." Maggard's voice was faint but steady now. "Thar's a thing I've got ter tell ye afore my stren'th gives out."

Beguiled by a seeming absence of suspicion into the belief that Maggard had just then awakened to consciousness, Rowlett ensconced himself on the bedside and nodded an unctuous sympathy. The other closed his eyes and spoke calmly and without raising his lids.

"Ye forewarned me, Bas... We both of us spoke out p'int blank ... erbout ther gal ... an' we both went on bein' ... plum friendly."

"Thet war ther best way, Cal."

"Yes... Then ye proffered ter safeguard me... Ye didn't hev no need ter imperil yoreself ... but ye *would* hev hit so."

"I reckon ye'd hev done likewise."

"No. I misdoubts I wouldn't ... anyhow ... right from ther outset on you didn't hev ter be friendly ter me ... but ye was."

"I loves fa'r mindedness," came the sanctimonious response.

A brief pause ensued while Maggard rested. He had yet some way to go, and the last part of the conversation would be the hardest.

"Most like," he continued at last, "I'll die ... but I've got a little bitty, slim chanst ter come through."

"I hopes so, Cal."

"An' ef I *does*, I calls on God in heaven ter witness thet afore ther moon fulls ergin ... I'm a-goin' ter *kill*– somebody."

"Who, Cal?"

The white face on the pillow turned a little and the eyes opened.

"I hain't keerin' none much erbout ther feller thet fired ther shot..." went on the voice. "Ther man I aims ter git ... air ther one thet hired him... *He's* goin' ter die ... *hard!*"

"What makes ye think" – the listener licked his lips furtively – "thar war more'n one?"

"Because I knows who ... t'other one is."

Rowlett rose from his seat, and lifted a clenched fist. The miscreant's thoughts were in a vortex of doubt, fear, and perplexity – but perhaps Maggard suspected "Peanuts" Causey, and Rowlett went on with an admirable bit of acting.

"Name him ter me, Cal," he tensely demanded. "He shot at both of us. He's my man ter kill!"

"When ye lay thar ... by my house ... watchin' with me..." went on the ambushed victim in a summarizing of ostensible services, "what made ye discomfort yoreself, fer me, save only friendliness?"

"Thet war all, Cal."

"An' hit war ther same reason thet made ye proffer ter take away thet letter an' seek ter diskiver who writ hit, warn't hit ... an' ter sa'rch about an' find thet peanut hull ... an' ter come by hyar an' show me a safe way home... All jest friendliness, warn't hit?"

"Hain't thet es good a reason es any?"

The voice on the bed did not rise but it took on a new note.

"Thar couldn't handily be but jest ... one better one ... Bas."

"What mout thet be?"

"Ther right one. Ther reason of a sorry craven thet aimed at a killin' ... an' sought ter alibi hisself."

Rowlett stood purple-faced and trembling in a transport of maniac fury with which an inexplicable fear ran cross-odds as warp and woof. The other had totally deluded him until the climax brought its accusation, and now the unmasked plotter took refuge in bluster, fencing for time to think.

"Thet's a damn lie an' a damn slander!" he stormed. "Ye've done already bore witness afore these folks hyar thet I sought ter save ye."

"An' I plum believed hit ... then. Now I knows better. I sees thet ye led me inter ambush ... thet ye planted them peanut hulls... Thet ye writ thet letter ... an' jest now ye stole hit outen my pocket."

"Thet's a lie, too. I reckon yore head's done been crazed. I toted ye in hyar an' keered fer ye."

"Ye aimed ter finish out yore alibi," persisted Maggard, disdainfully. "Ye didn't low I seed ye steal ther letter ... but I gives ye leave ter tek hit over thar an' and burn hit up, Rowlett – same es them peanut hulls... I hain't got no need of nuther them ... nur hit."

Rowlett's hand, under the sting of accusation, had instinctively pressed itself against his pocket. Now guiltily and self-consciously it came away and he found himself idiotically echoing his accuser's words:

"No need of hit?"

"No, I don't want nuther law-co'tes ner juries ter help me punish a man thet hires his killin' done second-handed... All I craves air one day of stren'th ter stand on my feet."

With a brief spasm of hope Rowlett bent forward and quickly decided on a course of temporizing. If he could encourage that idea the man would probably die – with sealed lips.

"I'm willin' ter look over all this slander, Cal," he generously acceded; "ye've done tuck up a false notion in yore light-headedness."

"This thing lays betwixt me an' you," went on the low-pitched but implacable voice from the bed, "but ef I ever gits up again – you're goin' ter wisht ter God in Heaven ... hit war jest only ther penitenshery threatenin' ye."

Again Rowlett's anger blazed, and his self-control slipped its leash.

"Afore God, ef ye warn't so plum puny an' tuckered out, I wouldn't stand hyar an' suffer ye ter fault me with them damn lies."

"Is thet why ye was ponderin' jest now over shakin' me till I bled inside myself?.. I seed thet thought in yore eyes."

The breath hissed out of Rowlett's great chest like steam from an over-stressed boiler, and a low bellow broke from his lips.

"I kin still do thet," he declared in a rage-choked voice. "I *did* hire a feller ter kill ye, but he failed me. Now I'm goin' ter finish ther job myself."

Then the door opened and old Caleb Harper called from the threshold:

"Did I hear somebody shout out in hyar? What's ther matter, Bas?"

As the menacing face hung over him, Maggard saw it school itself slowly into a hard composure and read a peremptory warning for silence in the eyes. The outstretched hands had already touched him, and now they remained holding his shoulders as the voice answered:

"Cal jest woke up. I reckon he war outen his head, an' I'm heftin' him up so's he kin breath freer."

Old Man Harper came over to the bed and Rowlett released his hold and moved away.

"I've done been studyin' whether Dorothy's goin' ter make hit acrost ter Jase Burrell's or not," said Caleb, quaveringly. "I fears me ther storm hes done washed out the ford."

Then he crossed to the hearth and sat down in a chair to light his pipe.

## CHAPTER IX

Cal Maggard lay unmoving as the old man's chair creaked. Over there with his back turned toward the fire stood Bas Rowlett, his barrel-like chest swelling heavily with that excitement which he sought to conceal. To Caleb Harper, serenely unsuspecting, the churlish sullenness of the eyes that resented his intrusion, went unmarked. It was an intervention that had come between the wounded man and immediate death, and now Rowlett cursed himself for a temporizing fool who had lost his chance.

He stood with feet wide apart and his magnified shadow falling gigantically across floor and wall – across the bed, too, on which his intended victim lay defenseless.

If Cal Maggard had been kneeling with his neck on the guillotine block the intense burden of his suspense could hardly have been greater.

So long as Caleb Harper sat there, with his benign old face open-eyed in wakefulness, death would stand grudgingly aloof, staring at the wounded man yet held in leash.

If those eyes closed in sleep the restive executioner would hardly permit himself to be the third time thwarted.

Yet the present reprieve would for a few moments endure, since the assassin would hesitate to goad his victim to any appeal for help.

Slowly the fire began to dwindle and the shadows to encroach with a dominion of somberness over the room. It seemed to the figure in the bed as he struggled against rising tides of torpor and exhaustion that his own resolution was waning with the firelight and that the murk of death approached with the thickening shadows.

He craved only sleep yet knew that it meant death.

With a morose passion closely akin to mania the thoughts of the other man, standing with hands clenched at his back, were running in turbulent freshet.

To have understood them at all one must have seen far under the surface of that bland and factitious normality which he maintained before his fellows. In his veins ran a mongrelized strain of tendencies and vices which had hardened into a cruel and monstrous summary of vicious degeneracy.

Yet with this brain-warping brutality went a self-protective disguise of fair-seeming and candour.

Rowlett's infatuation for Dorothy Harper had been of a piece with his perverse nature – always a flame of hot passion and never a steadfast light of unselfish love.

He had received little enough encouragement from the girl herself, but old Caleb Harper had looked upon him with partiality, and since, to his own mind, possession was the essential thing and reciprocated affection a minor consideration, he had until now been confident of success. Once he had married Dorothy Harper, he meant to break her to his will, as one breaks a spirited horse, and he had entertained no misgivings as to his final mastery.

Once unmasked, Bas Rowlett could never regain his lost semblance of virtue – and this battered creature in the bed was the only accuser who could unmask him. If the newcomer's death had been desirable before, it was now imperative.

The clock ticked on. The logs whitened, and small hissing tongues of blue flame crept about them where there had been flares of vermilion.

Like overstrained cat-gut drawn tauter and tauter until the moment of its snapping is imminent, the tension of that waiting grew more crucial and tortured.

Bit by bit into Cal Maggard's gropings after a plan crept the beginnings of an idea, though sometimes under the stupefying waves of drowsiness he lost his thread of thought.

Old Caleb was not yet asleep, and as the room grew chill he shivered in his chair, and rose slowly, complaining of the misery in his joints.

He threw fresh fuel on the fire and then, over-wearied with the night's excitement, let his head fall forward on his breast and his breath lengthen to a snore.

Then in a low but peremptory voice Maggard said:

"Rowlett, come hyar."

With cautious but willing footfall Rowlett approached, but before he reached the bedside a curt undertone warned him, "Stop right thar ... ef ye draws nigher I'll call out. Kin ye hear me?.. I aims ter talk low."

"I'm hearkenin'."

"All right. Give me yore pledge, full-solemn an' in ther sight of God Almighty ... thet ye'll hold yore hand till I gits well ... or else dies."

"Whar'fore would I do thet?"

"I'll tell you fer why. Ef ye don't ... I'll wake old Caleb up an' sw'ar ter a dyin' statement ... an' I'll tell ther full, total truth... Does ye agree?"

The other hesitated then evaded the question.

"S'posin' I does give ye my pledge ... what then?"

"Then ef I dies what I knows'll die with me... But ef I lives ... me an' you'll settle this matter betwixt ourselves so soon es I kin walk abroad."

That Maggard would ever leave that bed save to be borne to his grave seemed violently improbable, and if his silence could be assured while he lay there, success for the plotter would after all be complete. Yet Rowlett pretended to ponder the proposition which he burned ardently to accept.

"Why air ye willin' ter make thet compact with me?" he inquired dubiously, and the other answered promptly:

"Because ter send ye ter sulter in ther penitenshery wouldn't pleasure me ner content me ... no more then ter see ye unchurched fer tale-bearin'. Ye've got ter *die* under my own hands... Ef ye makes oath an' abides by hit ... ye needn't be afear'd thet I won't keep mine, too."

For a brief interval the standing man withheld his answer, but that was only for the sake of appearances. Then he nodded his head.

"I gives ye my hand on hit. I sw'ars."

Something like a grunt of bitter laughter came from the bed.

"Thet hain't enough ... fotch me a Bible."

"I don't know whar hit's at."

"I reckon they've got one – in a godly dwellin'-house like this. Find hit – an' speedily ... or I'll call out."

Rowlett turned and left the room, and presently he returned bearing a cumbersome and unmistakable tome.

"Now kneel down," came the command from the bed, and the command was reluctantly obeyed.

"Repeat these hyar words atter me ... 'I swa'rs, in ther sight an' hearin' of God Almighty...'" and from there the words ran double, low voiced from two throats, "'thet till sich time as Cal Maggard kin walk abroad, full rekivered ... I won't make no effort ter harm ner discomfort him ... no wise, guise ner fashion... Ef I breaks this pledge I prays God ter punish me ... with ruin an' death an' damnation in hell hyaratter!"

"An' now," whispered Maggard, "kiss ther book."

As the weirdly sworn malefactor came slowly to his feet the instinct of craft and perfidy brought him back to the part he must play.

"Now thet we onderstands one another," he said, slowly, "we're swore enemies atter ye gits well. Meantime, I reckon we'd better go on *seemin'* plum friendly."

"Jist like a couple of blood-brothers," assented Maggard with an ironic flash in his eyes, "an' now Blood-brother Bas, go over thar an' set down."

Rowlett ground his teeth, but he laughed sardonically and walked in leisurely fashion to the hearth.

There he sat with his feet outspread to the blaze, while he sought solace from his pipe – and failed to find it.

Possibly stray shreds of delirium and vagary mingled themselves with strands of forced clarity in Cal Maggard's thinking that night, for as he lay there a totally unreasonable comfort stole over him and seemed real.

He had the feeling that the old tree outside the door still held its beneficent spell and that this magic would regulate for him those elements of chance and luck without which he could not hope to survive until Dorothy and Uncle Jase came back – and Dorothy had started on a hard journey over broken and pitch-black distances.

Fanciful as was this figment of a sick imagination, the result was the same as though it had been a valid conviction, for after a while Old Man Caleb roused himself and stretched his long arms. Then he rose and peered at the clock with his face close to its dial, and once more he replenished the fire.

"Hit's past midnight now, Bas," he complained with a querulous note of anxiety in his words. "I'm plum tetchious an' worried erbout Dorothy."

For an avowed lover the seated man gave the impression of churlish unresponsiveness as he made his grumbling reply.

"I reckon she hain't goin' ter come ter no harm. She hain't nobody's sugar ner salt."

Caleb ran his talon-like fingers through his mane of gray hair and shook his patriarchal head.

"Ther fords air all plum ragin' an' perilous atter a fresh like this... I hain't a-goin' ter enjoy no ease in my mind ef *somebody* don't go in s'arch of her – an' hit jedgmatically hain't possible fer me ter go myself."

Slowly, unwillingly, and with smouldering fury Rowlett rose from his chair.

He was a self-declared suitor, a man who had boasted that no night was too wild for him to ride, and a refusal in such case would stultify his whole attitude and standing in that house.

"I reckon ye'll suffer me ter ride yore extry critter, won't ye?" he inquired, glumly, "an' loan me a lantern, too."

\* \* \*

After the setting of the moon the night had become a void of blackness, but it was a void in which shadows crowded, all dark but some more inkily solid than others – and of these shadows some were forests, some precipices, and some chasms lying trap-like between.

Dorothy Harper and the mule she rode were moving somewhere through this world of sooty obscurity.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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