BUCK CHARLES NEVILLE

THE TEMPERING

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

"Nothin' don't nuver come ter pass hyarabouts!"

The boy perched disconsolately on the rotting fence threw forth his lament aloud to the laurelled silences of the mountain sides and the emptiness of space.

"Every doggone day's jest identical with all ther balance – save only thet hit's wuss!"

He sat with his back turned on the only signs of human life within the circle of his vision; unless one called the twisting creek-bed at his front, which served that pocket of the Kentucky Cumberlands as a highway, a human manifestation.

There behind him a log-cabin breathed smokily through its mud-daubed chimney; a pioneer habitation in every crude line and characteristic. On the door hung, drying, the odorous pelt of a "varmint." Against the wall leaned a rickety spinning wheel.

To all that, which he hated, he kept his stiff back turned, but his ears had no defence against the cracked falsetto of an aged voice crooning a ballad that the pioneers had brought across the ridges from tide-water … a ballad whose phrasing was quaintly redolent of antiquity.

The boy kicked his broganned heels and snorted. His clothes were homespun and home sewed and his touselled shock of red-brown hair cropped out from under a coon skin cap. His given name was Boone and his life was as hobbled by pioneer restrictions as was that of the greater Boone – but with a difference.

The overland argonauts who had set their feet and faces westward across these same mountains bore on their memories the stimulating image of all that they had left behind and carried before their eyes the alluring hope of what they were to find.

This Boone, whose eyes, set in a freckled face, were as blue as overhead skies and deep with a fathomless discontent, had neither past nor future to contemplate – only a consuming hunger for a life less desolate. That of his people was unaltered – save for a lapse into piteous human lethargy – from the days when the other Boone had come on moccasined feet to win the West – for they were the offspring of the stranded; the heirs of the lost.

Over all the high, hunched steepness of the ranges, Autumn had wandered with a palette of high colour and a brush of frost, splashing out the summer's sun-burned green with champagne yellow, burgundy-red and claret-crimson. To the nostrils, too, there floated with the thistledown, hints of bursting ripe fox-grapes and apples ready for the cider press.

Countless other times Boone had sat here on this top-rail in his hodden-gray clothes and his slate-gray despair, making the same plaint, and knowing that only a miracle would ever bring

around the road's turning anything less commonplace than a yoke of oxen or a native as drab as the mule he straddled.

Yet as the boy capped his lamentation with a sigh that seemed to struggle up from the depths of his being, a breeze whispered along the mountain sides; the crisp leaves stirred to a tinkle like low laughter and there materialized a horseman who was in no wise to be confused with ordinary travellers in these parts. Boone Wellver caught his breath in a gasp of surprise and interest, and a low whistle sounded between his white teeth.

"Lord o' Mercy," breathed the urchin, "hit's a furriner! Now I wonder who is he?"

The stranger was mounted on a mule whose long ears flapped dejectedly and whose shamble had in it the flinch of galled withers, but the man in the saddle sat as if he had a charger under him – and it was this indefinable declaration of bearing that the boy saw and which, at first glance, fired his imagination.

The traveller's face was bronzed and the moustache and imperial, trimmed in the fashion of the Third Napoleon's court, were only beginning to lose their sandy colour under a dominance of gray.

The eyes – though now they were weary with travel and something more fundamental, too, than physical fatigue – were luminous of quality and a singularly clear gray of colour. They were such eyes as could be dogged and stern as flint or deep and bafflingly gentle like mossy waters.

Covering the bony flanks of the mule and bulging grotesquely

to port and starboard, hung capacious canvas saddle pockets – and as the stranger drew rein the boy's eyes dwelt with candid inquisitiveness upon them. Out of the cavernous maw of one of these receptacles protruded the corner of a tin dispatch box and fastened to a cantle ring behind the saddle was a long, slender object in a water-proof covering laced at the top.

At sight of that, Boone's eyes livened yet more, for he recognized the shrouded shape though it was a thing almost as foreign to his world as starlight is to the floor of the sea. Once he had been to Marlin Town on a troubled Court day when a detachment of militia had stood guard in the square to overawe warring factions and avert bloodshed. Their failure to do so is another story, but their commanding officer had worn a sabre, and now with a stirring excitement the boy divined that, this "qu'ar contraption" dangling at the newcomer's back was nothing less portentous than a sword!

Straightway the drab curtain of life's unrelief was rent for Boone Wellver, and shot through with gleaming filaments of wonderment and imaginative speculation. Here, of a sudden, came Romance on horseback, and what matter that the horse was a mule?

"Son," he said in a kindly manner, "I'm bound for Cyrus Spradling's house, and I begin to suspect that I must have lost my way. How about it?"

Boone did not immediately reply. He merely poured out of his wide and innocent blue eyes a scrutiny as inquisitorial as though

he had been stationed here on picket duty and were vested with full authority to halt whomsoever approached.

While the newcomer sat, waiting in his saddle, Boone Wellver vaulted lightly down from fence rail to gravel roadway and, standing there as slim yet as sturdy as a hickory sapling, raised one hand towards the mule's flank, but arrested it midway as he inquired, "Thet critter o' yourn – hit don't foller kickin', does hit?"

"Stand clear of its heels," cautioned the man hastily. "I've known this beast only since morning – but as acquaintance ripens, admiration wanes. What's your name?"

"Boone Wellver. What's yourn?"

"Mine is Victor McCalloway. Does your father live near here?"

"Hain't got no daddy."

"Your mother, then?"

"Hain't got no mammy nuther."

The stranger gazed down from his saddle with interested eyes, and under the steadiness of his scrutiny Boone was smitten with an abrupt self-consciousness.

"Don't you belong to any one at all?" The question was put slowly, but the reply came with prompt and prideful certitude.

"I'm my own man. I dwells with a passel of old granny folks an' gray-heads, though." Having so enlightened his questioner, he added with a ring of pride, as though having confessed the unflattering truth about his immediate household, he was entitled

to boast a little of more distant connections:

"Asa Gregory's my fust cousin by blood. I reckon ye've done heered tell of him, hain't ye?"

Across the face of Victor McCalloway flitted the ghost of a satirical smile, which he speedily repressed.

"Yes," he said briefly with non-committal gravity, "I've heard of him."

To the outer world from which McCalloway came few mountain names had percolated, attended by notability. A hermit people they are and unheralded beyond their own environment – yet now and then the reputation of one of them will not be denied. So the newspaper columns had given Asa Gregory space, headlines even, linking to his name such appositives as "mountain desperado" and "feud-killer."

When he had shot old John Carr to death in the highway, such unstinted publicity had been accorded to his acts – such shudder-provoking fulness of detail – that Asa had found in it a very embarrassment of fame.

But the boy spoke the name of his kinsman in accents of unquestioning admiration, and Victor McCalloway only nodded as he repeated,

"Yes, I've heard of him."

Then as the traveller gathered up his reins to start onward, a tall young man came, with the swing of an elastic stride, around the next turn and, nodding to the boy, halted at the mule's head. He was an upstanding fellow, of commanding height, and

the tapering staunchness of a timber wedge. He carried a rifle upon his shoulder and his clear-chiselled face bore the pleasant recommendation of straight-gazing candour. His clothing was rough, yet escaped the seeming of roughness, because it sat upon his splendid body and limbs as if a part of them – like a hawk's plumage. But it was the eyes under a broad forehead that were most notable. They were unusually fine and frank; dark and full of an almost gentle meditativeness. Here was a native, thought the man on the mule, whose gaze, unlike that of many of his fellows, was neither sinister nor furtive. Here was one who seemed to have escaped the baleful heritage of grudge-bearing.

Then McCalloway's thought was interrupted by the voice of the boy declaring eagerly: "This hyar furriner 'lows ter ride over ter Cyrus Spradlin's dwellin' house. We've jest been talkin' erbout ye – an' he's already done heered of ye, Asa!"

The tall man on foot stiffened, at the announcement, into something like hostile rigidity, and the velvet softness of eye which, a moment ago, a woman might have envied, flashed into the hard agate of suspicion.

He stood measuring the stranger for an uncompromising matter of moments before he spoke, and when words came they were couched in a steely evenness of tone. "So ye've heerd of me – hev ye?"

He paused a moment after that, his face remaining mask-like, then he went on:

"I reckon whatever ye heered tell of me war either right

favourable or right scandalous – dependin' on whether ye hed speech with my friends – or my enemies. I've got a lavish of both sorts."

McCalloway also stiffened at the note of challenge.

"I never talked to any one about you," he rejoined crisply. "I read your name in newspapers – as did many others, I dare say."

"Yes. I reckon ye read in them papers thet I kilt Old Man Carr. Wa'al, thet war es true es text. I kilt him whilst he was aimin' ter lay-way me. He'd done a'ready kilt my daddy an' I was ridin' inter Marlin Town ter buy buryin' clothes – when we met up in ther highway. Thet's ther whole hist'ry of hit."

"Mr. Gregory," the older man said slowly with an even courtesy that carried a note of aloofness, "I've neither the right nor the disposition to question you on personal matters. I reserve the privilege of discussing my own affairs only so far as I choose, and I recognize the same right in others. My final opinions, however, are not formed on hearsay."

The brown eyes softened again and the features relaxed. "I reckon," commented Asa with a touch of shame-faced apology in his tone, "thar warn't no proper call fer me ter start in straightway talkin' erbout myself nohow – but when a man's enemies air a'seekin' ter git him hung, hit's liable ter make him touchy an' mincy-like. Hit don't take no hard bite ter hurt a sore tooth, no-ways."

Victor McCalloway inclined his head. "I stopped here," he explained, "to ask directions of this lad. These infernal roads

confuse me."

"I reckon they do be sort o' mystifyin' ter a furriner," assented the mountaineer, who stood charged with murder, then he added with grave courtesy: "I'll go back ter ther fork of ther highroad with ye an' sot ye on yore way ef so be hit would convenience ye any."

As mounted traveller and unmounted guide went on toward the rounded cone of Cinder Knob it seemed to loom as far away as ever, masking behind its timbered distances the unseen trickle of Hominy Mill Creek, where Cyrus Spradling dwelt.

But to right and left, ever the same, yet ever changing; sombre in shadowed gorge and bright of sunlit crest, lay the broken, forested hills. Their horizons gathered in tangled depths of timber – shadowed hiding places of chasms – silences and a brooding spirit of mystery.

At length a sudden elbow in the twisting way brought them face to face with two rifle-bearing men. They were gaunt fellows, tall but slouching and loose of joint. Their thin faces, too, were saturnine and ugly with the cast of vindictiveness.

"Howdy, Asa," accosted one and, with a casual nod, the guide responded, "Howdy, Jett," but in the brief silence that followed, broken by the wheezy panting of the mule, McCalloway fancied he could discern an undernote of tension.

"This here man," went on Asa Gregory, jerking his head backward, as if in answer to an unuttered query, "gives ther name of McCalloway. I hain't never seed him afore this day, but he's

farin' over ter Spradling's an' I proffered ter kinderly sot him on his way. I couldn't skeercely do no less fer him."

The two nodded and when some further exchange of civilities had followed, passed on and out of sight. But for a while after their departure Asa stood unmoving with his head intently bent in an attitude of listening – and though his rifle still nestled unshifted in its cradling elbow, the fingers of the trigger hand twitched a little and the brown eyes were again agate-hard. Finally the guide's mouth line relaxed from the straight tautness of whatever emotion had caused that stiffening of posture, and the lips moved in low speech – almost drawlingly soft of cadence.

"I reckon they've done gone on," he said, as if speaking to himself; then lifting his eyes to his companion, he explained briefly. "Not meanin' no offence, I 'lowed hit war kinderly charitable ter ye ter let them fellers know ye jest fell in with me accidental like. They wouldn't favour ye no great degree ef they figgered me an' you was close friends."

"And yet," hazarded McCalloway, groping in the bewilderment of this strange environment, "you greeted each other amicably enough."

Gregory's lips twisted at the corners into a satirical smile.

"When they comes face ter face with me in ther highroad," he answered calmly, "we meets an' makes our manners ther same es anybody else – a man's *got* ter be civil. But we keeps a'watchin' one another outen ther tails of our eyes, jest ther same. Them two fellers air Blairs an' them an' ther Carrs is married in an' out

an' back an' fo'th twell they're all as thick tergether as pigs outen ther same litter."

The traveller's question came a little incredulously.

"You mean – that those men are your actual enemies?"

"*I'd* call 'em enemies. I knows thet they aims ter git me some day – ef so be they're able."

"And you – ?"

The tall man in the road looked steadily into the face of his companion for a moment, then said deliberately, "Me? Oh, of course, I aims ter carcumvent 'em – ef so be *I'm* able."

When the newcomer had reached a point from which he no longer needed guidance Asa Gregory wheeled and began to back-track on his steps, but before he had covered a half mile he turned abruptly from the road and was swallowed in the thicket where the waxen confusion of rhododendron and laurel, the tangle of holly and thorn seemed solid and impenetrable. He went with head bent and noiseless footfall – though the sifting leaves were crisp – but with eye, ear and nostril delicately alert and receptive.

As Asa Gregory slipped, shadow like, among the shifting lights of the late afternoon, his face wore a grim smile, and when he had come to a point determined by some system of his own, he dropped to a low-crouching posture and continued his journey a step or two at a time, with a perfection of caution, and with eyes and ears strained in expectancy.

Across a gray-green hummock of sandstone, so villainously

matted with blackberry briars that a pointer-dog would have balked at its edge, he hitched himself forward on his belly. From there he could look down on the road he had abandoned – and the thick bushes that fringed it, and there he lay, silent and flat as a lizard, scanning the lower ground.

A less acute and instinctive eye would have made little of it all, save the variegated colours of the foliage, but after a while he picked out a scrap of grey-brown buried deep and motionless under the leafage, much like the hue of the earth itself. His smile became more sardonically set and his muscles tensed as his rifle barrel was thrust forward. But he still sprawled there hugging the earth, and finally hushed voices stole up to him.

"… He's got ter pass by hyar ef he holds ter ther highway… I reckon he don't hardly suspicion nothin'." Then a second voice spoke Asa's name and linked it with foul expletives, yet save for the gray patches in the brush almost as hard to see as a rabbit crouched in dry grass there was no visible sign … no warning.

Asa's face blackened. His thumb lay on the hammer of his rifle and his thoughts ran to bitter turmoil.

"I *'lowed* them Blairs hed hit in head ter lay-way me this evenin'," he mused. "I jest *felt* hit in my bones, somehow."

The hatred in his veins pulsed and simmered. Here he lay behind them and above them, while they lurked in ambush waiting for him to pass in front and below. One shot from his rifle and Jett Blair would never rise. His face would sag forward – that was all – and as his companion scrambled up in dismay, he too

would fall back. Asa could picture the expression of astonished panic that would gleam in his eyes for the one brief moment before he too crumpled. Asa's finger tingled with an itch which only trigger-pressure could cool and appease.

Yet slowly and resolutely he shook his head. "No," he told himself, "no, hit won't hardly do. Thar's one murder charge a'hangin' over me now – an' es fer *them*, thar's time a'plenty. I hain't no-ways liable ter fergit!"

CHAPTER II

Backward he edged to the far side of the rock, and on he went by a detour which, in due course, brought him out to the road once more at that panel of fence where Boone Wellver still sat perched in the deep preoccupation of his thoughts. These reflections focussed about the stranger who had lately ridden by, and as Gregory paused, with no revealing sign in his face of the events of the past half-hour, the boy blurted out the fulness of his interest.

"Asa, did ye find out who *is* he? Did ye see thet *sward* he hed hangin' ter his saddle, an' did ye note all them qu'ar contraptions he was totin' along with him?"

"I didn't hev overly much speech with him," was the grave response. "But he 'lowed he'd done come from acrost ther waters – from somewhars in t'other world. I reckon he's done travelled wide."

"His looks hain't none common nuther!" Boone's eyes were sparkling; his imagination galloping free and uncurbed. "I've done read stories about kings an' sich-like, travellin' hither an' yon unbeknownst ter common folks. What does ye reckon, Asa, mout *he* be su'thin' like thet? A king or su'thin?"

"Ef so be he's a king," opined Asa Gregory drily, "he's shore done picked him out a God-fersaken place ter go a'travellin' in." The dark eyes riffled for a moment into a hint of covert raillery.

"Ye didn't chanst ter discarn no crown, did ye, Booney, pokin' a gold prong or two up outen them saddle pockets?"

Boone Wellver flushed brick-red and straightway his words fell into a hot disclaimer of gullibility. "I hain't no plum, daft idjit. I didn't, ter say, *really* think he was a king – but his looks *wasn't* none common."

The older kinsman granted that contention and for a while they talked of Victor McCalloway, but at length Asa shifted the subject.

"A week come Monday," he informed the boy, "thar's a'goin' ter be a monstrous big speakin' at Marlin Town. Ther Democrat candi*date* fer Governor aims ter speechify an' I 'lowed mebby ye'd love ter go along with me an' listen at him."

Whenever Asa yielded to the temptation of teasing his young cousin he hastened to make amends for the indulgence and now the boy's face was ashine with anticipation.

Customarily in Kentucky from the opening of the campaign to the day of election the tide and sweep of political battle runs hot and high. But in that autumn of 1899 all precedents of party feeling were engulfed in a tidal wave of bitterness and endowed with a new ferocity ominously akin to war. The gathering storm centred and beat about the head of one man whose ambition for gubernatorial honours was the core and essence of the strife. He was, in the confident estimate of his admirers, a giant whose shoulders towered above the heads of his lesser compatriots. An election law bore his name – and his adversaries gave insistent

warning that it surrendered the state, bound hand and foot, to a triumvirate of his own choosing.

Into the wolf-like battle-royal of his party's convention he had gone seemingly the weakest of three aspirants for the Democratic nomination. Out of it, over disrupted party-elements, he had emerged – triumphant.

Whether one called him righteous crusader or self-seeking demagogue, the fact stood baldly clear that his name with an "ism" attached had become the single issue in that State, and that hero-worship and hatred attended upon its mention.

Back to the people of the inaccessible hills, living apart, aloof and neglected, came some of the murmurs of the tempest that shook the lowlands. Here at the edge of a normally Democratic State which had in earlier times held slaves and established an aristocracy, the hillsmen living by the moil of their own sweat had hated alike slave and slave-holder and had remained solidly Republican. For them it was enough that William Goebel was not of their party. Basing their judgment on that premise, they passed on with an uncomplicated directness to the conclusion that the deleterious things said of him by envenomed orators were assertions of gospel truth.

Now that man was carrying his campaign into the enemy's country. Realizing without illusion the temper of the audience which would troop in from creek-bed and cove and the branch-waters "back of beyond," he was to speak in Marlin Town where the cardinal faith of the mountains is, "hate thine enemy!"

In the court-house square of Marlin Town, under the shadow of high-flung hills, had gathered close-packed battalions of listeners. Some there were who carried with them their rifles and some who looked as foreign to even these rude streets as nomads ridden in from the desert.

A brass band had come with the candidate's special train and blared out its stirring message. There was a fluttering of flags and a brave showing of transparencies, and to Boone Wellver, aged fifteen, as he hung shadow-close at Asa Gregory's elbow, it all seemed the splendour of panoply and the height of pageantry.

From the hotel door, as the man and boy passed it, emerged two gentlemen who were clothed in the smoother raiment of "Down below," and Boone pointed them out to his companion.

"Who *air* they, Asa?" he whispered, and his kinsman carelessly responded:

"One of 'em's named Masters. He's a coal-mine boss – but I hain't never seed t'other one, afore now."

Strolling along the narrow plank runway that did service as a sidewalk, the boy glimpsed also the mysterious stranger who had ridden in on a mule, with a canvas-covered sword at his saddle ring.

Then the fanfare of the band fell silent and a thin figure in an ancient frock coat stepped forward on the platform itself and raised its hands to shout: "Fellow Citizens and Kentuckians of Marlin County!"

Ranged importantly behind the draped bunting stood the

corporal's guard of native Democratic leaders – leaders who were well-nigh without followers – and who now stood as local sponsors for the Candidate himself.

Boone caught his breath and listened, his eager eyes conspicuous among the immobile and stolid faces of the unresponsive throng as the speaker let flow his words of encomium.

Seeking to compensate by his own vehemence for the unreceptiveness of his audience, the thin master of ceremonies heaped the Ossa of fulsomeness upon the Pelion of praise. "And now, men of Marlin," he shouted in his memorized peroration, "now I have the distinguished honour of presenting to you the man whose loins are girt in the people's fight – the – the – ahem, – unterrified champeen of the Commonwealth's yeomanry – . Gentlemen, the next Governor of Kentucky!"

A peroration without applause is like a quick-step beat upon a loose drum-head, and an the local sponsor stood back in the dispiriting emptiness of dead silence – unbroken by a single hand-clap – his face fell. For several moments that quiet hung like a paralyzing rebuff, then from the outskirts of the crowd a liquor-thickened voice bellowed – "Next gov'nor – of hell!"

To the front of the platform, with that derisive introduction, calmly – even coldly, stepped a dark, smooth-shaven man, over whose stocky shoulders and well-rounded chest a frock coat was tightly buttoned.

For a while the Candidate stood looking out, gauging his

audience, and from him there seemed to emanate an assurance of power before his lips parted. A heavy lock of coal-black hair fell over his forehead, across almost disdainfully cold eyes went sooty lashes, and dark brows met above the prominent nose. The whole face seemed drawn in bold charcoal strokes, uncompromising of line and feature – a portrayal of force.

Then the resonant voice broke silence, and though it came calmly and moderately pitched, it went out clarion-clear over the crowd like the note of a fox horn.

"Some one out there shouted – 'Next governor of hell!'" he began without preamble. "I grant you that if any region needs improved government it is hell, and if there is a state on this earth where a man might hope to qualify himself for that task, it is this state. Let me try that first, my friend. I believe in myself, but I am only human."

He launched forthright into arraignment of his enemies with sledge-blows of denunciation untempered by any concession to time, place or condition, and though scowls grew vindictively black about him, he knew that he was holding his audience.

He was a Vulcan forging thunders with words and destructive batteries of bolts with phrases, and Boone Wellver – trembling with excitement as a pointer puppy trembles with the young eagerness of the covey-scent in his nostrils – seemed to be in the presence of a miracle; the miracle of eloquence.

"My God," breathed the less impressionable Asa Gregory under his breath, "but thet feller hes a master gift fer lyin'!"

At the end, with one clenched fist raised high, the speaker thundered out his final words of defiance: "The fight is on, and I believe in fighting. I ask no quarter and I fear no foe!"

Again he paused, and again save for the valiant enthusiasm on the platform at his back, he met with no response except a grim and negative silence.

But this disconcerting stillness was abruptly ripped asunder by a pistol shot and a commotion of confused voices, rising where figures began to eddy and mill at the outskirts. The reception committee closed hastily and protectingly about the candidate, whose challenge seemed to have been accepted by some irresponsible gun-fighter, but he thrust them back with a face of unaltered and stony calmness. Though he had finished, he continued to stand at the front with hands idly resting on the platform rail as if meaning to demonstrate his contempt for anything like retreat.

While he still tarried there a tall figure elbowed its way through the crowd until it stood near. It was the figure of Asa Gregory, and, raising a hand for recognition, it called out in a full-chested voice: "Thet shot war fired by a feller thet war full of white licker – an' they're takin' him ter ther jail-house now. I reckon yore doctrine hain't hardly converted nobody hyarabouts – but we don't aim ter insult no visitor."

Victor McCalloway had come to Cyrus Spradling's house to remain until he could arrange a more permanent residence. The purpose that lay behind his coming was one which he had not

felt called upon to explain, and though he had much to learn of this new place of abode, still he had come forearmed with some of the cardinals of a necessary understanding.

They were an incurious people with whom he had cast his lot, content with their remoteness, and it was something that here a man could lose himself from questions touching the past, so long as he answered frankly those of the present. It suited McCalloway to seal the back pages and the bearded men evinced no wish to penetrate them.

Before the snow flew the newcomer was to be housed under his own roof-tree, and today in answer to the verbal announcement that he was to have a "working" on the land he had bought, the community was present, armed with hammer and saw, with adze and plane, mobilized under the auspices of Cyrus Spradling who moved, like a shaggy patron saint, among them.

There were men, working shoulder to shoulder, whose enmities were deep and ancient, but who today were restrained by the common spirit of volunteer service to a neighbour. Cyrus had seen to it that the gathering at McCalloway's "house-raising" should not bear the prejudicial colour of partisanship, but that Carrs and Gregories alike should have a hand in the activities which were going robustly forward at the head of Snag Ridge.

Back of Cedar Mountain no architect was available and no builders' union afforded or withheld labour, but every man was carpenter and artisan in his own right, and some were "practiced corner-men" as well.

Through the sun-flooded day with its Indian summer dream along the skyline their axes rang in accompaniment to their homely jests, and the earnest whine of their saws went up with the minors of voices raised in the plaintive strains of folk-lore ballads.

The only wage accepted was food and drink. They would have thought as readily of asking payment for participation in the rough festivities of the "infare" with which the mountain groom brings his bride from her wedding to his own house on a pillion at the back of his saddle.

Tomorrow some of these same men, meeting in the roadway, would perhaps eye each other with suspicion. Riding on, after greetings, they would go with craned necks, neither trusting the other to depart unwatched, but today the rude sanctuary of hospitality to the stranger rested over them and the timbers that went up were raised by the hands of friends and enemies alike.

But toward sunset the newcomer chanced upon a fight that the simple code had not safeguarded and that had gained headway before his interference.

Down by the creek-bed, with no audience, he found two boys rolling in a smother of dust and, until he remembered that the hill code of "fist and skull" bars neither shod-toe nor bared tooth, he was shocked at the unmitigated savagery of the combat.

The strenuous pair rolled in a mad embrace, and as he approached, one of the boys – whose back alone he could see – came to the top of the writhing heap. While this one gouged,

left handed, at eyes which the other attempted to cover, his right hand whipped out a jack-knife which he sought to open with his teeth. Out of the commotion came an animal-like incoherence of snarls and panting profanity, and Victor McCalloway caught the top boy by his shoulder and dragged him forcibly away from what threatened to be maiming or worse.

So pried from his victim, on the verge of victory, the boy with a bloody and unrecognized face stood for an instant heaving of breast and infuriated, then wrenching himself free from the detaining hand, he gave a leap as sudden as that of a frightened buck and disappeared behind the screen of the laurel.

The other figure, with an eye blackened and bleeding from the raw scratches of finger-nails about the lids, came more slowly to his feet, his breath rasping with passion and exhaustion. He stood there before his would-be rescuer – and McCalloway recognized Boone Wellver.

"I'd hev licked him – so his own mammy wouldn't 'a' knowed him ef ye hadn't 'a' bust in on me," he panted. "I'd done had him down oncet afore an' I war jest erbout ter turn him under ergin."

A light of suppressed drollery glinted into the eyes of the man whose ruddy face remained otherwise unsmiling.

"It looked to me as though you were in a situation where nothing could save you but reinforcements – or surrender," he commented, and the heaving body of the rescued boy grew rigid while his begrimed face flamed with chagrin.

"Surrender – knock under – ter *him*!" He spat out the words

with a venomous disgust. "Thet feller war a *Blair*! Did ye ever heer of a Gregory hollerin' 'enough!' ter a Blair, yit!"

McCalloway stood looking down with an amusement which he was considerate enough to mask. He knew that Boone, though his surname was Wellver, was still in all the meaning of feud parlance a Gregory and that in the bitterness of his speech spoke not only individual animosity but generations of vendetta. So he let the lad have his say uninterrupted, and Boone's words ran freshet-like with the churn and tumble of his anger. "Ye jest misjudged he war a'lickin' me, because ye seed him on top an' a'gougin' at my eye. But I'd *done been* on top o' him – an' I'd a got thar ergin. Ef you'd noted whar I'd done chawed his ear at he wouldn't 'a' looked so good ter ye, I reckon."

"Suppose he had gotten that knife open." The man still spoke with that unpatronizing gravity which carries an untold weight of conviction to a boy's mind. "What would he have done?"

"I reckon he'd a'gutted me – but I didn't nuver aim ter let him git hit open."

"Are you a fighter by habit, Boone?"

Something in the intonation caused the lad to flush afresh, this time with the feeling that he had been unduly bragging, and he responded in a lowered voice. "I hain't nuver tuck part in no gun-battles yit – but when hit comes ter fist an' skull, I'm accounted ter be a right practiced knocker an' I kin rass'le right good. What made ye ask me thet question?"

McCalloway held the angelic blue eyes, so paradoxically set

in that wrath-enflamed face, with his own steady gray ones, and spoke quietly:

"Because if you are going to be a fighting man, it's important that you should fight properly, I thought perhaps you'd like to talk to me about it sometime. You see, I've been fighting all my life. It's been my profession."

Over the freckled face surged a wave of captivated interest. The Blair boy was forgotten and the voice thrilled into earnest solicitation. "Would ye l'arn me more about hit some time? What style of fightin' does ye foller?"

"The fair kind, I trust. Civilized warfare. The trade of soldiering."

"I hain't nuver follered no unfa'r sort nuther," disclaimed Boone, and his companion smiled enigmatically while he replied meditatively,

"What is fair or unfair – what is courageous or cowardly – is largely a matter of viewpoint. Some day I dare say you'll go out into the world beyond the hills and out there you'll find that gouging eyes and chewing ears isn't called fair – that shooting an enemy from ambush isn't called courageous."

That was a doctrine, Boone felt, which savoured of sacrilege. If it were categorically true then his own people were cowards – and to his ardent hero worship the Gregories and the Wellvers were exemplars of high bravery, yet this man was no ordinary individual, and he spoke from a wisdom and experience based on a lifetime of soldiering. A seed of dilemma had fallen into the

fallow soil of the lad's questioning mind, and as he stood there in a swirl of perplexity he heard the other voice explaining with a sort of comforting reassurance, "As I said, notions of right and wrong vary with locality and custom – but it's good for a man to know more than one standard – one set of ideas. If you ever go out in the world you'll need that knowledge."

After a period of reflection the boy demanded bluntly,

"Whar-at war ye a'soldierin'?"

For the first time, McCalloway's glance hardened and his tone sharpened. He had not meant to throw open the discussion to a wide review of his own past.

"If you and I are going to be good friends, you mustn't ask too many questions," he said curtly. "It doesn't make a boy popular."

"I axes yore pardon; I didn't aim at no offence." The apology was prompt, yet puzzled, and carried with it a note of injured dignity. "I 'lowed ye proffered ter tell me things – an' even ef ye told me all ye knowed, I wouldn't go 'round blabbin' no-whars. I knows how ter hold my own counsel."

This time it was the seasoned man of experience who flushed. He felt that he had first invited and then rebuffed a natural inquiry, and so he, in turn, spoke apologetically: "I shall tell you things that may be useful – but I sha'n't answer every question."

After a long silence Boone spoke again, with the altered voice of diffidence:

"I reckon I hain't got nothin' more ter say," he contributed. "I reckon I'll be farin' on."

"You looked as if you were spilling over with things to say."

"I had hit in head ter say some sev'ral things," admitted the youthful clansman, "but they was all in ther manner of axin' more questions, so I reckon I'll be farin' on."

Victor McCalloway caught the deep hunger for information that showed out of those independent young eyes, and he caught too the untutored instinct of politeness, as genuine and unaffected as that of a desert Sheik, which forced repression. He laid a kindly hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Go ahead and ask your questions, then," he directed, "and I'll answer what I like and refuse to answer the rest. Is that a fair arrangement?"

The brown face glowed. "Thet's es fa'r es airy thing kin be," was the eager response. "I hain't nuver seed nothin' but jest these hyar hills – an' sometimes hit kinderly seems like ter me thet ef I kain't light out an' see all ther balance, I'll jest plain swell up an' bust with ther cravin'."

"You study history – and geography, don't you, Boone?"

"Huh-huh." The tousled head nodded. "But thar's a passel of thet book stuff thet a man kain't believe nohow. Hit ain't *reasonable*."

"What books have you read?"

"Every single damn one thet I could git my hands on – but thet hain't been no lavish plenty." With a manner of groping for some point of contact with the outer world, he added, "I've got a cousin thet's in ther army, though. He's in ther Philippines right

now. Did you soldier in ther Philippines?" Abruptly Boone broke off, and then hastily he prompted as he raised a hand in a gesture of caution, "Don't answer thet thar question ef ye hain't got a mind ter! I jest axed hit heedless-like without studyin' what I war a'doin'."

McCalloway laughed aloud. "I'll answer it. No, I've never soldiered in the Philippines nor anywhere under the American flag. My fighting has all been with what you call the 'outlanders.'"

CHAPTER III

McCalloway's house had been chinked and sealed within a few weeks and now he was living under its roof. Boone had been out there often, and one day when he went on to Asa Gregory's cabin his mind was unsettled with the ferment of conflicting standards. Heretofore Asa had been his sole and sufficient hero. Now there were two, and it was dawning upon him, with a travail of dilemma, that between the essentials of their creeds lay an irreconcilable divergence.

As the boy reached his kinsman's doorstep in the lengthening shadows of late afternoon, Asa's "woman" came out and hung a freshly scoured dish-pan on a peg. In her cheeks bloomed a colour and maturity somewhat too full-blown for her twenty years. Asa had married the "purtiest gal" on five creeks, but the gipsy charm of her dark, provocative eyes would die. Her lithe curves would flatten to angularity and the lustre fade out of her hair's burnished masses with a few seasons of drudgery and child-bearing.

"Howdy, Booney," she said in greeting, and, without removing his hat, he demanded curtly, "Whar's Asa at?"

"He ain't come in yit." A suggestion of anxiety sounded through the voice of Araminta Gregory. It was an apprehension which experience failed to mitigate. She had married Asa while he stood charged with homicide. The threat of lurking enemies

had shadowed the celebration of wedding and infare. She had borne his child while he sat in the prisoner's dock. Now she was weaning it while he went abroad under bond. One at least knew when the High Court sat, but one could neither gauge nor calculate the less formal menace that lurked always in the laurel – so one could only wait and endeavour to remain clear eyed.

It was twilight before the man himself came in, and he slipped so quietly across the threshold into the uncertain light of the room that Boone, who sat hunched before the unkindled hearth, did not hear his entrance. But in the door-frame of the shed kitchen the wife's taut sense of waiting relaxed in a sigh of relief. Until tomorrow at least the silent fear was leashed.

An hour later, with the heavy doors protectingly barred, the man and the boy who considered himself a man took their seats at the rough table in the lean-to kitchen, but Araminta Gregory did not sit down to meat with them. She would take her place at table when the lordlier sex had risen from it, satisfied, since she was only a woman. She did not even know that the custom whose decree she followed lacked universal sanction, and, not knowing it, she suffered no discontent.

From the hearth where the woman bent over crane and frying-pan, her face hot and crimson, the red and yellow light spilled out into the primitive room, catching, here, the bright colour of drying pepper-pods strung along the rafters – there the duller glint of the house-holder's rifle leaning not far from his hand. With the flare, the shadows of the corners played a wavering

hide-and-seek.

Asa ate in abstracted silence, intent upon his side-meat and "shucky-beans," but the boy, who was ordinarily ravenous, only dallied with his food and his freckled face wore the set of a preternatural solemnity.

"Don't ye love these hyar molasses no more, Booney?" inquired Araminta, to whose mind such an unaccustomed abstinence required explanation, and the boy started with the shock of a broken revery and shook his head.

"I don't crave no more of 'em," he replied shortly. Once again his thoughts enveloped him in a silence which he finally broke with a vehement interrogation.

"Asa, did ye ever heer anybody norrate thet hit's cowardly ter shoot an enemy from ther bresh?"

Asa paused, his laden knife suspended midway twixt platter and mouth. For an instant his clear-chiseled features pictured only surprise for the unexpected question – then they hardened as Athenian faces hardened when Plato "corrupted the youth with the raising up of new gods."

"Who's been a'talkin' blamed nonsense ter ye, Boone?" he demanded in a terse manner tinctured with sharpness.

The boy felt his cheeks grow suddenly hot with a quandary of embarrassment. To McCalloway he stood pledged to keep inviolate the confidence of their conversations, and it was only after an awkward pause that he replied with a halting lameness:

"Hit hain't jist p'intedly what nobody's been a'tellin' me. I … I

seed in a book whar hit said somethin' ter thet amount." Suddenly with an inspirational light of augmented authority, he added, "The Circuit-rider hisself read outen ther Scriptures suthin' 'bout not doin' no murder."

Asa carried the knife up to his lips and emptied its blade. Having done so, he spoke with a deliberate and humourless sincerity.

"Murder's a right ugly word, Boone, an' one a feller ought ter be kinderly heedful erbout usin'. Barrin' ther Carrs an' Blairs an' sich-like, I don't know nobody mean enough ter foller murderin'. Sometimes a man's p'intedly fo'ced into a *killin'*, but thar's a heap of differ betwixt them two things."

The grave face of the boy was still clouded with his new-born misgivings, and reading that perplexity, his kinsman went on:

"Myself I've done been obleeged ter kill some sev'ral men. I plum deplores hit. I wouldn't hold no high notion of anybody thet tuck ther life of a feller-bein' without he *was* plum obleeged ter do hit – ner of no man thet *didn't* ef hit war his cl'ar duty. Hit's done been ther rise of fifty y'ars now since ther war first started up betwixt us an' ther Carrs. Hit warn't none of my doin', but ever since then – off an' on – my kinsfolk an' yourn hes done been shot down from ther la'rel – an' we've done hit back an' sought ter hold ther score even – or a leetle mite better. I've got my choice atween bein' run away from ther land whar I was born at or else" – he let his hand drop back with a simple gesture of rude eloquence until its fingers rested on the leaning rifle – "or else I

hev need ter give my enemies ther only style of fightin' thet will avail. Seems like ter me hit'd be right cowardly ter run away."

To the boy these principles had never before needed defence. They had been axioms, yet now he parried with a faltering demurrer:

"Ther books says that, down below, when fellers fights, they does hit in ther open."

"Alright. Thet's ther best way so long as *both* of 'em air in ther open. But ef one stands out in ther highway an' tother lays back in ther timber, how long does ye reckon ther fight's a'goin' ter last? A man may love ter be above-board – but he's *got* ter be practical."

It was the man now who sat forgetful of his food, relapsing into a meditative silence. The leaping fire threw dashes of orange high-lights on his temple and jaw angle and in neither pattern of feature nor quality of eye was there that degenerate vacuity which one associates with barbarous cruelty.

His wife, turning just then from the hearth, saw his abstraction – and understood. She knew what tides of anxious thought and bitter reminiscence had been loosed by the boy's questioning, and her own face too stiffened. Asa was thinking of the malign warp and woof which had been woven into the destiny of his blood and of the uncertain tenure it imposed upon his own life-span. He was meditating perhaps upon the wrinkled crone who had been his mother; "fittified" and mumbling inarticulate and unlovely vagaries over her widowed hearth.

But Araminta herself thought of Asa: of the dual menace of assassination and the gallows, and a wave of nauseating terror assailed her. She shook the hair resolutely out of her eyes and spoke casually:

"La! Asa, ye're lettin' yore vittles git plum cold whilst ye sets thar in a brown study." Inwardly she added with a white-hot ferocity of passion, "Ef they lay-ways him, or hangs him, thank God his baby's a man-child – an' I'll know how ter raise hit up ter take a full accountin'!"

But as the man's face relaxed and he reached toward the biscuit plate his posture froze into an unmoving one – for just an instant. From the darkness outside came a long-drawn halloo, and the poised hand swept smoothly sidewise until it had grasped the rifle and swung it clear of the floor. The eye could hardly have followed Asa's rise from his chair. It seemed only that one moment found him seated and the next standing with his body warily inclined and his eyes fixed on the door, while his voice demanded:

"Who's out thar?"

"Hit's me – Saul Fulton. I wants ter have speech with ye."

As the householder stepped forward, Araminta blocked his way, and spoke in hurried syllables, with her hands on his two shoulders. "Hit hain't sca'cely heedful fer ye ter show yoreself in no lighted doorway in ther night time, Asa. Thet's how yore uncle died! I'll open hit an' hev a look, first, my own self."

The husband nodded and stood with the cocked rifle

extended, while the wife let down the bar and ushered in a visitor who entered with something of a swagger and the air of one endowed with a worldly wisdom beyond the ordinary.

In raw-boned wiriness and in feature, Saul Fulton was typically a mountaineer, but in dress and affectation of manner he was a nondescript aping the tawdrily and cheaply urban. His dusty hat sat with an impudent tilt on crisp curls glossed with pomade and his stale cigar-butt tipped upward, under a rakish moustache.

Fulton was the sort of mountaineer by whom the outer world misjudges and condemns his race. He had left the backwoods to dwell among "furriners" as a tobacco-raising tenant on a Bluegrass farm, and there he had been mongrelized until he was neither wolf nor house-dog but a thing characterized by the vices of each and the virtues of neither. In him highland shrewdness had deteriorated into furtive cunning, and mountain self-respect had tarnished into the dull discontent of class hatred. But when he came to the hills, clad in shoddy finery to visit men in honest homespun, he bore himself with a cocksure dare-deviltry and malapert condescension. Saul was Asa Gregory's cousin, and since Asa's family still held to the innate courtesies of the barbarian, they received him unquestioningly, fed him, and bade him "Set ye a cheer in front of the chimley-place."

"I heer tell," suggested Asa with casual interest, "thet politics is waxin' middlin' hot down thar in ther settlemints."

After the mountain fashion the host and Boone had kicked off

their heavy shoes and spread their bare toes to the warmth of the blaze. Saul, as a man of the world, refrained from this gaucherie.

"Hell's red fire an' Hell's black smoke – hit hain't only ter say politics this time." The response came with oracular impressiveness while the speaker twirled his black moustache. "Hit savours a damn sight more of civil war!"

"I heered ther Democrat candidate speak at Marlin Town," contributed Asa with tepid interest. "I 'lowed he hed a right hateful countenance – cruel-like, thet is ter say."

Here spoke the estimate of partisanship, but Saul straightened in his chair and his eyes took on a sinister glitter.

"Thet's ther identical thing thet brought me hyar ter ther hills. I come ter bear tidin's ter upstandin' men like you. We're goin' ter need ye, an' onlessen we all acts tergether our rights air goin' ter be everlastin'ly trompled in ther dust."

Gregory crumpled a handful of "natural leaf" and filled his pipe-bowl. His gesture was as lazy and easy as that of a purring cat. "Oh, pshaw, Saul," he deprecated, "I don't take no master interest in politics nohow. I always votes ther Republican ticket because I was raised up ter do thet – like most everybody else in these mountings."

"But I'm a'tellin' ye this time thet hain't agoin' ter be enough ter do!" The visitor leaned forward and spoke with impassioned tenseness. "I've been dwellin' down thar amongst rich folks in ther flat Bluegrass country an' I *knows* what I'm sayin'. Ther Democrat air es smart es Satan's circuit-rider. Y'ars back he

jammed a crooked law through ther legislater jest a'lookin' forward ter this time an' day. Now he's cocked an' primed ter steal ther office, like he stole ther nomination, an' human freedom will be dead an' buried for all time in ther State of old Kaintuck."

Into Gregory's eyes as he listened stole an awakening light of interest and indignation. Up here among the eyries of eagles the threat of tyranny is hateful beyond words, and its invocation is a conjure spell of incitement. But at once Asa's face cleared to an amused smile as he inquired, "How does he aim ter compass all thet deviltry – ef ther people votes in ther other feller?"

The momentum of his own philippics had brought Saul Fulton to his feet. Down there where one party had been split in twain and the other had slipped all leash of decorum's restraint, he had been virulently inoculated with the virus of hate, and now, since his memory was tenacious, he swept, without crediting quotations, into a freshet of argument that echoed every accusation and exaggerated every warning of that merciless campaign.

For a half hour he talked, with the fiery volubility of a prophet inciting fanatics to a holy war, while his simple audience listened, yielding by subconscious stages to his bitter text. At last he came to the point toward which he had been progressing.

"Down thar ther purse-proud Demmycrats calls us folks blood-thirsty barbarians. Ter th'ar high-falutin' fashion o' thinkin' we're meaner than ther very dirt under th'ar feet. Even

ther niggers scorns us an' calls us 'pore white trash.' When this man once gits in power he aims ter make us feel ther weight of his disgust an' ter rule us henceforth with bayonets an' milishy muskets. Afore this matter ends up thar's liable ter be some shovellin' of graveyard dirt."

"Looks right smart like hit mout be needful," acquiesced Gregory; and Saul knew that he had won a convert to action.

The insidious force of the visitor's appeal to mountain passion had stolen into the veins of his hearers until it was not strange that their eyes narrowed and their lips compressed into lines of ominous straightness.

"Now this air what I come hyar ter name ter ye, Asa." Saul reseated himself and waved his cigar stub impressively. "Troublesome days air a'comin' on an' us mountain men hev need ter lay by our own private grievances an' stand tergether fer a spell."

Asa's face darkened, with the air of a man who has discovered the catch in an outwardly fair proposition.

"What air ye a'drivin' at?" he demanded shortly, and his visitor hastened to explain.

"I wants thet all ther good Republicans in this deestrict shell send a telegram ter our candi*date* thet we've done made a truce to our enmities hyar at home, an' thet we all stands shoulder ter shoulder, Gregories an' Carrs, Fultons an' Blairs alike, ter defend our rights es freemen."

Asa Gregory rose slowly and stood on his hearth with his feet

wide apart and his head thrown back. From straight shoulders to straight legs he was as unmoving, for a space, as bronze, but when he spoke his voice came out of his deep chest with the resonance of low and far-reaching thunder.

"Saul," he began, with a guarded deliberation, "I stands indicted before ther High Co'te fer ther killin' of old man Carr. Ther full four seasons of ther year hain't rolled round yit sence I buried my daddy out thar with a Carr bullet drilled through his heart. Ther last time any man preached a truce ter us Gregorys we agreed ter hit – an' my daddy was lay-wayed an' shot ter death whilest we war still a'keepin' hit plum faithful. Ther man thet seeks ter beguile me *now* with thet same fashion of talk comes askin' me ter trust my life an' ther welfare of my woman an' child ter ther faithless word of liars!"

His voice leaped suddenly out of its difficult timbre of restraint and rang echoing against the chinked timbers of the walls.

"I've done suffered grievously enough already by trustin' ter infamy. From now on I'll watch them enemies thet's nighest me fust – an' them thet's further off atterwards. My God A'mighty, ef ye warn't my own blood kin, I couldn't hardly suffer ye ter tarry under my roof atter ye'd give voice ter sich a proffer!"

Araminta Gregory had listened from the kitchen door but now she swept to her husband's side and turned upon her visitor the wrath of blazing eyes and a heaving bosom.

"We hain't askin' no odds of nobody," she flared in a panting

transport of fury. "Asa kin safeguard his own so long es he hain't misled with lyin' an' false pledges."

"Don't fret yoreself none, Araminty," said the man, reassuring her with a brusque but not ungentle hand on her trembling arm. Then he turned with regained composure to Saul, as he inquired: "Does ther Carrs proffer ter drap tha'r hell-bent detarmination ter penitenshery me or hang met?"

Somewhat dubiously Fulton shook his head in negation.

"I reckon they 'low ye'd only mistrust 'em ef they proffered *thet*. All they proposes is thet ontil this election's over an' sottled – not jest at ther polls, but sottled fer good an' all – thar won't be no hand raised erginst you ner yourn. I reckon ye kin bide yore time thet long, an' when this racket's over ye'll be plum free ter settle yore own scores." He paused, then added insinuatingly, "Every week a trial's put off hit gits harder fer ther prosecution. Witnesses gits scattered like an' men kinderly disremembers things."

Asa Gregory, confronted with a new and complicated problem, sank back into his seat and his attitude became one of deep meditation. He glanced at the bowl of his dead pipe, leaned forward and drew a burning fagot from the fire for its relighting; then, at length, he spoke with a judicial deliberation.

"This hyar's a solid Republican deestrick. We don't need no truce ter make us vote ther ticket."

The messenger from the outer world shook a dubious head. "Votin' ther ticket hain't enough. Thar's ergoin' ter be a heap of

fancy mathematics in tallyin' thet vote all over ther State. Up hyar we've got ter make up fer any deefault down below. We kain't do thet without we all stands solid. Ef thar's any bickerin' them crooks'll turn hit ter account, but ef we elects our man he hain't ergoin' ter fergit us."

"So fur es thet goes," mused Asa, "I hain't a'seekin' no favours from ther Governor."

"Why hain't ye?" Saul lowered his voice a little for added effect. "Ye faces a murder trial, don't ye? I reckon a Republican Governor, next time, mout be right willin' ter grant ye a pardon ef ye laid by yore own grievances fer ther good of ther party – hit wouldn't be no more'n fa'r jestice."

"What guaranty does these enemies of mine offer me?" inquired Asa coolly. "Does they aim ter meet me half way?"

"Hit's like this," Saul spoke now with undisguised excitement: "Ther boys air holdin' a rally ternight over at ther incline… A big lawyer from Loueyville is makin' a speech thar… They wants thet I shell fotch ye back along with me – an' thet ye shan't tote no rifle-gun ner no weepin' of airy sort. Tom Carr'll be thar too – unarmed."

At the name Asa Gregory flinched as if he had been smitten in the face, but the messenger went persuasively on:

"Thar'll be es many of our folks thar es his'n. They'll be consortin' tergither plum peaceable – twell ye walks inter ther room. Them Gregories an' them Carrs air all armed. Hit's jest you an' Tom thet hain't. When we comes inter ther place, Tom'll

start down ther aisle to'rds ye – an' you'll start up to'rds Tom." The speaker paused, and Asa prompted in a low, restrained voice, though his face was chalky pale with smothered emotion:

"Go on! I'm hearkenin'."

Saul shrugged his shoulders. "Wa'al, thet's all. Ye knows ther rest es well es I does. Them fellers on both sides air trustin' their lives ter ther two of ye. Ef you an' Tom shakes hands they'll all ride home quiet as turtle-doves – an' take off th'ar coats ter beat this man fer Governor. Ef you an' Tom *don't* shake hands – or ef one or t'other of ye makes a single fightin' move, every gun under thet roof'll start poppin' an ther place'll be a slaughter house. They all knows thet full well. Ther lawyer knows hit, too – an' he's a'riskin' hit fer ther sake of his party."

The indicted man took a step forward. "Stand up hyar an' look me in ther eyes," he commanded shortly, and, when Fulton rose, they stood, face to face, so close that each could feel the breath of the other's lips.

The steady brown eyes bored into the shiftier pupils of greenish-gray with an implacable searching, and Asa's voice came in an uncompromising hardness:

"Saul, ye're askin' me ter trust ye right far. I hain't got nothin' but yore word fer hit thet thar'll be airy man over thar at thet meetin' but them thet seeks my life. This may be what ye says hit is or hit may be a trap – but ye're a kinsman of mine, an' I've got a license ter believe ye – oncet. Ef ye're lyin' ter me, ye're mighty apt ter hev ter pay fer hit."

"Ef I'm lyin' ter ye, Asa," came the prompt response, "I'm ready ter pay fer hit."

Gregory drew on his coarse socks and heavy shoes. "Alright," he acceded curtly, "I'm a'goin' along with ye now, an' I reckon we'd better hasten."

"Don't go, Asa," pleaded Araminta. "Don't take no sich chanst." But as her husband looked into her eyes she slowly nodded her head. "Ye're right," she said falteringly. "I was jest skeered because I'm so worrited. Of course ye've *got* ter go. Hit's fer yore country."

When the door had closed the woman dropped limply into a chair. Her pupils were distended and her fingers twisted in aimless gropings. After a while she looked about a little wildly for Boone Wellver. It was something to have his companionship during the hours of suspense – but the boy's chair, too, was empty. His rifle was missing from its corner.

She know now what had happened. Boone had slipped uninvited and secretly out into the night. He had said nothing, but he meant to follow the pair unseen, and if he found his hero threatened, there would be one armed follower at his back.

From the crib in one corner rose an uneasy whimper and Araminta went to soothe her baby at her breast.

CHAPTER IV

When Boone surreptitiously slipped out of the house he had plunged recklessly into the thorn-tangle for a shorter cut than the two men would take: a road of precipitous peril but of moments saved.

If the possibility which Saul had admitted came to fruition and the guns started popping, the peril lay not in the course of subsequent minutes but at the pregnant instant when Asa Gregory's face was first seen in the door. It would be in that breathing-space that the issue would find settlement, and it would hang, hair-balanced, on the self-restraint of two men whose hard-held hatred might break bounds and overwhelm them as each thought of the father slain by violence. It would be a parlous moment when their eyes, full of stored-up and long-curbed rancour, first engaged and their hostile palms were required to meet and clasp.

Young as he was, Boone understood these matters. He knew how the resolve which each had undertaken might collapse into swift destruction as the hot tides rushed into their temples. If their mutual concession of manner was not balanced to exact nicety – if either Tom or Asa seemed to hold back and throw upon the other the brunt of the difficult conciliation by so much as a faltering stride – there would be chaos – and Boone meant to be there in time.

In this pocketed bit of wilderness, the incline had been built years ago, and it had been a challenge to Nature's mandate of isolation.

As the crow flew, the railroad that might afford an outlet to market was not so many miles away, but it might as well have been ten times as distant. Between lay a wall of hills interposing its grim prohibition with a timbered cornice lifted twenty-five hundred feet towards the sky and more than a day's journey separated those gaps where wheels could scale and cross. Long ago local and visionary enthusiasts had built a huge warehouse on a towering pinnacle with an incline of track dropping dizzily down from it to the creek far below. Its crazy little cars had been hauled up by a cable wound on a drum with the motive force of a straining donkey-engine. But so ambitious an enterprise had not survived the vicissitudes of hard times. Its simple machinery had rusted; its tracks ran askew with decay upon their warped underpinning of teetering struts.

Now the warehouse stood dry-rotting and unkempt, its spaces regularly tenanted only by the owl and bat. Through its unpatched roof one caught, at night, the peep of stars and its hulking sides leaned under the buffet of the winds which raced, screaming, around the shoulder of the mountain.

Towards this goal Boone was hurrying, forgetful now of any divided standards of thought, thinking only of the kinsman whom his boyhood had exalted with ardent hero-worship – and of that kinsman's danger. A rowelling pressure of haste drove him, while

snares of trailing creepers, pitfalls blotted into darkness and the thickness of jungle-like undergrowth handicapped him with many stubborn difficulties.

Sometimes he fell and scrambled up again, bruised and growling but undiscouraged. Sometimes he forsook even the steep grade of the foot trail for shorter cut-offs where he pulled himself up semi-perpendicular walls of cliff, trusting to a hand-grip on hanging root or branch and a foothold on almost nothing.

But when he was still a long way off he saw a pale flare against the sky which he knew was a bonfire outside the warehouse, and by the brightening of that beacon from pallor to crimson glow he measured his progress.

Inside the building itself another battle against time was being fought: a battle to hold the attention of a crowd in the background of whose minds lurked the distrait suspense of waiting for a graver climax than that of oratorical peroration. About the interior blazed pine torches and occasional lanterns with tin reflectors. Even this unaccustomed effort at illumination failed to penetrate the obscurity of the corners or to carry its ragged brightness aloft into the rafters. Beyond the sooty formlessness of encroaching shadows one felt rather than saw the walls, with their rifts through which gusty draught caused the torches to flare and gutter, sending out the incense of their resin.

Between the Circuit Judge, before whom Asa must face trial and the County Judge, sat Basil Prince, the principal speaker of the evening, and his quiet eyes were missing nothing of the

mediaevalism of the picture.

Yet one might have inferred from his tranquillity of expression that he had never addressed a gathering where the fitful glare of torches had not shone upon repeating rifles and coon skin caps: where the faces had not been set and grim as though keyed to an ordeal of fire and lead.

He was noting how every fresh arrival hesitated near the door and glanced about him. In that brief pause and scrutiny he recognized the purport of a division, for as each newcomer stepped to the left or the right of the centre aisle he thereby proclaimed himself a Carr or a Gregory – taking shrewd thought of clan-mobilization. Then as a low drone of talk went up from the body of the house and a restless shuffling of feet, the speaker and his reception committee could not escape the realization of an ugly tension; of an undertow of anxiety moving deep beneath the surface affectation of calm. A precarious spirit brooded there.

The Circuit Judge leaned over toward Prince, whispering nervously through a smile of courteous commonplace: "Maybe we've made a mistake to attempt it, General. They seem dangerously restless and tight-strung, and they've got to be so gripped that they'll forget everything but your words for a spell!" The speaker, in his abstraction, relapsed abruptly out of judicial dignity into mountain crudity of speech. "Hit's ergoin' ter be like holdin' back a flood tide with a splash-dam. Thank God ef any man kin do thet, I reckon hit's you."

The Louisville lawyer nodded, "I'll try, sir," was his brief response.

As the speaker of the moment dropped back, General Prince came to his feet and with him rose the Circuit Judge who was to introduce him. That prefatory address was brief, for the infection of restiveness was spreading and loosely held interests were gravitating to mischief.

Yet as General Prince stood quietly waiting, with his slender and elderly figure straight poised and his fine face, for all its intellectuality, remaining the steel-jawed face of a fighter, the shuffling feet quieted and straying glances came to focus. There was a commanding light in the unquailing eyes and these men who knew few celebrities from the world without, knew both his name and his record. They gazed steadfastly at him because, though he came now as a friend he had in another day come as a foe, and the weight of his inimical hand had come down to them through the mists of the past as word-of-mouth. In the days of the war between the States, the mountains had thrust their wedge of rock and granite-loyal Unionism through the vitals of Confederate territory. While the mobility of the gray forces were balked there to a heavy congestion, one command, bitterly hated and grudgingly admired, had seemed capable of defying mountain ranges and of laughing at torrents. Like a scathe that admitted no gainsaying, it came from nowhere, struck, without warning, and was gone again unpunished. Its name had been a metaphor for terror.

Morgan's Men! That brilliant organization of partisan raiders who slept in their saddles and smote Vulcan-like. The world knew of them and the Cumberlands had felt their blows. General Basil Prince had been one of their commanders. Now, a recognized authority on the use of cavalry, a lawyer of distinction, a life-long Democrat, he stood before Republicans pouring out the vials of his wrath upon the head of the man whom he charged with having betrayed and disrupted his own party and with attempting to yoke freedom into bondage.

Faces bent forward with eyes lighting into an altered mood, and the grimness which spelled danger relaxed grudgingly into attention.

The speaker did not underestimate his task. It was not enough to play the spell-binder for a definite period. He must unflaggingly hold them vassals to his voice until the entrance of Asa Gregory gave him pause.

Never had Basil Prince spoken with a more compelling force or a fierier power of invective, and his voice had rung like a bugle for perhaps three-quarters of an hour when in the shadowed darkness beyond the walls the figure of a boy halted, heavily panting.

Boone paused only for a little, testing the condition of his rifle's breech and bolt, recovering his spent breath. Then he slipped nearer and peered through the slit where a board had been broken away in the wall itself. Within he saw figures bending forward and intent – and his brow knit into furrows as he took

in at a glance the division of the clans, each to its separate side of the house. They had come, Saul said, to bring peace out of dissension, but they had paradoxically arranged themselves in readiness for conflict.

Through a gaping door at the rear, of which he knew, and which lay as invisible as a rent in a black curtain, because the shadows held undisputed sway back there, the boy made a noiseless entrance. Up a ladder, for the rungs of which he had to feel blindly, he climbed to a perch on the cross-beams, under the eaves, and still he was as blanketed from view as a bat in an unlighted cavern. The only dim ghost of glow that went with him were two faint phosphorescent points where he had rubbed the sights of his rifle with the moistened heads of matches.

For the eloquence of the speaker, which would at another time have enthralled him, he had now no thought, because lying flattened on a great square-hewn timber, he was searching the crowd for the face of Tom Carr.

Soon he made it out below him, to his right, and slowly he trained his rifle upon the breast beneath the face.

That was all he had to do for the present – except to wait.

When Asa came in, if matters went badly and if Tom made a motion to his holster or a gesture to his minions, there would be one thing more, but it involved only the crooking of a finger which snuggled ready in the trigger-guard.

The boy's muscles were badly cramped up there as the minutes lengthened and multiplied. The timber was hard and the

air chill, but he dared not invite discovery by free movement.

Then suddenly with a short and incisive sentence following on longer and more rounded phrases, the speaker fell silent. Boone could not properly appreciate the ready adroitness with which General Prince had clipped his oratory short without the seeming of a marred effect. He only knew that the voice spoke crisply and halted and that the speaker was reaching out his hand, with matter-of-fact gesture, toward the gourd in the water bucket on the table.

Instantly the shuffling of feet grated its signal of an awakening apprehension – an uneasiness which had been temporarily lulled. There was an instant, after that, of dead hush, and then a twisting of necks as all eyes went to the door.

The men on each side of the house drew a little closer and more compactly together, widening and emphasizing the line of the aisle between; becoming two distinct crowds where there had been one, loosely joined. Hands gestured instinctively toward guns laid by, and halted in cautious abeyance. Through the cobwebbed spaciousness and breathless quiet of the place sounded the ill-omened quaver of a barn owl.

In the door stood Asa Gregory, his hands hanging at his sides with a studied inertness as his eyes travelled slowly, appraisingly, about the place. His attitude and expression alike were schooled into passiveness, but as he saw another figure rise from just in front of the stage and stand in momentary irresolution, the muscles of his jaw hardened and into his eyes flashed a defiant

gleam. His lids contracted to the narrowness of slits, as though struggling to shut out some sudden and insufferable glare. His chest heaved in a gasp-like breath and the hands which he sought to keep hanging, slowly closed and clenched as muscles tauten under an electric shock. Then, as if in obedience to impulses beyond volition, the right hand came upward toward the left armpit – where his pistol holster should have been.

At the sight of his enemy rising there before him, Asa Gregory had seen red, and the length of the aisle away, Tom Carr stood struggling with an identical transport of reeling self-control. Like a reflection in a mirror his face too blackened in sinister hatred and his hand too moved toward the empty holster.

The strained tableau held only for a breathing space, but it was long enough for acceptance as a signal. It was long enough to afford the orator of the evening a swift, photographic impression of flambeaux giving back the glint of drawn pistols to right and left of the aisle; of the ducking of timid heads; of a crowd holding a pose as tense and ready as runners set on their marks – yet breathlessly awaiting the overt signal.

It was long enough, too, for Boone Wellver, crouched in the rafters, to close one eye and sight his rifle on the back of Tom Carr – and to draw a shallow breath of nerve-tension and resolution as his finger balanced the trigger – a finger which sheer strain was perilously contracting.

In that same instant Asa Gregory and Tom Carr were brought back to themselves by the feel of emptiness where there should

have been the bulge of concealed weapons – and by all the resolution for which that disarmament stood.

With a convulsive bracing of his shoulders, Gregory relaxed again, throwing out his arms wide of his body, and Carr echoed the peace gesture.

As his deep-held breath came with long exhalation from his chest, Asa walked steadily down the aisle – while Tom Carr went to meet him half way.

Standing face to face, the two enemies lifted stubbornly unwilling hands for the consummation of the peace-pact. Their palms touched and fell swiftly apart as though each had been scorched. Their faces were the stoic faces of two men undergoing a necessary torture. But the thing was done and the rafters rocked with an uproar of applause.

That clamour killed out a lesser sound, as the held breath in Boone Wellver's chest hissed out between teeth that suddenly fell to chattering. His body, for just a moment, shook so that he almost lost his balance on his precarious perch, as the flexed emotions that had keyed him to the point of homicide burst into relief like a released spring … and with shaken but careful fingers he let down the cocked rifle hammer.

Then with a voice of smooth and quieting satisfaction the orator from Louisville raised his hands.

"I've just seen a big thing done," he said, "and now I move that you instruct your chairman to send a telegram of announcement to the next Governor of Kentucky."

He had to pause there until order could be restored out of a bedlam of yelling, laughing and handshaking. When there was a possibility of being heard again he held up a message which he had scribbled during that noisy interval. "I move you that you say this to our standard-bearer: 'Here in the hills of Marlin we have laid aside feudism to rescue our State from an even more dangerous thing. Here old enmities have been buried in an alliance against tyranny.'"

Boone had not recognized the face of Victor McCalloway in the audience, because that gentleman had been sitting quietly back in the shadows with the detachment of a looker-on among strangers, but now as the boy stood outside the door, he saw the Scot shaking hands with the speaker of the evening and heard him saying:

"General Prince, it has long been my ambition to meet you, Sir. I have soldiered a bit myself and I know your record. The committee has paid me the honour of permitting me to play your host for the night."

There was no moon and the heavens were like a high-hung curtain of purple-black plush, spangled with the glitter of cold stars. A breeze harping softly through the tree-tops carried a touch of frost, but Boone Wellver sat on a rounded hump of rock, well back from the road, with eyes that were wide and themselves starry under the spell of his reflections.

Since the coming of McCalloway Boone had been living in a world of fantasy. He had been seeing himself as no longer an

ignorant lad, sleeping on a husk-pallet, in the cock-loft of a cabin, but as a personality of greater majesty and spaciousness of being. Tonight he had heard General Prince speak and under the fanning of oratory his dream-fires were hotly aglow. As he sat on the rock with the soft minstrelsy of the wind crooning overhead, a score of hearth-stone recitals came back to memory; all saga-like stories of the prowess of Morgan's men. It seemed that he could almost hear the strain of stirrup leathers and the creak of cavalry-gear; the drum-beat of many hoofs.

This great man who had ridden at the head of that command was even now on his way to Victor McCalloway's house and there he would remain until tomorrow morning. What marvellous stories those two veterans would furnish forth from their own treasuries of reminiscence!

Suddenly Boone rose with an abrupt but fixed resolve. "By Godelmighty!" he exclaimed. "I reckon I'll jest kinderly sa'anter over thar and stay all night, too. I'd love ter listen at 'em talk."

Here in the hills where the very meagreness makes a law of hospitality he had never heard of a traveller who asked a night's lodging being turned away. Yet when he arrived and lifted his hand to knock he hesitated for a space, gulping his heart out of his throat, suddenly stricken with the enormity of intruding himself, unbidden, upon such notable presences.

Then the door swung open, and the boy found himself stammering with a tongue that had become painfully and ineptly stiff:

"I've done got belated on ther highway – an' I'm leg-weary," he prevaricated. "I 'lowed mebby ye'd suffer me ter come in an' tarry till mornin'."

Over the preoccupation of McCalloway's face broke an amused smile, and he stepped aside, waving his hand inward with a gesture of welcome.

"General Prince, permit me to present my young friend, Boone Wellver," he announced, stifling the twinkle of his eyes, and speaking with ceremonial gravity. "He is a neighbour of mine – who tells me he has dropped in for the night."

The seated gentleman with the gray moustache and beard came to his feet, extending his hand, and under the overwhelming innovation of such courtesy, Boone was even more palpably and painfully abashed. But as vaguely comprehended etiquette, he recognized its importance and accordingly came forward with the stiffness of an automaton.

"Howdy," he said with a stupendous solemnity. "I've done heerd tell of ye right often, an' hit pleasures me ter strike hands with ye. Folks says ye used ter be one of ther greatest horse-thievin' raiders that ever drawed breath."

When the roar of General Prince's laughter subsided – a laughter for which Boone could see no reason, the boy drew a chair to the corner of the hearth and sat as one may sit in the wings of a theatre, his breath coming with the palpitation of simmering excitement. Soon the elders seemed to have forgotten him in the heated absorption of their debate. They were threshing

over the campaigns of the war between the States and measuring the calibre of commanders as a backwoods man might estimate the girth and footage of timber.

Boone nursed contented knees between locked fingers while the debate waxed warm.

Not only were battles refought there in retrospect, with such illuminating vividness as seemed to dissolve the narrow walls into a panoramic breadth of smoking, thunderous fields, but motive and intent were developed back of the engagements.

Boone in the chimney corner sat mouse-quiet. He seemed to be rapturously floating through untried spaces on a magic carpet.

McCalloway replenished the fire from time to time, and though midnight came and passed, neither thought of sleep. It was as if men who had dwelt long in civilian inertia, were wassailing deep again in the heady wine of a martial past, and were not yet ready to set aside their goblets of memory.

The forgotten boy, electrically wakeful, huddled back, almost stifling his breath lest he should be remembered and sent to bed.

The speakers fell eventually into a silence which held long and was complete save for the light hiss and crackle of the logs, until Basil Prince's voice broke it with a low-pitched and musing interrogation. "I sometimes wonder whether the chemistry of a great war today would bring forth mightier or lesser reactions. Would the need call into evidence men of giant stature? Have we, in our time, greater potential geniuses than Grant and Lee?"

McCalloway shook his head. "I question it," he declared.

"I question it most gravely. I am myself a retired soldier. I have met most of the European commanders of my day, I have campaigned with not a few. Several have demonstrated this or that element of greatness, but not one the sheer pre-eminence of genius."

"And yet – " General Prince rose abruptly from his chair, under the impulse of his engrossed interest. "And yet, there was quite recently, in the British Army, one figure that to my mind demonstrated true genius, sir, – positive and undeniable genius. Tragedy claimed him before his life rounded to fulfilment. Not the tragedy of the field – which is rather gold than black – but the unholy and – I must believe – the undeserved tragedy of unwarrantable slander. If General Hector Dinwiddie had not died by his own hand in Paris, two years ago, he would have compelled recognition – and history's grudging accolade. It is my belief, sir, that he was of that mighty handful – the military masters."

For a while, McCalloway offered neither assent nor denial. His eyes held, as if by some hypnotic influence in the coals, were like those of the crystal gazer who sees shadowy and troubling pictures, and even in the hearth-flare the usually high-colour of his Celtic cheeks appeared faded into a sort of parchment dulness. Such a tide of enthusiasm was sweeping the other along, though, that his host's detachment and taciturnity went unobserved.

"Dinwiddie was not the man to have been guilty of those things, which scandal whispered of him," persisted Prince, with

such spirited animation as might have characterized him had he been confronting a jury box, summing up for the defence, "but he could not brook calumny." The speaker paused to shake his head sadly, and added, "So he made the mad mistake of self-destruction – and robbed Great Britain of her ablest and most brilliant officer."

"Perhaps," McCalloway suggested in a speculative and far-away voice, "perhaps he felt that his usefulness to his country was ended when his name was dragged into the mire."

"And in that he erred. Such a man would have emerged, clean-shriven, from the smirching of slander. His detractors would have stood damned by their own infamous falsity – had he only faced them out and given them the lie."

"Then you believe – in spite of the seemingly overpowering evidence which they produced against him – that the charges *were* false?"

McCalloway put the question slowly. "May I ask upon what you base your opinion? You know all they said of him: personal dishonesty and even ugly immorality?"

CHAPTER V

The one-time cavalry leader caught up the challenge of the question.

"Upon what do I base my opinion, sir? I base it upon all the experience of my life and all my conceptions of personal honour. For such a man as Dinwiddie had proven himself to be under a score of reliable tests, the thing was a sheer impossibility. It was a contradiction in the terms of nature. His was the soul of a Knight, sir! Such a man could not cheat and steal and delight in low vices."

"Yet," came the somewhat dubious observation, "even Arthur's table had its caitiff knights, if you remember."

The Kentuckian's exclamation was almost a snort. "Dinwiddie was no such renegade," he protested. "At least I can't believe it. Glance at his record, man! The son of an Edinburgh tradesman, who forced his way up from the ranks to pre-eminence. He did it, too, in an army where caste and birth defend their messes against invasion, and, as he came from the ranks to a commission, so he went on to the head. There must have been a greatness of soul there that could hardly care to wallow in viciousness." As Prince paused, a spasm of emotion twitched the lips of his host, and McCalloway's pipe died in fingers that clutched hard upon its stem.

But because McCalloway sat unmoving, making no comment

of any sort, the Kentuckian continued. It was as though he must have his argument acknowledged.

"I can see the tradesman's son, Sir Hector Dinwiddie, D.S.O., K.C.B., Major General, Aide de Camp to the Queen, promising Britain another glorious name – but as God in heaven is my judge, I cannot see him soiling his character, or degrading the uniform he wore!"

A moment of dead silence hung heavily between the walls of the room. Boone Wellver saw Victor McCalloway pass an uncertain hand across his eyes, and move his lips without speech, and then he heard Prince demand almost impatiently,

"But you say you have served in the British Army. Surely you do not believe that he was guilty?"

McCalloway, called out of his detached quiet by a direct question, raised his head and nodded it in a fashion of heavy inertia.

"General Prince," he replied with an effort, "there are two reasons why I should be the last man alive to add a syllable of corroboration to the evil things that were said of Dinwiddie. I myself have been a soldier and am a civilian. You may guess that a man whose career has been active would not be living the petty life of a hermit if fortune had dealt kindly with him. The officer who has suffered from a warrantless disgrace – which he cannot disprove – is hardly the judge to condemn another similarly charged.

"That, sir, is one reason why I should not contradict your

view."

McCalloway rose slowly from his chair and, after standing for a moment with shoulders that drooped from their military erectness, went with an inelastic step to the corner of the room and came back, carrying a sword.

"There is also another reason based on personal partiality," he added. "I knew him so well that after the world heard of his suicide – and after my own misfortunes forced me into retirement, I might often have hired my sword because of my familiarity with his military thought."

Boone Wellver saw the throat work spasmodically, and wondered what it all meant as the carefully schooled words went on again, with a gauged steadiness.

"I have admired your own record, General Prince. I owe you frankness, but I have chapters in my life which I cannot confide to you. Nevertheless, I am glad we have met. Look at that blade." He held out the sword. In the leap and flicker of the firelight Boone could catch the glint of a hilt that sent out the sparkle of jewelry and inlaid enamel. Slowly General Prince slid the sabre from the scabbard, and bent forward, studying an inscription upon the damascened steel itself. For a moment he held it reverently before him, then straightened up and his voice trembled with a note of mystified wonderment.

"But this – " he said incredulously, "this is Dinwiddie's sabre – presented by – "

McCalloway smiled stiffly, but he held up a hand as if

entreating silence.

"It *is* his sword," he answered, but dully and without ardour, "and, if it means anything to you – he knew the facts of my own life, both the open and the hidden – and he trusted me enough to leave that blade in my keeping."

"To me, you required no recommendation, sir," said Basil Prince slowly. "If you *had* needed it, this would be sufficient. You had the confidence, even the love it seems, of the greatest military genius of our age."

On the following morning, Boone made his farewells, reluctantly as one who has glimpsed magic and who sets his face again to dull realities.

The Southerner, who had laid down his sword when its cause was lost and the Celt who had sheathed his, when his name was tarnished, stood together in the crystal-clear air of the heights, looking down from a summit over crags and valleys that sparkled with the rime of frost.

Undulating like a succession of arrested waves, were the ramparts of the ridges stretching into immeasurable distances. They were almost leafless now, but they wrapped themselves in colour tones that touched them into purple and blue. They wore atmospheric veils, mist-woven, and sun-dyed into evanescent and delicate effects of colour, but the cardinal note which lay upon them, as an expression rests upon a human face, was their declaration of wildness; their primitive note of brooding aloofness.

"They are unchanged," declared General Prince in a low voice. "The west has gone under the plough. The prairies are fenced. Alaska even is won – . These hills alone stand unamended. Here at the very heart of our civilization is the last frontier, and the last home of the trail-blazer." His eyes glistened as he pointed to a wisp of smoke that rose in a cove far under them, straight and blue from its clay-daubed chimney.

"There burns the hearth fire of our contemporary ancestors, the stranded wagon voyagers who have changed no whit from the pioneers of two hundred years ago."

Victor McCalloway nodded gravely, and his companion went on.

"With one exception this range was the first to which the earth, in the travail of her youth, gave birth. Compared with the Appalachians, the Himalayas and the Alps are young things, new to life. On either side of where we stand a youthful civilization has grown up, but these ridges have frowned on, unaltered. Their people still live two centuries behind us."

McCalloway swept out his hands in a comprehensive gesture.

"When you leave this spot, sir, for your return, you travel not only some two hundred miles, but also from the infancy of Americanism to its present big-boyhood. Pardon me, if that term seems disrespectful," he hastened to add. "But it is so that I always think of your nation, as the big growing lad of the world family. Titanically strong, astonishingly vigorous of resource, but, as yet, hardly adult."

The Kentuckian, standing spare and erect, typical of that old South which has caught step with the present, yet which has not outgrown the gracious touch of a more courtly past, smiled thoughtfully while his younger companion, who had known the life of court and camp, in the elder hemisphere, puffed at his blackened pipe: "Adult or adolescent, we are altering fast, casting aside today the garments of yesterday," admitted Prince. "In my own youth a gentleman felt the call of honour to meet his personal enemy on the duelling field. I have, myself, answered that call. In my young manhood I donned the gray, with a crusader's ardent sincerity, to fight for the institution of human slavery. Today we think in different terms."

Upon them both had fallen a mood; the mood of gazing far backward and perhaps also of adventuring as far forward in the forecasting of human transition.

Such a spirit may come to men who have, in effect, stepped aside from the march of their own day, into an elder régime – a pioneer setting.

To Basil Prince, in the fore-shortening of retrospect, all the gradual amendments of life, as he had known them in their enactment, stood forth at once in a gigantic composition of contrasts; heroically pictured on a single canvas.

"Now," he reflected, "we hear the younger generation speak with a pitying indulgence of the archaic stodginess of mid-Victorian ideas – and, my God, sir, that was all only yesterday, and this mid-Victorian thought was revolutionary in its newness

and its advancement! I can remember when it startled the world: when Tennyson was accounted a wild radical, and Darwin a voice savouring strongly of heresy."

McCalloway filled a fresh pipe. He sent out a cloud of tobacco smoke and set back his shoulders.

"In my belief, your radical poet said one true thing at least," he observed.

"… I doubt not through the ages, one increasing purpose runs.

"That purpose lies towards the swallowing of the local, and the individualistic, the national even into the international. It lies toward the broadest federation of ideals that can exist in harmony." He paused there, and in the voice of one expecting contradiction, added: "And that end will not be attained in parliaments, but on the battlefield."

"The creed of Americanism," Prince reminded him, "rests on the pillars of non-interference with other states and of a minimum of meddling among our own."

"So far, yes," admitted the Scot, but his eyes held a stubborn light of argument. "Yet I predict that when the whole story of Americanism is written, it will be cast to a broader plot."

On General Prince's lips flickered a quiet smile.

"Is there a broader thing than independence?" he inquired, and the answer came back with a quick uptake.

"At least a bigger thing, sir. Breadth is only one dimension,

after all. A larger concept, perhaps, comes by adding one syllable to your word and making it interdependence. Inexorably you must follow the human cycle and some day, sir, your country must stand with its elder brethren, grappled in the last crusade. Then only will the word Americanism be completely spelled."

The Kentuckian's eyes kindled responsively to the animation of his companion's words, his manner. It was a phase of this interesting man that he had not before seen, but his own response was gravely calm,

"I am thinking," he said whimsically, "that this wine-like air has gone to our heads. We are standing in a high place, dreaming large dreams."

The Scot nodded energetically.

"I dare say," he acceded. "After all a hermit is thrown back on dreaming for want of action." He broke off and when he spoke again it was with a trace of embarrassment, almost of shyness which brought a flush to his cheeks.

"I've been living here close to the life that was the infancy of your nation, and I've been imagining the wonder of a life that could start as did that of these hardy settlers and pass, in a single generation, along the stages that the country, itself, has marched to this day. It would mean birth in pioneer strength and simplicity, and fulfilment in the present and future. It would mean ten years lived in one!"

"It would have had to begin two centuries ago," Prince reminded him, "and to run, who can say, how far forward?"

Half diffidently, half stubbornly, McCalloway shook his head.

"You saw that boy last night who called you a 'great horse-thievin' raider'?" The gray eyes twinkled with reminiscence. "In every essential respect he is a lad of two hundred years ago. He is a pioneer boy, crude as pig-iron, unlettered and half barbaric. Yet his stuff is the raw material of which your people is made. It needs only fire, water, oil and work to convert pig-iron into tempered steel."

Prince looked into his companion's eyes and found them serious.

"You mean to try," he sceptically inquired, "to make the complete American out of that lad in whose veins flows the blood of the vendetta?"

"I told you that we hermits were dreamers," answered McCalloway. "I've never had a son of my own. I think it would be a pretty experiment, sir, to see how far this young backwoodsman could go."

Strange indeed would have seemed to any prying eye the occurrences within the walls of McCalloway's cabin on those many evenings which Boone Wellver spent there. But of what took place the boy breathed no word, despite the almost feverish eagerness that glowed constantly in his blue eyes. His natural taciturnity would have sealed his lips had he given the "furriner" no pledge of confidence, and even McCalloway never guessed how strict was the censorship of that promise as Boone construed its meaning. Inasmuch as he could not be sure just what

details, out of the summary of their conversations, fell under the restrictive ban, he set upon the whole association a seal of Masonic silence. And Victor McCalloway, recognizing that dependable discretion, talked with a freedom which he would have permitted himself with few other companions.

Sometimes he read aloud from books whose pages were, to the young listener, gates swinging open upon gilded glimpses of chivalry, heroism and those thoughts which are not groundling but winged and splendid. Sometimes through the hills where the distances shimmered with an ashen ghost of brilliance, they tramped together, a peripatetic philosopher and his devoted disciple.

But strangest and most fantastical of all, were the hours they spent before McCalloway's hearth when the man threw off his coat and rolled his sleeves high over scarred forearms while the boy's eyes sparkled with anticipation. And at outside mention of these sessions, McCalloway himself might have reddened to the cheekbones, for then it was that the man produced improvised wooden swords and placed himself, feet wide apart and left hand elevated in the attitude of the fencer's salute. Facing him was a solemn, burning-eyed pupil and adversary of fifteen in a linsey-woolsey shirt and jeans overalls. The lad with his freckled face and his red-brown shock of hair made an absurd contrast with the gentleman whose sword play possessed the exquisite grace and deft elegance of a Parisian fencing master – but Boone had the astonishing swiftness of a panther cub, and a lightning play

of wrist and agility of limb. How rapidly he was gaining mastery over his foil he could not, himself, realize because standing over against him was one of the best swords of Europe, but this enthusiasm, which was a very passion to learn, was also a thing of which he never spoke outside.

CHAPTER VI

With winter came desolation. The sumac no longer flared vermilion and the flaming torches of the maples were quenched.

Roads were quagmires where travellers slipped and laboured through viscid mud and over icy fords. The hills were scowling ranks of slate gray. A tarnished sun paraded murky skies from its pallid dawn to its setting in a bed of inflamed and angry clouds.

And as the sullen spirit of winter came to this isolation, another spirit came with it – equally grim.

The campaign had progressed with torrential bitterness to its inevitable culmination. Exhausted invective had, like a jaded thing, sought greater lengths – when already the superlative was reached. Each side shrieked loud and blatant warnings of an attempt at rape upon the ballot. There was irresponsible talk of the freeman's final recourse to arms and of blood-letting in the name of liberty. At last had come the day of election itself with howls of fraud and claims of victory ringing from both camps: then a lull, like that in which two bleeding and exhausted dogs draw off from the clamp of locked jaws to pant at each other with weltering fangs and blood-shot eyes.

As Saul Fulton had predicted, the gaze of the State turned anxiously to the hills. There, remote and slow to give its election returns, lay the Eleventh Congressional District with all its counties solidly Republican. Already the margin was recognized

as narrow enough, perhaps, to hinge on the "Bloody Eleventh." While the State waited, the Democrats asseverated that the "Bloody Eleventh" was marking time, awaiting a response to the query it had wired to its state headquarters:

"How much do you need?"

Those were days of tension and rumblings in the craters, and one day the rumour was born that the vote of Marlin County was to be counted out.

In an hour after that whisper mysteriously originated, thirty horsemen were riding faster than road conditions warranted, by every crooked creek-bed and trail that debouched from the county seat. They made light of quicksand and flooded ford. They laughed at shelving precipice brinks. Each of them shouted inflammatory words at every cabin and dwelling house along his way; each of them kindled signal fires atop the ridges, and when the first pallid light of dawn crept into the fog reek of the hillsides an army was on the march to Marlin Town.

That evening, in a grimly beleaguered court house, the commissioners certified the ballots as cast, and the cloud of black hats melted as quietly as it had formed.

In the state courts, on points of legal technicality, with mandamus and injunction, the fight went on bitterly and slowly. The narrow margin fluctuated: the outcome wavered.

When Saul Fulton returned to his birthplace in December, his face was sinister with forebodings. But his object in coming was not ostensibly political. He meant to drive down, from the

creeks and valleys of Marlin County, a herd of cattle collected from scattered sources for marketing in the bluegrass. It was an undertaking that a man could hardly manage single handed, and since a boy would work for small wages he offered to make Boone his assistant. To Boone, who had never seen a metalled road, it meant adventuring forth into the world of his dreams.

He would see the theatre where this stupendous political war was being waged – he would be only a few miles from the state capitol itself, where these two men, each of whom called himself the Governor of Kentucky, pulled the wires, directed the forces and shifted the pawns.

Victor McCalloway smiled when Boone told him, in a voice shaken with emotion, that the day had come when he could go out and see the world.

Boone and Saul slept, that night, in a mining town with the glare of coke furnaces biting red holes through the surrounding blackness of the ridges.

To Boone Wellver, this journey was as full of mystifying and alluringly colourful events as a mandarin's cloak is crusted with the richness of embroidery. Save for his ingrained sense of a man's obligation to maintain always an incurious dignity, he would have looked through widened eyes of amazement from the first miles of his travelling. When the broken raggedness of peaks began to flatten toward the billowing bluegrass, his wonder grew. There at home the world stood erect and lofty. Here it seemed to lie prone. The very air tasted flat in his nostrils and, missing the

screens of forested peaks, he felt a painful want of privacy – like a turtle deprived of its shell, or a man suddenly stripped naked.

Upon his ears a thousand sounds seemed to beat in tumult – and dissonance. Men no longer walked with a soundless footfall, or spoke in lowered voices.

In the county seat to which they brought their gaunt cattle, his bewilderment mounted almost to vertigo, for about the court house square were congregated men and beasts – all unfamiliar to the standards of his experience.

The native beef here was fat, corn-fed stock, and the hogs were rounder and squatter than the mast-nourished razor-backs he had known at home. The men, too, who bought and sold them, were fuller nourished and fuller voiced. It was as if they never whispered and had never had to talk in soft caution. Upon himself from time to time he felt amused glances, as though he, like his bony steers, stood branded to the eye with the ineradicable mark of something strayed in from a land of poverty.

But when eventually the cattle had been sold, Saul took him on to the capitol of the State, and there, on the twelfth of December, he stood, with a heart that hammered his ribs, in a great crowd before the state house and gazed up at the platform upon which the choice of his own people was being inaugurated as Governor.

Boone was dazzled by the gold-laced uniforms of all the colonels on the retiring executive's staff, and as he turned away, in the amber light of the winter afternoon, his soul was all but

satiated with the heady intoxication of full living.

On a brilliantly frosted morning, when the weed stalks by the roadside were crystal-rimmed, and the sky was an illimitable arch of blue sparkle, he trudged at Saul's side along a white turnpike between smooth stone walls and well-kept fences. Yet for all his enthusiasm of admiration, a new sense of misgiving and vague trouble began to settle heavily at his heart.

No one, along the way, halted to "meet an' make their manners." Vehicles, drawn by horses that lifted their hocks and knees high, passed swiftly and without greeting. The threadbare poorness of his clothes, a thing of which he had never before been conscious, now uncomfortably obtruded itself upon realization. At home, where every man was poor, there had been no sense of inferiority, but here was a régime of disquieting contrasts.

When they at last turned through a gate with stone pillars, he caught sight of a long maple and oak-flanked avenue, and at its end a great brick house. Against the age-tempered façade stood out the trim of white paint and the dignity of tall, fluted columns. He marvelled that Saul Fulton had been able in so short a time to buy himself such a palace.

But while he still mulled over his wonderment in silence, Saul led him by a detour around the mansion and its ivory-white out-buildings, and continued through back pastures and fields, disfigured by black and sharp tobacco stubble. Boone followed past fodder-racks and pig-sties, until they brought up at a square, two-roomed house with blank, unpainted walls, set

in a small yard as barren as those of the hills, but unrelieved by any background of laurel or forest. About this untempered starkness of habitation stretched empty fields, snow-patched and desolate, and the boy's face dropped as he heard his kinsman's announcement, "This hyar's whar I dwells at."

"Who – who dwells over yon at t'other house?" came Boone's rather timid query. "Ther huge brick one, with them big white poles runnin' up in front."

Saul laughed with a rasping note in his voice, "Hit b'longs ter Colonel Tom Wallifarro, ther lawyer, but he don't dwell thar hisself, save only now an' then."

Fulton paused, and his face took on the unpleasant churlishness of class hatred. "Ther whole kit and kaboodle of 'em will be hyar soon, though. They all comes back fer Christmas, an' holds dancin' parties, and carousin's, damn 'em!"

A seriously puzzled expression clouded the boy's eyes, and he asked simply, "Hain't ye friendly with 'em, Saul?"

"No," was the short rejoinder, "I hain't friendly with no rich lowlander that holds scorn fer an honest man jest because he's poor."

On subsequent occasions when Boone passed the "great house" it seemed almost as quiet as though it were totally untenanted, but with the approach of Christmas it awoke from its sleep of inactivity.

The young mountaineer was trudging along one day through a gracious woodland, which even, in the starkness of winter, hinted

at the nobility that summer leafage must give to its parklike spaces. His way carried him close to the paddocks flanking the ample barns, and he could see that the house windows were ruddy from inner hearth fires, and decked with holly wreaths.

In the paddocks themselves were a dozen persons, all opulent of seeming, and what interested the passer-by, even more than the people, were the high-headed, gingerly stepping horses that were being led out by negro boys for their inspection.

In the group Boone recognized the man whom Asa had identified that day in Marlin as Mr. Masters, a "mine boss," and the gentleman who had come with him out of the mountain hotel. The boy surmised that this latter must be Colonel Tom Wallifarro himself, the owner of all these acres.

There was a small girl too, whom Masters called "daughter." Boone had for girls the fine disdain of his age, and this one he guessed to be some four or five years younger than himself. But she was unlike any other he had ever seen, and it puzzled him that so much attention should be squandered on a "gal-child," though he acknowledged to himself – "but she's plum purty." He went by with a casual glance and a high chin, but in his brain whirled many puzzling thoughts, springing from a first glimpse of wealth.

CHAPTER VII

It was Christmas eve night, and General Basil Prince, who had hurriedly changed to evening dress after his arrival by a late train, halted for a moment at the stairhead to look down. On his distinguished face played a quiet smile. In these rapidly changing times, pride of lineage and deference for tradition were things less openly voiced than in other days which he could remember.

Probably that was as it should be, he reflected, yet an elderly fellow might enjoy the fragrance of old lavender or the bouquet of memory's vintage.

When he came here to the country house of his friend Wallifarro, it seemed to him that he stepped back into those days when gracious ceremonies held and dancers trod the measured figures of the minuet.

He wondered if in many places one could find just such another coterie of intimates as the little group of older men who gathered here: men who had been boyhood comrades in the Orphan Brigade, or Morgan's Cavalry: men who had, since the reconstruction, distinguished themselves in civilian life, weaving into a new pattern the regathered threads of fortune.

Gazing down upon the broad hall, with the parquetry of its floors cleared for dancing, Basil Prince warmed to a glow of pride in these people who were his people. Aristocracies had risen and tottered since history had kept its score, but here,

surviving all change, remained a simple graciousness, and a stamina of great heartedness like that which royal breeding had instilled into those satin-coated horses out there in their barns; steadfastness of courage and a high spirit.

Holly and mistletoe festooned the doorways, logs roared on brass andirons, and silver-sconced candles glowed against an ivory softness of white wainscoting and the waxed darkness of mahogany. He loved it all; the simple uncrowded elegance; the chaste designs of silver, upon which the tempered lights found rebirth; the ripe age of the family portraits. It stood for a worthy part of America – a culture that had ripened in the early wilderness.

Morgan Wallifarro was home from Harvard for his first vacation, and as General Prince eyed the boy his brows puckered in the momentary ghost of a frown. This lad, alone of all the young folk in the laughing groups, struck him as one to whom he could not accord an unreserved approval – as one whose dress and manner grated ever so slightly with their marring suspicion of pose. But this, he told himself, was only the conceit of extreme youth. Morgan was named for his old chieftain of the partisan cavalry. He was Tom Wallifarro's boy, and if there was anything in blood he must ultimately develop into worthiness.

"He's the best stock in the world," mused the General. "He's like a fractious colt just now – but when he's had a bit of gruelling, he'll run true to form."

The fiddles swung into a Sousa march, and couples drifted

out upon the floor. General Prince stood against the wall, teasing and delighting a small girl with short skirts and beribboned hair. It was Anne Masters, that bewitching child who in a few years more would have little leisure for gray-heads when the violins sang to waltz-time.

The music ran its course and stopped, as all music must, and the couples stood encoring. Some one, flushed with dancing, threw open the front door, and a chilly gust swept in from the night. Then quite suddenly General Prince heard Morgan Wallifarro's laugh break out over the hum of conversation.

"Well, in Heaven's name," satirically inquired that young gentleman, "what have we here?"

It was a strange picture for such a framing, yet into the eyes of General Prince flashed a quick indignant light and under his breath he muttered, "That young cub, Morgan! He disappoints me."

Seen across the sparkling shoulders and the filmy party gowns of the girls, beyond the black and white of the men's evening dress, was the parallelogram of the wide entrance-door, and centred on its threshold, against the night-curtain, bulked a figure which hesitated there in momentary indecision and grotesque inappropriateness.

It was a boy, whose long mop of red-brown hair was untrimmed and whose eyes were just now dazzled by the unaccustomed light and sparkle upon which they looked. His shirt was of blue cotton, his clothes patched and shoddy, but

under a battery of amused glances he sensed a spirit of ridicule and stiffened like a ramrod. A drifting peal of laughter from somewhere brought his chin up, and a red tide flooded into his cheeks. The soft and dusty hat which he clasped in his hand was crumpled under the pressure of his tightening fingers.

Then Boone Wellver's voice carried audibly over the hall and into the rooms at the side.

"I heered tell thet thar war a dancin' party goin' forward hyar," he announced simply, "an' I 'lowed I'd jest as lieve as not fare over fer a spell."

Boone had intended no comedy effect. He spoke in decorous gravity, and he knew of no reason why an outburst of laughter should sweep the place as he finished. Prince caught an unidentified voice from his back. It was low pitched, but it fell on the silence that succeeded the laugh, and he feared that the boy must have caught it too.

"One of the tobacco-yaps from the back of the place, I expect."

At once General Prince stepped forward and laid his hand on Boone's shoulder. Under his palm he felt a tremor of anger and hurt pride, and he spoke clearly.

"This young gentleman," he said – and though his eyes were twinkling with a whimsical light, his voice carried entire and calculated gravity – "is a friend of mine, Mr. Boone Wellver of Marlin County. I've enjoyed the hospitality of his people." There was a puzzled pause, and the General, whose standing here was

as secure as that of Petronius at Nero's court, continued.

"In the mountains when a party is given no invitations are issued. Word simply goes out as to time and location, and whoever cares to come – comes."

The explanation was meant for those inside, but the boy in the doorway caught from it a clarifying of matters for his own understanding as well. Obviously here one did *not* come without being bidden, and that left him in the mortifying attitude of a trespasser. It came with a flash of realization and chagrin.

He yearned to blot himself into the kindly void of the night behind him – yet that rude type of dignity which was bred in him forbade the humiliation of unexplained flight. Such a course would indeed stamp him as a "yap," and however shaggy and unkempt his appearance might be in this ensemble of silk and broadcloth he was as proud as Lucifer.

Heretofore a "dancing-party" had meant to him, shuffling brogans where shadows leaped with firelight and strings of fiddle and "dulcimore" quavered out the strains of "Turkey-in-the-straw" or "I've got a gal at the head of the hollow."

He had expected this to be different, but not *so* different, and he had need to blink back tears of shame.

But, all the more for that, he drew himself straight and stiff and spoke resolutely, though his voice carried the suspicion of a tremor.

"I fear me I've done made a fool mistake an' I reckon I'll say farewell ter you-all, now."

Even then he did not wheel precipitately, under the urge of his anxiety to be gone, but paused with a forced deliberation, and, as he tarried, little Anne Masters stepped impulsively forward.

Anne had reigned with a captivating absolutism from her cradle on. Swift impulses and ready sympathies governed much of her conduct, and they governed her now.

"This is *my* party," she declared. "Uncle Tom told me so at dinner, and I specially invite you to come in." She spoke with the haste of one wishing to forestall the possible thwarting of elderly objection, and ended with a dancing-school curtsey before the boy in hodden gray. Then the music started up again, and she added, "If you like, I'll give you this waltz."

But Boone Wellver only shifted from one uneasy foot to the other, fingering his hat brim and blinking owlishly. "I'm obleeged ter ye," he stammered with a sudden access of awkwardness, "but I hain't never run a set in my life. My folks don't hold hit ter be godly. I jest came ter kinderly look on."

"Anne, dear," translated Basil Prince, "in the mountains they know only the square dances. Isn't that correct?" The boy nodded his head.

"Thet's what I aimed ter say," he corroborated. "An' I'm beholden ter ye, little gal, none-the-less."

"And now, come with me, Boone," suggested the old soldier, diplomatically steering the unbidden guest across the hall and into the library where over their cigars and their politics sat the circle of devoted veterans.

Colonel Tom Wallifarro was standing before the fire with his hands clasped at his back. "I had hoped against hope," he was indignantly asserting, "that when the man's own hand-made triumvirate denied him endorsement, he would end his reign of terror and acknowledge defeat."

"A knowledge of the candidate should have sufficed to refute that idea," came the musical voice of a gentleman, whose snow-white hair was like a shock of spun silver.

"I was in Frankfort some days ago when Mr. Goebel sat there in conference with his favoured lieutenants. It was reported that he declared himself indifferent as to the outcome, but that he would abide by the decision of his party whips. The reporters were besieging those closed doors, and at the end you all know what verdict went over the wires: 'Being a loyal Democrat I shall obey the mandate of my party – and make a contest before the legislature for the office of governor, to which I was legally elected.'"

Just then Basil Prince came forward, leading his protégé. Possibly a wink passed over Boone Wellver's head. At all events the circle of gentlemen rose and shook hands as sedately as though they had been awaiting him – and Boone, hearing the titles, colonel, senator, governor, was enthralled beyond measure.

A half hour later, Morgan Wallifarro burst tempestuously in, carrying a large package, and wearing an expression of excited enthusiasm.

"General," he exclaimed, "I have disobeyed orders and opened

one Christmas gift before tomorrow. I suspected what it was, sir – and I couldn't wait."

Forgetful of the pretty girls in the rooms beyond, he ripped open the parcel and laid on the centre table a pair of beautifully chased and engraved fencing foils, and the masks that went with them.

"I simply had to come in and thank you at once, sir," he added delightedly. "Father, bend that blade and feel the temper! Look at the engraving too! My monogram is on the guard."

While his elders looked indulgently on, the lad made a pass or two at an imagined adversary, and then he laughed again.

"By George, I wish I had one of the fencing-class fellows here now."

Boone bent forward in his chair, his eyes eagerly fixed on the glittering beauty of the slender, rubber-tipped blades. His lips parted to speak, but closed again without sound, while Morgan lunged and parried at nothing on the hearth-rug. "'We're the cadets of Gascogny,'" the son of the house quoted lightly. "'At the envoy's end I touch.'" Then regretfully he added, "I wish there was some one to have a go with. Are there any challengers, gentlemen?"

The boy in hodden-gray slipped from his chair.

"I reckon ef ye're honin' fer a little sward-fightin' I'll aim ter convenience ye," he quietly invited.

For an instant Morgan gazed at him in silence. Without discourtesy, it was difficult to reply to such an absurd invitation,

and even the older men felt their reserve of dignity taxed with the repression of mirth as they contemplated the volunteer.

"I'm sorry," apologized Morgan, when the silence had become oppressive, "but these foils are delicate things. For all their temper, they snap like glass in hands that aren't accustomed to them. It takes a bit of practice, you see."

The note of condescension stung Boone painfully and his eyes narrowed. "All right. Hev hit yore own way," he replied curtly. "I thought ye wanted some sward-practice."

With a sudden flash of memory there came back to Basil Prince's mind the picture of Victor McCalloway's cabin and Dinwiddie's sword – and, with the memory, an idea. "Morgan," he suavely suggested, "your challenge was general, as I understood it, and I don't see how you can gracefully decline. If a blade breaks, I'll see that it's replaced."

The young college man could hesitate no longer, though he felt that he was being forced into a ludicrous position, as he bowed his unwilling acquiescence.

But when the two adversaries took their places where the furniture had been hastily cleared away, the men widened their eyes and bent forward absorbed. The mountain lad had suddenly shed his grotesqueness. He dropped his blade and lifted it in salute, not like a bumpkin but with the finished grace of familiarity – the sweeping confidence of perfect ease. As he stepped back, saying "On guard," his left hand came up at balance and his poise was as light as though he had been reared

in the classroom of a fencing-school.

Morgan went into that contest with the disadvantage of utter astonishment. He had received some expensive instruction and was on the way toward becoming a skilled hand with the rapier, but the "tobacco yap" had been schooled by one of the first swords of Europe.

At the first sharp ring of steel on steel one or two persons materialized in the library door, and they were speedily augmented by fresh arrivals, until the circle of bare-shouldered girls and attendant cavaliers pressed close on the area of combat. Backward and forward, warily circling with a delicate and musical clatter of engaging steel between them, went the lad in broadcloth and the boy in homespun.

It was, at best, unequal, but Morgan gave the most that he had, and against a lesser skill he would have acquitted himself with credit.

After a little there came a lunge, a hilt pressed to lower blade, a swift twist of a wrist, and young Wallifarro's foil flew clear of his hand and clattered to the floor. He had been cleanly disarmed.

Boone drew the mask from his tousled head and shuffled his feet. That awkwardness which had been so absent from his moments of action descended upon him afresh as he awoke to the many watching eyes. Morgan held out a hand, which was diffidently received, and acknowledged frankly, "You're much the better man – but where in Heaven's name did you learn to fence like that?"

The mountain boy flushed, suddenly realizing that this too was a matter included in his pledge of confidence to Victor McCalloway.

"Oh," he evasively responded, "I jest kinderly picked hit up – hyar an' thar as I went along."

As soon as possible after that, Boone made his escape, and it was characteristic of his close-mouthed self-containment that at Saul Fulton's cabin he said nothing as to where he had spent his Christmas eve.

CHAPTER VIII

On the afternoon of Christmas day, as Boone stood by the gate of Saul's rented patch, looking off across the wet bareness of the fields to the gray and shallow skyline, he was more than a little homesick for the accustomed thickness of forest and peak. He at last saw two mounted figures coming toward him, and recognized General Prince and Anne Masters.

"We rode by to wish you a very merry Christmas," announced the girl, and the General added his smile and greeting.

"I'm – I'm obleeged ter both of you-all," stammered Boone as Anne, leaning over, handed him a package.

"I thought maybe you'd like that. It's a fruit-cake," she informed him, "I brought it because we think our cook makes it just a little bit better than anybody else."

Something told Boone Wellver that the girl, despite her fine clothes and manners, was almost as shy with him as he felt toward her, and in the thought was a sort of reassurance.

"Hit's right charitable-like of ye ter fotch hit ter me," he responded, slowly, and the child hastened to make a denial.

"Oh, no, please don't think that. It wasn't charity at all. It was just – " But as she paused, General Prince interrupted her with a hearty laugh.

"Yes, it was, Anne," he announced. "The word is like the dances. It has a different significance in the hills. For instance

when you go to visit your father in Marlin County, Boone will be charitable to you too – or, as we would say, courteous."

"Be ye comin' ter ther mountains?" demanded Boone, and the sudden interest which rang in his voice surprised himself.

Fearful lest he had displayed too much enthusiasm, he withdrew cautiously into his almost stolid manner again. "I'm beholden ter ye fer this hyar sweet cake," he said. "Hit's ther fust Christmas gift I ever got."

The house party ended a few days after that, so the mansion became again a building of shuttered windows and closed doors, and as the old year died and the new one dawned, Saul himself was frequently absent on mysterious journeys to Frankfort.

Sometimes he returned home with a smoulder in his eyes, and once or twice he brought with him a companion, who sat broodingly across the hearth from him and discussed politics, not after the fashion of frank debate but in the sinister undertones of furtiveness. On one particular night in the first week of January, while Saul was entertaining such a visitor, a knock sounded on the door, and when it was opened a man entered, whose dress and bearing were of the more prosperous strata and who seemed to be expected.

Boone overheard the conversation which followed from the obscurity of the chimney corner, where he appeared to be napping and was overlooked.

"I'm right sorry you was called on to journey all the way here from Frankfort," began Saul apologetically, but the other cut him

short with a crisp response.

"Don't let that worry you. There are too many eyes and ears in Frankfort. You know what the situation is now, don't you?"

"I knows right well thet ther Democrat aims ter hev ther legislater seat him. He's been balked by ther people an' his own commission – an' now thet's his only chanst."

"The Governor says that if he leaves the state house it will be on a stretcher," announced the visitor defiantly. "But there are more conspiracies against us on foot than I have leisure to explain. The time has come for you mountain men to make good."

Saul rose and paced the floor for a minute, then halted and jerked his head toward the companion whom he had brought home with him that evening.

"Shake hands with Jim Hollins of Clay County," he said briefly. "We've done talked it all over and he understands."

"All right. It's agreed then that you take Marlin and Mr. Hollins takes Clay. I have representatives in the other counties arranged for. These men who come will be fed and housed all right. There'll be special trains to bring them, and ahead of each section will be a pilot engine, in case the news leaks out and anybody tries to use dynamite."

"All right, then. We'll round ye up ther proper kind of men – upstandin' boys thet ain't none timorous."

The man in good clothes dropped his voice to an impressive undernote.

"Have them understand clearly that if they are asked why they come, they shall all make the same response: that in accordance with their constitutional rights, they are in Frankfort to petition the legislature – but above all have them well armed."

Saul scratched his chin with a new doubt. "Most mountain men hev guns, but some of 'em air mighty ancient. I misdoubts ef I kin arm all ther fellers I kin bring on."

"Then don't bring them." The man, issuing instructions, raspingly barked out his mandate. "Unarmed men aren't worth a damn to us. If anybody wants to hedge or back down, let him stay at home. After they get to Frankfort, it will be too late."

"And when they does git thar," inquired the man from Clay County incisively, "what then?"

"They will receive their instructions in due time – and don't bring any quitters," was the sharply snapped response.

Bev. Jett was the High Sheriff of Martin County, for in unaltered Appalachia, with its quaint survivals of Elizabethan speech, where jails are jail-houses and dolls are puppets, the sheriff is still the High Sheriff.

Now on a bleak January day, when snow-freighted clouds obscured the higher reaches of the hills, he was riding along sloppy ways, cut off from outer life by the steep barrier of Cedar Mountain.

Eventually he swung himself down from his saddle before Asa Gregory's door and tossed his bridle-rein over a picket of the fence, shouting, according to custom, his name and the assurance

that he came upon a mission of friendliness.

Bev. Jett remembered that when last he had dismounted at this door there had been in his mind some apprehension as to the spirit of his reception. On that occasion he had been the bearer of an indictment which, in the prolix phrases of the law, made allegation that the householder had "with rifle or pistol or other deadly weapon loaded with powder and leaden bullet or other hard and combustible substance, wilfully, feloniously and against the peace and dignity of the Commonwealth of Kentucky," accomplished a murder. Now his mission was more diplomatic, and Asa promptly threw open the door and invited him to "light down and enter in."

"Asa," said the officer, when he had paid his compliments to the wife and admired the baby, "Jedge Beard sent me over hyar ter hev speech with ye. Hit hes ter do with ther matter of yore askin' fer a pardon. Of course, though, hit's a right mincy business an' must be undertook in heedful fashion."

Judge Baird, whose name the Sheriff pronounced otherwise, had occupied the bench when Asa had been less advantageously seated in the prisoner's dock.

Reflecting now upon the devious methods and motives of mountain intrigue, Gregory's eyes grew somewhat flinty as he bluntly inquired, "How does ye mean hit's a mincy business?"

"Hit's like this. Jedge Beard figgers thet atter all this trouble in Frankfort, with you an' ther Carr boys both interested in ther same proposition, they mout be willin' ter drap yore prosecution

of thar own will."

Asa Gregory broke into a low laugh and a bitter one.

"So thet's how ther land lays, air hit? He 'lows they'll feel friendly ter me, does he? Did ye ever see a rattlesnake thet could he gentled inter a pet?"

"Ye've got ther wrong slant on ther question, Asa," the sheriff hastened to explain. "The Jedge don't 'low thet ye ought ter *depend* on no sich an outcome – an' he hain't dodgin'. None-the-less while he's on ther bench he's obleeged ter seem impartial. His idee is ter try ter git ye thet pardon right now if so be hit's feasible – but he counsels thet if ye does git hit ye'd better jest fold hit up an' stick hit in yore pants pocket an' keep yore mouth tight. If ther Carrs draps ther prosecution, then ye won't hev ter show hit at all, an' they won't be affronted neither. Ef they does start doggin' ye afresh, ye kin jest flash hit when ye comes ter co'te, an' thet'd be ther end of ther matter. Don't thet strike ye as right sensible?"

"Thet suits me all right," acceded the indicted man slowly, "provided I've got a pardon ter flash."

Once more the sheriff's head nodded in reflective acquiescence.

"Thet's why ye'd better hasten like es if ye war goin' down ter Frankfort ter borry fire. They're liable ter throw our man out – an' then hit'll be too late." After a pause for impressiveness, the Sheriff continued,

"Hyar's a letter of introduction from ther Jedge ter ther

Governor, an' another one from ther Commonwealth's attorney. They both commends ye ter his clemency."

"I'd heered tell thet Saul Fulton an' one or two other fellers aimed ter take a passel of men ter Frankfort, ter petition ther legislater," suggested Asa thoughtfully. "I'd done studied some erbout goin' along with 'em."

"Don't do hit," came the quick and positive reply. "Ef them fellers gits inter any manner of trouble down thar ther Governor couldn't hardly pardon ye without seemin' ter be rewardin' lawlessness. Go by yoreself – an' keep away from them others."

On the evening of the twenty-fifth of January Colonel Tom Wallifarro stepped from the Louisville train at Frankfort and turned his steps toward the stone-pillared front of the Capitol Hotel. Across the width of Main Street, behind its iron fence, loomed the ancient pile of the state house with its twilight frown of gray stone. The three-storied executive building lay close at its side. Over the place, he fancied, gloomed a heavy spirit of suspense. The hills that fringed the city were ragged in their wintriness, and ash-dark with the thickening dusk.

Bearing a somewhat heavy heart, the Colonel registered and went direct to his room. Like drift on a freshet, elements of irreconcilable difference were dashing pell-mell toward catastrophe. Colonel Wallifarro's mission here was a conference with several cool hands of both political creeds, actuated by an earnest effort to forestall any such overt act as might end in chaos.

But the spirit of foreboding lay onerously upon him, and he

slept so fitfully that the first gray of dawn found him up and abroad. River mists still held the town, fog-wrapped and spectral of contour, and the Colonel strolled aimlessly toward the station. As he drew near, he heard the whistle of a locomotive beyond the tunnel, and knowing of no train due of arrival at that hour, he paused in his walk in time to see an engine thunder through the station without stopping. It carried neither freight cars nor coaches, but it was followed after a five-minute interval by a second locomotive, which panted and hissed to a grinding stop, with the solid curve of a long train strung out behind it – a special.

Vestibule doors began straightway to vomit a gushing, elbowing multitude of dark figures to the station platform, where the red and green lanterns still shone with feeble sickliness, catching the dull glint of rifles, and the high lights on faces that were fixed and sinister of expression.

The dark stream of figures flowed along with a grim monotony and an almost spectral silence across the street and into the state house grounds.

There was a steadiness in that detraining suggestive of a matter well rehearsed and completely understood, and as the light grew clearer on gaunt cheekbones and swinging guns an almost terrified voice exclaimed from somewhere, "The mountaineers have come!"

CHAPTER IX

When the senate convened that day, strange and uncouth lookers-on stood ranged about the state house corridors, and their unblinking eyes took account of their chief adversary as he entered.

Upon his dark face, with its overhanging forelock, flickered no ghost of misgiving; no hint of any weakening or excitement. His gaze betrayed no interest beyond the casual for the men along the walls, whom report credited with a murderous hatred of himself.

Boone was fretting his heart out at the cabin of Saul Fulton while he knew that history was in the making at Frankfort, and on the evening of the twenty-ninth an eagerness to be near the focus of activity mastered him. The elements of right and wrong involved in this battle of political giants were, to his untrained mind, academic, but the drama of conflict was like a bugle-call – clear, direct and urgent.

He would not be immediately needed on the farm, and Frankfort was only fifteen miles away. If he set out at once and walked most of the night, he could reach the Mecca of his pilgrimage by tomorrow morning, and in his pocket was the sum of "two-bits" to defray the expenses of "snacks an' sich-like needcessities." For the avoidance of possible discussion, he slipped quietly out of the back door with no announcement

to Saul's wife. With soft snowflakes drifting into his face and melting on his eyelashes, he began his march, and for four hours swung along at a steady three-and-a-half mile gait. At last he stole into a barn and huddled down upon a straw pile, but before dawn he was on the way again, and in the early light he turned into the main street of the state capital. His purpose was to view one day of life in a city and then to slip back to his uneventful duties.

The town had outgrown its first indignant surprise over the invasion of the "mountain army," and the senator from Kenton had passed boldly through its unordered ranks, as need suggested. The hill men had fallen sullenly back and made a path for his going.

This morning he walked with a close friend, who had constituted himself a bodyguard of one. The upper house was to meet at ten, and it was five minutes short of the hour when the man, with preoccupied and resolute features, swung through the gate of the state house grounds. The way lay from there around the fountain to the door set within the columned portico.

In circling the fountain, the companion dropped a space to the rear and glanced about him with a hasty scrutiny, and as he did so a sharp report ripped the quietness of the place, speedily followed by the more muffled sound of pistol shots.

The gentleman in the rear froze in his tracks, glancing this way and that in a bewildered effort to locate the sound. The senator halted too, but after a moment he wavered a little, lifted one hand with a gesture rather of weariness than of pain, and,

buckling at the knees, sagged down slowly until he lay on the flagstoned walk, with one hand pressed to the bosom of his buttoned overcoat.

Figures were already running up from here and there. As the dismayed friend locked his arms under the prone shoulders, he heard words faintly enunciated – not dramatically declaimed, but in strangely matter-of-fact tone and measure – "I guess they've – got me."

Boone Wellver saw a throng of tight-wedged humanity pressing along with eyes turned inward toward some core of excited interest, and heard the words that ran everywhere, "Goebel has been shot!"

He felt a sudden nausea as he followed the crowd at whose centre was borne a helpless body, until it jammed about the door of a doctor's office, and after that, for a long while, he wandered absently over the town.

Turning the corner of an empty side street in the late afternoon he came face to face with Asa Gregory, and his perplexed unrest gave way to comfort.

Asa was tranquilly studying a theatrical poster displayed on a wall. His face was composed and lit with a smile of quiet amusement, but before Boone reached his side, or accosted him, another figure rounded the corner, walking with agitated haste, and the boy ducked hastily back, recognizing Saul Fulton, who might tax him with truancy.

Yet when he saw Saul's almost insanely excited gaze meet

Asa's quiet eyes, curiosity overcame caution and he came boldly forward.

"Ye'd better not tarry in town over-long, Asa," Saul was advising in the high voice of alarm. "I'm dismayed ter find ye hyar now."

"Why be ye?" demanded Asa, and his unruffled utterance was velvet smooth. "Hain't I got a license ter go wharsoever hit pleasures me?"

"This hain't no safe time ner place fer us mountain fellers," came the anxiety-freighted reply. "An' you've done been writ up too much in ther newspapers a'ready. You've got a lawless repute, an' atter this mornin' Frankfort-town hain't no safe place fer ye."

"I come down hyar," announced Asa, still with an imperturbable suavity, "ter try an' git me a pardon. I hain't got hit yit an' tharfore I hain't ready ter turn away."

Gregory began a deliberate ransacking of his pockets, in search of his tobacco plug, and in doing so he hauled out miscellaneous odds and ends before he found what he was seeking.

In his hands materialized a corn-cob pipe, some loose coins and matches, and then – as Saul's voice broke into frightened exclamation – several rifle and pistol cartridges.

"Good God, man," exploded the other mountaineer, "ain't ye got no more common sense than ter be totin' them things 'round in this town – terday?"

Asa raised his brows, and smiled indulgently upon his

kinsman. "Why, ginrally, I've got a few ca'tridges and pistol hulls in my pockets," he drawled. "Why shouldn't I?"

"Well, git rid of 'em, an' be speedy about it! Don't ye know full well thet every mountain man in town's goin' ter be suspicioned, an' thet ther legislater'll vote more money than ye ever dreamed of to stretch mountain necks? Give them things ter the boy, thar."

Fulton had not had time to feel surprise at seeing Boone, whom he had left on the farm, confronting him here on the sidewalk of a Frankfort street. Now as the boy reached up his hand and Asa carelessly dropped the cartridges into it, Saul rushed vehemently on.

"Boone, don't make no mention of this hyar talk ter nobody. Take yore foot in yore hand an' light out fer my house – an' ther fust spring-branch ye comes ter, stop an' fling them damn things into ther water."

When the wires gave to the world the appalling climax of that savagely acrimonious campaign, a breathlessness of shock settled upon the State where passion had run its inflammatory course. The reiteration of Cassandra's prediction had failed to discount the staggering reality, and for a brief moment animosities were silenced.

But that was not for long. Yesterday the lieutenants of an iron-strong leader had bowed to his dominant will. Today they stood dedicated to reprisal behind a martyr – exalted by his mortal hurt.

It appeared certain that the rifle had barked from a window of the executive building itself – and when police and posses

hastily summoned had hurried to its doors, a grimly unyielding cordon of mountaineers had spelled, in human type, the words "no admission."

The Secretary of State, who was a mountain man, was among the first to fall under accusation, and had the city's police officers been able to seize the Governor, he too would doubtless have been thrown into a cell. But the Governor still held the disputed credentials of office, and he sat at his desk, haggard of feature, yet at bay and momentarily secure behind a circle of bayonets.

Just wrath would not, and could not, long remain only righteous indignation. Out of its inflammation would spring a hundred injustices, and so in opposition to the mounting clamour for extreme penalties arose thundering the counter-voice of protest against a swift and ruthless sacrifice of conspicuous scapegoats.

To the aid of those first caught in the drag-net of vengeful accusation, came a handful of volunteer defence attorneys, and among them was Colonel Wallifarro.

The leader with the bullet-pierced breast was dying, and in the legislature the contest must be settled, if at all, while there was yet strength enough in his ebbing life currents to take the oath of office.

His last fight was in keeping with his life – the persistence of sheer resolution that held death in abeyance and refused surrender.

But when the Democratic majority of the assembly gathered at

their chambers, they encountered muskets; when, casting dignity to the snowy winds, they raced toward an opera house, the soldiers raced with them, and arrived first. When they doubled like pursued hares toward the Odd Fellows' Hall, they found its door likewise barred by blade and muzzle.

Among the first men thrown into jail were Saul Fulton and his friend Hollins of Clay County. Their connection with the arrival of the mountaineers was not difficult to establish – and for the officers charged with ferreting out the ugly responsibility, it made a plausible beginning.

Meanwhile, the majority legislature, thwarted of open meeting, caucussed in hotel bedrooms, and gave decision for the dying candidate. A hectic and grotesque rumour even whispered that Mr. Goebel's gallant hold on life had slipped before the credentials could be placed in his weakened hand – and that the oath was solemnly administered to a dead body.

Boone had gone back to Saul's farm house, and on the way he had tossed the cartridges into a brook that flowed along the road, but his brain was in a swirl of perplexity and in his blood was an inoculation. He would never know content again unless, in the theatre of public affairs, he might be an onlooker or an actor.

CHAPTER X

A FEW days after that, he started back again to his mountains. With Saul in jail and his wife returning to her people, there was nothing further to hold him here. Indeed, he was anxious now to get home. Like one who has been bewildered by a plethora of new experiences, he needed time to digest them, and above all he wanted to talk with Victor McCalloway, whose wisdom was, to his thinking, as that of a second Solomon. There, too, was his other hero, Asa, who had returned to the hills as quietly as he had left them. Boone was burning to know whether, in the whirlpool of excitement there at Frankfort, his efforts to secure executive clemency had met with success or failure.

When, immediately upon crossing Cedar Mountain, he presented himself at McCalloway's house, he was somewhat nonplussed at the grave, almost accusing, eyes which the hermit gentleman bent upon him.

"I've jest got back hyar from ther big world down below," announced the boy, "an' I fared straight over hyar ter see ye fust thing." He paused, a little crestfallen, to note that reserve of silence where he had anticipated a warmth of welcome, and then he went on shyly: "Thar was hell ter pay down thar at Frankfort town – an' I seed a good part of ther b'ilin' with my own eyes."

Very slowly Victor McCalloway made response. "You have witnessed a tragedy – a crime for which the guilty parties should

pay with their lives. Even then a scar will be left on the honour of your State."

Boone crowded his hands into his coat pockets and shivered in the wet wind, for as yet he had not been invited across the threshold.

"I don't know nothin' about who done hit," he made calm assertion. "But fellers like Saul Fulton 'peared ter 'low he plum needed killin."

"Fellows like Saul Fulton!"

The retired soldier drew a long breath, and his eyes narrowed. "You went down there, Boone, with a kinsman who now stands accused of complicity. The law presumes his innocence until it proves him guilty, but I'm not thinking of him much, just now. I'm thinking of *you*." He paused as if in deep anxiety, then added: "A boy may be led by reckless and wilful men into – well – grave mistakes… I believe in you, but you must answer me one question, and you must answer it on your word of honour – as a gentleman."

The boy's pupils widened interrogatively, and held those older eyes with an unfaltering steadiness. In their frank and engaging depths of blue, as open as the sky, Victor McCalloway read the answer to his question, and something like a sigh of relief shook him; something spasmodic that clutched at his throat and his well-seasoned reserve. He had dreaded that Boone might, in that fanatically bitter association, have brushed shoulders with some guilty knowledge. He had refused that fear lodgment in his

thoughts as an ungenerous suspicion, but a lurking realization had persisted. It might need only a short lapse from a new concept to an inherited and ancient code to make heroes of "killers" for this stripling.

Slowly and candidly the boy spoke.

"On my word of honour as a gentleman – " His utterance hung hesitantly on that final word. It was a new thought that it might be applicable to himself, yet this man was a better and more exacting judge of its meaning than he, and his heart leaped to the quickened tempo of a new pride.

"I don't know nothin' – save thet I heered hit named aforehand thet men war acomin' from ther mountings ter see justice done, an' didn't aim ter be gainsaid ner thwarted, I 'lowed, though, hit would come about in fa'r fight – ef so-be hit bred trouble."

That same afternoon Asa Gregory happened by, and because McCalloway had come to recognize, in his influence, the most powerful feudal force operating upon the boy's thought, he waited somewhat anxiously to hear whether the man would express himself on the topic of the assassination. Since it was no part of wisdom to assail deep-rooted ferocities of thought in minds already matured beyond plasticity, he did not himself broach the matter, but he was pleased when Asa spoke gravely, and of his own volition.

"I done hed hit in head ter go along down thar ter Frankfort with them boys thet Saul gathered tergether, but now I'm right glad I went by myself. Thet war a mighty troublous matter thet

came ter pass thar."

"Did ye git yore pardon, Asa?" asked Boone, and the older kinsman hesitated, then made a frank reply.

"I hain't talkin' much erbout thet, son. Ther Governor war hevin' a right stressful time, an' any favours he showed ter mountain men war bein' held up ergainst him by his enemies. But I reckon I kin trust both of ye… Yes, I got ther pardon."

Late in February an item of news filtered in through the ravines of the hills which elicited bitter comment. The legislature had voted a reward fund of $100,000 for the apprehension and conviction of those guilty of the assassination of Senator Goebel, and, heartened by this spurring, the pack of detectives, professional and amateur, had cast off full-cry.

Saul Fulton lay in jail all that winter without trial. Upon the motion of the Commonwealth, his day in court was postponed by continuance after continuance.

"I reckon," suggested Asa bluntly, "they aims ter let him sulter in jail long enough ter kinderly fo'ce him ter drag in a few more fellers besides himself – but hit won't profit 'em none."

That winter spent its dreary monotony, and through its months Boone Wellver was growing in mind and character, as well as in bone and muscle. McCalloway began to see the blossoming of his Quixotically fantastic idea into some hope and semblance of reality. The boy's brain was acquisitive and flaming with ambition, and Victor McCalloway was no routine schoolmaster but an experimenter in the laboratory of human elements. He

was working with a character which he sought to bring by forced marches from the America of a quaint, broad-hearted past to the America of the present – and future. Under his hand the pupil was responding.

The slate-gray ramparts of the hills reeked with the wet of thawing snows. Watercourses swelled into the freshet-volume of the "spring-tide." Into the breezes crept a touch of softer promise, and in sheltered spots buds began to redden and swell. Then came the pale tenderness of greens, and the first shy music of bird-notes. The sodden and threadbare neutrality of winter was flung aside for the white blossoming of dogwood, and in its wake came the pink foam of laurel blossom.

On one of those tuneful days, while Boone sat on the doorstep of Victor McCalloway's house, listening to a story of a campaign far up the Nile, Asa Gregory came along the road, with his long elastic stride, and halted there. He smiled infectiously as he took the proffered chair and crumbled leaf tobacco between his fingers for the filling of his cob pipe.

For a while the talk ran in simple neighbourhood channels. They spoke of "drappin' an' kiverin'" in the corn fields, and the uncomplicated activities of farm life. But, after a time, Asa reached into his hip pocket and drew out a rumpled newspaper, which he tendered to Victor McCalloway.

"Mr. McCalloway," he said quietly, "ye're a friend of mine, an' right now I have sore need of counsel with a man of wisdom. I'd be beholden ter ye ef so be ye'd read thet thar printed piece

out loud."

The retired soldier took the sheet, several days old, and with the first glance at its headlines, his features stiffened and his eyes blazed into indignation.

"This is a slander!" he exploded. "It's an infamous libel. Do you actually want me to read it aloud?"

Asa nodded, and, in a voice of protest, McCalloway gave audible repetition to a matter to which he refused the sanction of belief.

"New Murders for Old." That was the first headline, and the subheads and the item itself followed in due order:

"Commonwealth uncovers startling evidence… Asa Gregory indicted for firing fatal shot at Goebel… Alleged he received a pardon for prior offence as price of fresh infamy."

"Perhaps the most astounding chapter in a long serial of the bizarre and melodramatic came to light today when the Franklin Grand Jury returned a true bill against Asa Gregory, a notorious mountain feudist, charging him with the assassination of Governor Goebel. In the general excitement of those days, the presence of Gregory in the state capitol escaped notice. Now it develops, from sources which the Commonwealth declines at this time to divulge, that on the day of the tragedy Gregory, who already stands charged with the murder from ambush of several enemies, came cold-bloodedly to town to seek a pardon for one of these offences, and that in payment for that favour he agreed to accept unholy appointment as executioner of Governor Goebel.

Gregory is now in hiding in the thicketed country of his native hills, and it is foreseen that before he is taken he may invoke the aid of his clansmen, and precipitate further bloodshed."

McCalloway laid down the paper and stared at the blossom-burgeoning slopes. It was strange, he reflected, that one could so swiftly yield to the instincts of these high, wild places. For just now it was in his heart to advise resistance. He thought that trial down there, before partisan juries and biased judges, would be a farce which vitiated the whole spirit of justice.

It might almost have been his own sentiments that he heard shrilled out from the excited lips of the boy; a boy whose cheeks had gone pale and whose eyes had turned from sky-blue to flame blue.

"They're jest a'seekin' ter git ye thar an' hang ye out of hand, Asa. Tell 'em all ter go everlastin'ly ter hell! Ye kin hide out hyar in ther mountains an' five hundred soldiers couldn't never run ye down. Ye kin cross over inter Virginny an' go wharsoever ye likes – but ef ye suffers yoreself ter be took, they'll hang ye outen pure disgust fer ther hills!"

Yes, thought Victor McCalloway, that was just about what would happen. The boy whom he had been educating to a new viewpoint had, at a stride, gone back to all the primitive sources of his nature, yet he spoke the truth. Then the voice of Asa Gregory sounded again with a measured evenness.

"What does ye think, Mr. McCalloway? I was thar on thet day. I kin hide out hyar an' resist arrest, like ther boy says, an' I

misdoubts ef I could git any lavish of justice down thar."

"I doubt it gravely, sir," snorted McCalloway. "By Gad, I doubt it most gravely."

"An' yit," went on the other voice slowly, somewhat heavily, "ef I did foller thet course hit mout mean a heap of bloodshed, I reckon. Hit'd be mightily like admittin' them charges they're amakin' too." He paused a moment, then rose abruptly from his chair. "I come ter ask counsel," he said, "but afore I come my mind was already done made up. I'm agoin' over ter Marlin Town termorrer mornin' an' I'm agoin' ter surrender ter Bev. Jett, ther High Sheriff."

"Don't ye never do hit, Asa," shouted the boy. "Don't ye never do hit!" but McCalloway had risen and in his eyes gleamed an enthusiastic light.

"It's a thing I couldn't have advised, Mr. Gregory," he said, in a shaken voice. "It's a thing that may lead – God knows where – and yet it's the only decent thing to do."

CHAPTER XI

At the edge of Marlin Town stood the bungalow of the coal company's superintendent, and in its living-room, on either side of a document-littered table, sat two men. One of them, silvered of temple and somewhat portly of stature, leaned back with the tranquillity of complete relaxation after his day's work. His face wore the urbanity of well-being and prosperity, but the man across from him leaned forward with an attitude of nervous tension.

To Larry Masters there was something nettling in the very repose with which his visitor from Louisville crossed his stout and well-tailored legs. This feeling manifested itself in the jerky quickness of hand with which the mine superintendent poured whiskey into his glass and hissed soda after it from the syphon.

"Won't you fill up, Tom," he invited shortly. "The entertainment I can offer you is limited enough – but at least we have the peg at our disposal."

"Thank you – no more." Colonel Wallifarro spoke with a pleasingly modulated voice, trained into effectiveness by years of jury elocution. "I've had my evening's allowance, except for a night-cap."

Masters rose abruptly from his chair. He tossed down half the contents of his glass and paced the floor with a restless stride, gnawing at his close-cropped and sandy moustache. His tall, well-

knit figure moved with a certain athletic vitality, and his florid face was tanned like a pig-skin saddle-skirt. But his brow was corrugated in a frown of discontent, and his pale blue eyes were almost truculent.

"By Gad, Tom," he flared out with choleric impetuosity, "you can put more righteous rebuke into a polite refusal of liquor than most men could crowd into a whole damned temperance lecture. I dare say, however, you're quite right. Life spells something for you. It's worth conserving. You've got assured position, an adoring family, money, success, hosts of friends. You'd be a blithering fool, I grant you, to waste yourself in indulgence, but I'm not so ideally situated. I 'take the cash and let the credit go.'"

"Yet you have, ahead of you, some ten or twelve years more of life than I can reasonably expect," was the quiet response. "You still have youth – or youth's fulfilment – early middle-age."

"And a jolly lot that means to me," retorted Masters, with acerbity. "I live here among illiterates, working for a corporation on a salary pared to the bone. At the time of life when one ought to be at the top of one's abilities, I'm the most pathetic human thing under God's arching sky – a man who started out with big promise – and fell by the wayside. Heaven help the man who fires and falls back – and if he can retrieve a bit of temporary solace from that poor substitute" – he jerked a forefinger toward the bottle – "then I say for Heaven's sake let him poison himself comfortably and welcome."

Colonel Wallifarro studied the darkened scowl of his

companion for a moment before he replied, and when he spoke his own manner retained its imperturbability.

"I didn't offer gratuitous criticism, Larry," he suggested. "I merely declined another toddy."

"You know my case, Tom" – the younger of the two caught him up quickly; "you know that no younger son ever came out from England with fairer expectations of succeeding on his own. I've been neither the fool nor the shirk – and yet – " A shrug of disgust finished the sentence.

Colonel Wallifarro studied his cigar ash without rejoinder, and when Larry Masters failed to draw a return fire of argument, he sat for a minute or two glumly silent. Then, as his thoughts coursed back into other years, a slow light kindled in his eyes, as if for a dead dream.

"You were always sceptical about Middlesboro, even when others were full of faith – but why?" he demanded. "To you, with your Bluegrass ideas of fat acres, these hills must always be the ragged fringes of things, a meagre land without a future. It was only that you lacked imagination."

The speaker swept torrentially on with as much of argumentative warmth as though he had not just confessed himself ruined by reason of his own former confidence.

"Where the Gap came through lay the natural gateway of the hills, hewn out in readiness by the hand of the Almighty. There was water-power – ore. There was coal, for smelter and market, timber awaiting the axe and the saw-mill – the whole tremendous

treasure house of a natural Eldorado."

"Perhaps," observed the Colonel, "and yet, when all is said and done, it was only a boom – and it collapsed. Whatever the causes, the results are definite."

"Yes, it collapsed, and we went with it." Masters paused to take up and empty the glass which had started the discussion, then with a heightened excitement he swept on afresh:

"Yet how near we came! Gad, man, your own eyes saw our conception grow! You saw lots along what had been creek-bed trails sell at a footage-price that rivalled New York's best avenues, and you yourself recognized in me, for all your scepticism, a man with a golden future. Then – after all that – you saw me jolly well ruined – and yet you prate of what life may hold for me in the vigour of my middle-age."

"All that happened ten years back, however," the elder man equably reminded his companion. "It was the old story of a boom and a collapse – and one misfortune – even one disaster – need not break a man's spirit. You might have come back."

The eyes of the portly gentleman rested in a momentary glance on the bottle and glass, but that may have been chance. At least he did not mention them.

"You think I might have come back, do you?" The voice of the Englishman had hardened. "I don't want to be nasty or say disagreeable things. You've been a staunch friend to me – even when Anne found herself growing bitter against me. Well, I don't blame her. Her people had been leaders always. She had the

divine right to an assured place in society, and I had failed. I suppose it was natural enough for her to feel that she'd been done in – but it happened to be the finish of me. I'd sweated blood to make Middlesboro – and I didn't have the grit left to commence over."

For the first time Colonel Wallifarro's attitude stiffened, bringing up his silver-crowned head defensively.

"Anne didn't leave you for financial reasons, Larry," he asserted steadily. "She's my kinswoman, and you are my friend, but no purpose is to be served by my listening to *ex parte* grievances from either of you."

Masters shrugged his shoulders. "I dare say you're quite right," he admitted. "But be that as it may, she did leave me – left me flat. If she didn't divorce me, it wasn't out of consideration for my feelings. It would almost have been better if she had. All I ever succeeded in doing for her was to make her the poor member of a rich family – and that's not enviable by half. And yet if I'd been a sheer rotter, I could scarcely have fared worse."

"If it wasn't consideration for you, at least it was for some one who should be important to you. As it is, your little girl isn't growing up under the shadow of a sensational divorce record."

The pale blue eyes of the Englishman softened abruptly, and the lips under the short-clipped moustache changed from their stiffness to the curvature of something like a smile. Into his expression came a lurking, half-shy ghost of winsomeness. "Yes, yes," he muttered, "the kiddie. God bless her little heart!"

After a moment, though, he drew back his shoulders with a jerk and spoke again in a harsher timbre.

"Anne has been fair enough with me about the child, though I'm bound to say I've been jolly well made to understand that it was only a chivalrous and undeserved sort of generosity. Well, the kiddie's almost twelve now, and before long she'll be a belle, too – poor, but related to all the first families."

Masters paused, and when he went on again it was still with the air of a repressed chafing of spirit.

"I dare say her mother will see to it that she doesn't repeat the mistake of the previous generation – marrying a man with only a splendid expectancy. Her heart will be schooled to demand the assured thing. That pointing with pride – a gesture which you Kentuckians so enjoy – well, with my little girl, it will all be done toward the distaff branch. There won't be much said about the wastrel father."

"Perhaps," suggested the other, "you are a little less than just."

"I dare say. She'll be a heart-breaker before long now – and listen, man" – Masters came a step nearer – "don't make any mistake about me either. When she's here, the bottle goes under lock and key. I play the game where she's concerned."

Colonel Wallifarro nodded slowly. "I know that, Larry," he hastily answered. "I know that. If the breach hadn't widened too far, I'd go as far as a man could to bring your family together again under one roof-tree."

"That's no use, of course," admitted Masters with a dead

intonation. "Only remember that down here where I'm chained to my little job, life ain't so damned gay and sunny at best – and don't begrudge me my liquor."

CHAPTER XII

During those following months, when Asa Gregory lay in jail, first in Frankfort, then in Louisville, as a prisoner of state, who had been denied bail, the boy back in the laurel-mantled hills smouldered with passionate resentment for what he believed to be a monstrous injustice. In his quest of education he sought refuge from the bitter brooding that had begun to mar his young features with its stamp of sullenness. Asa had killed men before, but it had been in that feud warfare which was sanctioned by his own conscience. Now he stood charged with a murder done for hire, the mercenary taking off of a man for whom he had no enmity save that of the abstract and political. Upon his kinsman's innocence the boy would have staked his life, and yet he must look helplessly on and see him thrown to the lions of public indignation.

Of Saul, he hardly thought at all. Saul was small-fry. The Commonwealth would treat him as such, but upon Asa it would wreak a surcharged anger, because to send Asa Gregory to the gallows would be to establish a direct link between the Governor who had pardoned him and mountain murder-lust.

Already the Secretary of State had been disposed of with a promptitude which, his friends asserted, savoured rather of the wolf pack than the courtroom. The verdict had been guilty, and his case was now pending on a motion for rehearing.

Already, too, a stenographer, who had been in the employ of the fugitive Governor, had been given a life sentence and had preferred accepting it without appeal to risking the graver alternative of the gallows.

As he lay in jail waiting until the slow grind of the law-mill should bring him into its hopper, Asa too recognized the extreme tenuousness of his chances.

But it was not until the wheat had been harvested and threshed in the rich bluegrass fields that the session of court was called to order, whose docket held for Asa Gregory the question of life and death.

That trial was to be at Georgetown, a graciously lying town about whose borders stretched estates, where a few acres were worth as much as a whole farm in the ragged and meagre hills. It was a town of kindly people, but just now of very indignant people, blinded by an unbalanced anger. It was not a hopeful place for a mountaineer with a notched gun who stood taxed with the murder from ambush of a governor.

Over the door of the brick court house stood an image of the blindfolded goddess. She was a weather-worn deity, corroded out of all resemblance to the spirit of eternal youthfulness which she should have exemplified, and Boone pressed his lips tight, as he entered with McCalloway, and noted that the scales which she held aloft were broken, but that the sword in the other hand was intact – and unsheathed.

At the stair head, in precaution against the electrically charged

tension of the air, deputies passed outspread hands over the pockets and hips of each man who entered, in search for concealed weapons. About the semicircular table, fronting the bench and the prisoner's dock, sat the men of the press, sharpening their pencils and – waiting.

Under the faded portrait of Chief Justice Marshall a battery of windows let in the summer sun and the mellow voice of a distant negro, raised somewhere in a camp-meeting song.

Across a narrow alleyway were other windows in another building, and beyond them operators sat idling by newly installed telegraph keys. These men had no interest in the routine of the "running story." That was a matter to be handled by the regular telegraph offices. These newly strung wires would be dedicated to a single "flash" – when the climax came. Then the reporters would no longer be sitting at their crescent-shaped table. A few of them would stand framed in those courtroom windows under the portrait of Chief Justice Marshall, and as the words fell from the lips that held doom, their hands would rise, with one, two, three, or four fingers extended, as the case might warrant. In response to that prearranged signal, the special operators would open their keys and – if one finger had been shown – over their lines would run the single but sufficient word "death." Two fingers would mean "life imprisonment"; three, "acquittal"; four would indicate a "hung-jury." That time was still presumably far off, but the arrangement for it was complete.

In a matter of seconds after that grim pantomime occurred,

foremen of printing crews standing by triple-decked presses in Louisville, in Cincinnati – in many other towns as well – would reach down and lift from the floor one of the several type metal forms prepared in advance to cover each possible exigency. A switch would be flipped. Back to the hot slag of the melting pots would go the other half-cylinders, and within three minutes papers, damp with ink and news, would be pouring from the maws of the presses into the hands of waiting boys.

To Boone these preparations were not yet comprehensible, but as McCalloway led him to a seat far forward he felt the tense atmosphere of place and moment.

He recognized, in those lines of opposing counsel, an array of notability. He picked out, with a glare of hatred, the bearded man whom the prosecution had brought as co-counsel, from another State, because of his great repute as a breaker-down of witnesses under cross-examination. Then his eyes lighted, as down the aisle came the full figure of Colonel Tom Wallifarro – to take its place among the attorneys for the defence. There was reassurance in his calmness and unexcited dignity.

And after interminable preliminaries, he heard the voice of the clerk droning from his docket, "The Commonwealth of Kentucky, against Asa Gregory; wilful murder," and after yet other delays the velvety direction from the bench, "Mr. Sheriff, bring the prisoner into court."

Asa's face, as he was led through the side door, was less bronzed than formerly, but his carriage was no less erect or

confident. In a new suit of dark colour, with fresh linen instead of his hickory shirt, clean shaven and immaculately combed, the defendant was a transformed person, and if there remained any semblance of the highland desperado, it was to be found only in the catlike softness of his tread and the falcon alertness of his fine eyes. Pencils at the press table began their light scratching chorus – the reporters were writing their description of the accused.

Asa Gregory's line of defence had been foreshadowed in the examining court. He had sworn that he arrived on the day of the shooting to petition a pardon, and he had known nothing of what was in the air until, from street talk, he learned of the tragedy.

The chief issue of fact pivoted on his testimony that on that day he had not been near the state house or executive building. The Commonwealth would contradict that claim with the counter assertion that, straight as a hiving bee, Asa had hastened from the train to the Governor's official headquarters, where he had been cold-bloodedly rehearsed in his grim duties. After firing the shot, the prosecution would contend he had taken command of the other mountaineers who refused to the police the privilege of entry and search.

Through days, weeks even, after that, Boone sat, always in the same place, with steadfast confidence in the eyes which he bent upon his kinsman.

Into the press dispatches began to steal mention of a boy in a cheap but new suit of store clothes, whose eyes held those of the prisoner with a rapt and unwavering constancy. It was even

said that the amazingly steady courage of the defendant seemed at times of unusual stress to lean on that supporting confidence, and that whenever they brought him from jail to courtroom, he looked first of all for the boy, as a pilot might look for a reef-light.

Shortly before the Commonwealth was ready to close, rumours went abroad. It was hinted that new and sensational witnesses would take the stand, with revelations as spectacular as the climax of a melodrama.

Boone had followed the evidence with a tense absorption. He had marked the effect of each point; the success or failure of every blow, and he realized what a powerful web was being woven about the man in whom he fully believed. There was no escaping the cumulative and strengthening effect of circumstance built upon circumstance.

He recognized, too, how like a keystone in an arch was the dependence of the State upon proving one thing: that Asa had been present, just after the shooting, and in command of those who barred the doors of the executive building against legitimate search. He took comfort in the fact that so far it had not been established by one sure piece of evidence. Then came the last of the Commonwealth's announced witnesses.

Upon the faces of the attorneys for the prisoner quivered a dubious expression of apprehension – as they waited the promised assault of the masked batteries. The son of the man who had walked at Senator Goebel's side, when he fell, took the

stand and told with straightforward directness the story of the five minutes after the shot had sounded. He and a policeman had sought entrance to the building, which presumably harboured the assassin – and mountain men had halted him at the door, under the leadership of one to whom the rest deferred. He described that commander with fulness of detail, and it was as if he were painting in words a portrait of the man in the prisoner's dock.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.