

BUCK CHARLES NEVILLE

WHEN 'BEAR CAT' WENT
DRY

Charles Buck

When 'Bear Cat' Went Dry

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When 'Bear Cat' Went Dry

CHAPTER I

A creaking complaint of loose and rattling boards rose under the old mountaineer's brogans as he stepped from the threshold to the porch. His eyes, searching the wooded mountain-side, held at first only that penetration which born woodsmen share with the hawk and ferret, but presently they kindled into irascibility as well.

He raised his voice in a loud whoop that went skittering off across the rocky creek bed where Little Slippery crawled along to feed the trickle of Big Slippery ten miles below, and the volume of sound broke into a splintering of echoes against the forested crags of the Old Wilderness Ridges.

"You, Turner!" bellowed the man with such a bull-like roar as might have issued from the chest of a Viking. "You, Turner, don't ye heer me a-callin' ye?"

A woman, rawboned and crone-like before her time under the merciless forcing of drudgery, appeared in the door, wiping reddened hands on a coarse cotton apron.

"I reckon he'll be hyar, presently, paw," she suggested in a high-pitched voice meant to be placating. "I reckon he hain't fared far away."

The hodden-gray figure of the man turned to his wife and his voice, as it dropped to conversational pitch, held a surprisingly low and drawling cadence.

"What needcassity did he hev ter go away a-tall?" came his interrogation. "He knowed I aimed ter hev him tote that gryste acrost ther ridge ter the tub-mill, didn't he? He knows that hits perilous business ter leave corn like that a-layin' 'round, don't he —*sprouted corn!*"

A flash of poignant anxiety clouded the woman's eyes. Corn sprouted in the grain before grinding! She knew well enough what that meant – incrimination in the eyes of the Government – trial, perhaps, and imprisonment.

"Ye 'lowed a long while since, Lone," she reminded him with a trace of wistfulness in her voice, "that ye aimed ter quit makin' blockade licker fer all time. Hit don't pleasure me none ter see ye a-follerin' hit ergin. Seems like thar's a curse on hit from start ter finish."

"I don't foller hit because I delights in hit," he retorted grimly. "But what else is thar ter do? I reckon we've got ter live somehow – hain't we?" For an instant his eyes flared with an upleaping of rebellion; then he turned again on his heel and roared "Turner – you, Turner!"

"Ther boy seemed kinderly fagged out when he come in. I reckon he aimed ter slip off and rest in ther shade somewhars fer a liddle spell afore ye needed him," volunteered the boy's mother, but the suggestion failed to mollify the mounting impatience of the father.

"Fagged! What's fagged him? I hain't never disc'arned nothin' puny about him. He's survigrous enough ter go a-snortin' an' a-stompin' over ther hills like a yearlin' bull, a-honin' fer battle. He's knowed from God's Blessin' Creek ter Hell's Holler by ther name of Bear Cat Stacy, hain't he? Bear Cat Stacy! I'd hate ter take my name from a varmint – but it pleasures him."

"I don't sca'cely b'lieve he seeks no aimless quarrels," argued the mother defensively. "Thar hain't no *meanness* in him. He's jest like you was, Lone, when ye was twenty a-goin' on twenty-one. He's full o' sperrit. I reckon Bear Cat jest means that he's quick-like an' supple."

"Supple! Hell's torment! Whar's he at now? He's jest about a-layin' somewhar's on his shoulder-blades a-readin' thet everlastin' book erbout Abe Lincoln – You, Turner!"

Then the figure of a young man appeared, swinging along with an effortless stride down the steep grade of the mountain which was richly mottled with the afternoon sun. He came between giant

clusters of flowering laurel, along aisles pink with wild roses and white with the foaming spray of elder blossoms; flanked by masses of colossal rock, and every movement was a note of frictionless power.

Like his father, Turner Stacy measured a full six feet, but age and the yoke of hardship had not yet stooped his fine shoulders nor thickened his slenderness of girth. His face was striking in its clear chiseling of feature and its bronzed color. It would have been arrestingly handsome but for its marring shadow of surliness.

In one hand he held a battered book, palpably one used with the constancy and devotion of a monk's breviary, and a forefinger was still thrust between the dog-eared pages. "Lincoln: Master of Men," – such was the title of the volume.

As Turner Stacy arrived at the house, his father's uncompromisingly stern eyes dwelt on the book and they were brimming with displeasure.

"Didn't ye know I hed work for ye ter do terday?"

The boy nodded indifferently.

"I 'lowed ye hed ther power ter shout fer me when ye war ready, I wasn't more'n a whoop an' a holler distant."

The mother, hovering in the shadowed interior of the house, listened silently, and a little anxiously. This friction of unbending temper between her husband and son was a thing to which she could never quite accustom herself. Always she was interposing herself as a buffer between their threats of clashing wills.

"Turner," said the elder man slowly, and now he spoke quietly with an effort to curb his irascibility, "I knows that boys often-times gits uppety an' brash when they're a-growin' inter manhood. They've got thar growth an' they feel thar strength an' they hain't acquired neither sense ner experience enough ter realize how plumb teetotally much they *don't* know yit. But speakin' jedgmatically, I hain't never heered tell of no Stacy afore what hain't been loyal ter his family an' ther head of his house. 'Pears like ter me hit pleasures ye beyond all reason ter sot yoreself crost-wise erginst me."

The boy's eyes grew somberly dark as they met those of his father with undeviating steadiness. An analyst would have said that the outward surliness was after all only a mask for an inner questioning – the inarticulate stress of a cramped and aspiring spirit.

"I don't know as ye hev any rightful cause fer ter charge me with bein' disloyal," he answered slowly, as if pondering the accusation. "I hain't never aimed ter contrary ye."

Lone Stacy paused for a moment and then the timbre of his voice acquired the barb of an irony more massive than subtle.

"Air yore heart in torment because ye hain't ther *President* of ther country, like Abe Lincoln was? Is *that* why ye don't delight in nothin' save dilitary dreams?"

A slow, brick-red flush suffused the brown cheeks of Bear Cat Stacy, and his answer came with a slowness that was almost halting.

"When Abraham Lincoln was twenty years old he warn't no more *President* then what I be. Thar hain't many Lincoln's, but any feller kin have ther thing in him, though, thet carried Lincoln up ter whar he went. Any feller kin do his best and want ter do some better. Thet's all I'm aimin' after."

The father studied his son's suddenly animated eyes and inquired drily, "Does this book-l'arnin' teach ye ter lay around plumb ind'lent with times so slavish hard thet I've been pintedly compelled ter start ther still workin' ergin, despite my a-bein' a Christian an' a law-lover: despite my seekin' godliness an' abhorin' iniquity?"

There was in the sober expression of the questioner no cast of hypocrisy or conscious anomaly, and the younger man shook his head.

"I hain't never shirked no labor, neither in ther field ner at ther still, but – " He paused a moment and once more the rebellious light flared in his eyes and he continued with the level steadiness of resolution. "But I hates ter foller thet business, an' when I comes of age I aims ter quit hit."

"Ye aims ter quit hit, does ye?" The old mountaineer forgot, in the sudden leaping of wrath at such unfilial utterances, that he himself had a few minutes before spoken in the same tenor. "Ye aims ter defy me, does ye? Wa'al even afore ye comes of age hit wouldn't hardly hurt ye none ter quit *drinkin'* hit. Ye're too everlastin' good ter *make* blockade licker, but ye hain't none too good ter lay drunk up thar with hit."

This time the boy's flush was one of genuine chagrin and he bit off the instinctive retort that perhaps a realization of this overpowering thirst was the precise thing which haunted him: the exact urge which made him want to break away from a serfdom that held him always chained to his temptation.

"Ye thinks ye're too much like Abe Lincoln ter make blockade licker," went on the angry parent, "but ye hain't above rampagin' about these hills seekin' trouble an' raisin' up enemies whar I've done spent my days aimin' ter consort peaceable with my neighbors. Hit hain't been but a week since ye broke Ratler Webb's nose."

"Hit come about in fair fight – fist an' skull, an' I only hit him oncet."

"Nobody else didn't feel compelled ter hit him even oncet, did they?"

"Mebby not – but he was seekin' ter bulldoze me an' he hurt my feelin's. I'd done laughed hit off twic't."

"An' so ye're a-goin' on a-layin' up trouble erginst ther future. Hit hain't ther *makin'* of licker thet's laid a curse on these hills. Hit's *drinkin'* hit. Ef a man kin walk abroad nowadays without totin' his rifle-gun an' a-dreadin' ther shot from the la'el, hit's because men like me hev sought day an' night ter bring about peace. I counseled a truce in ther Stacy-Towers war because I war a Christian an' I didn't 'low thet God favored bloodshed. But ther truce won't hardly last ef ye goes about stirrin' up ructions.

"Bear Cat Stacy!" stormed the older man furiously as his anger fed upon itself. "What air a bear cat anyways? Hit's a beast thet rouses up from sleep an' crosses a mountain fer ther pure pleasure of tearin' out some other critter's throat an' vitals. Hit's a varmint drove on by ther devil's own spirit of hatefulness.

"Even in ther feud days men warred with clean powder an' lead, but sich-like fightin' don't seem ter satisfy ye. Ye hain't got no use fer a rifle-gun. Ye wants ter tear men apart with yore bare hands an' ter plumb rend 'em asunder! I've trod ther streets of Marlin Town with ye, an' watched yore eyes burnin' like hot embers, until peaceable men drew back from ye an' p'inted ye out ter strangers. 'Thar goes ther Bear Cat,' they'd whisper. 'Give him ther whole road!' Even ther town marshal walked in fear of ye an' war a-prayin' ter God Almighty ye wouldn't start nothin'."

"I don't never seek no fight." This time Turner Stacy spoke without shame. "I don't never have no trouble save whar I'm plumb *obleeged* ter hev hit."

"Thet's what Kinnard Towers always 'lowed," was the dry retort, "though he's killed numerous men, and folks says he's hired others killed, too."

The boy met the accusing glance and answered quietly:

"Ye don't favor peace no more than what I do."

"I've aimed ter be both God-fearin' an' law-abidin'," continued the parent whose face and figure might have been cast in bronze as a type of the American pioneer, "yet ye censures me fer makin' untaxed licker!" His voice trembled with a repressed thunder of emotion.

"I've seed times right hyar on this creek when fer ther most part of a whole winter we hurted fer salt an' thar warn't none to be had fer love nor money. Thar warn't no money in these hills nohow – an' damn'-little love ter brag about. Yore maw an' me an' Poverty dwelt hyar tergether – ther three of us. We've got timber an' coal an' no way ter git hit ter market. Thar's jest only one thing we kin turn inter money or store-credit – an' thet's our corn run inter white licker."

He paused as if awaiting a reply and when his son volunteered none he swept on to his peroration. "When I makes hit now I takes numerous chances, an' don't complain. Some revenuer,

a-settin' on his hunkers, takin' life easy an' a-waitin' fer a fist full of blood money is liable ter meet up in ther highway with some feller thet's nursin' of a grudge erginst me or you. Hit's plumb risky an' hits damn'-hard work, but hit hain't no wrong-doin' an' ef yore grandsires an' yore father hain't been above hit, I reckon *you* hain't above hit neither."

Turner Stacy was still standing on the porch, with one finger marking the place where he had left off reading his biography of Lincoln – the master of men.

Born of a line of stoics, heir to laconic speech and reared to stifle emotions, he was inarticulate and the somberness of his eyes, which masked a pageantry of dreams and a surging conflict in his breast, seemed only the surliness of rebellion.

He looked at his father and his mother, withered to serenity by their unrelenting battle with a life that had all been frostbite until even their power of resentment for its injustice had guttered out and dried into a dull acceptance.

His fingers gripped the book. Abraham Lincoln had, like himself, started life in a log house and among crude people. Probably he, too, had in those early days no one who could give an understanding ear to the whispering voices that urged him upward. At first the urge itself must have been blurred of detail and shadowy of object.

Turner's lips parted under an impulse of explanation, and closed again into a more hopelessly sullen line. The older man had chafed too long in heavy harness to comprehend a new vision. Any attempt at self-expression would be futile.

So the picture he made was only that of a headstrong and wilful junior who had listened unmoved to reason, and a mounting resentment kindled in the gaze of the bearded moonshiner.

"I've done aimed ter talk reason with ye," barked the angry voice, "an' hit don't seem ter convince ye none. Ef ther pattern of life I've sot ye hain't good enough, do ye think ye're better than yore maw, too?"

"I didn't never say ye warn't good enough." The boy found himself freezing into defiant stiffness under this misconstruction until his very eagerness to be understood militated against him.

"Wa'al, I'll tell ye a thing I don't talk a heap about. Hit's a thing thet happened when ye was a young baby. I spent two y'ars in prison then fer makin' white whiskey."

"You!" Turner Stacy's eyes dilated with amazement and the older face hardened with a baleful resentment.

"Hit warn't jest bein' put in ther jail-house thet I kain't fergit ner fergive so long as I goes on livin'. Hit war ther *reason*. Ye talks mighty brash erbout ther sacredness of ther Revenue laws – wa'al, listen ter me afore ye talks any more." He paused and then continued, as if forcing himself to an unwelcome recital.

"I've always borne the name hyarabouts of bein' a law-abidin' citizen and a man thet could be trusted. I'd hoped ter bring peace to the mountings, but when they lawed me and sent me down to Looeyville fer trial, ther *Government* lawyer 'lowed thet sence I was a prominent citizen up hyar a-breakin' of the law, they had ought to make a sample of me. Because my reputation was good I got two y'ars. Ef hit hed been bad, I mout hev come cl'ar."

The son took an impulsive step forward, but with an imperious wave of the hand, his father halted him and the chance for a sympathetic understanding was gone.

"Hold on! I hain't quite done talkin' yit. In them days we war livin' over ther ridge, whar Little Ivy heads up. You thinks this hyar's a pore fashion of dwellin'-house, but *thet* one hed jest a single room an' na'ry a winder in all hits four walls. You're maw war right ailin' when they tuck me away ter ther big Co'te an' she war mighty young, too, an' purty them days afore she broke. Thar warn't no man left ter raise ther crops, an' *you* ra'ed like a young calf ef ye didn't git yore vittles reg'lar.

"I reckon mebby ye hain't hardly got no proper idee how long two y'ars kin string out ter be when a man's sulterin' behind bars with a young wife an' a baby thet's liable ter be starvin' meanwhile! I reckon ye don't hardly realize how I studied down thar in prison about ther snow on these Godforsaken

hillsides an' ther wind whirrin' through ther chinks. But mebbly ye *kin* comprehend this hyar fact. *You'd* hev pintedly starved ter death, ef yore maw hedn't rigged up a new still in place of ther one the *Government* confiscated, an' made white lickar all ther time I was down thar sarvin' time. *She* did thet an' paid off ther interest on the mortgage an' saved a leetle mite for me erginst ther day when I come home. Now air ye sich a sight better then yore maw was?"

A yellow flood of sunlight fell upon the two figures and threw into a relief of high lights their two faces; one sternly patriarchal and rugged, the other vitally young and spare of feature.

Corded arteries appeared on Bear Cat's temples and, as he listened, the nails of his fingers bit into the flesh of his palms, but his father swept on, giving him no opportunity to reply.

"My daddy hed jest shortly afore been lay-wayed an' killed by some Towers murderer, an' his property had done been parceled out amongst his children. Thar wasn't but jest fourteen of us ter heir hit an' nobody got much. When they tuck me down ter ther big Co'te I had ter hire me a lawyer – an' thet meant a mortgage. Yore maw hedn't, up ter then, been used ter sich-like slavish poverty. *She* could hev married mighty nigh any man in these parts – an' *she* tuck me.

"Whilst I war a-layin' thar in jail a-tormentin' myself with my doubtin' whether either one of ye would weather them times alive, *she* was a-runnin' ther still hyar in my stead. Many's the day *she* tromped over them hills through ther snow an' mud with *you* a-whimperin' on her breast an' wropped in a shawl thet *she* needed her own self. Many's ther night *she* tromped back ergin an' went hongry ter bed, so's *you* could have plenty ter eat, when thar warn't sca'cely enough ter divide betwixt ye. But them things *she* did in famine days, *you're* too sanctified ter relish now."

Turner Stacy trembled from head to foot. It seemed to him that he could see that grim picture in retrospect and despite his stoic's training his eyes burned with unshed tears. Loyalty to kith and kin is the cornerstone of every mountain man's religion, the very grail of his faith. Into his eyes blazed a tawny, tigerish light, but words choked in his throat and his father read, in his agitation, only a defiance which was no part of his thought.

"Now, see hyar," he went on with mounting autocracy, "I've done told ye things I don't oftentimes discuss. I've done reasoned with ye an' now I commands ye! Ye hain't of age yit and until ye do be, ye've got to do as I bids ye. Atter that, ef ye aims to turn yore back on yore family ye can do hit, an' I reckon we can go our two ways. That's all I got to say to ye. Now pick up that sack of gryste an' be gone with hit."

The boy's face blackened and his muscles tautened under the arrogant domineering of the edict. For a moment he neither spoke nor stirred from his place, though his chest heaved with the fulness of his breathing. The elder man moved ominously forward and his tone was violently truculent.

"Air ye goin' ter obey me or do I hev ter *make* ye? Thar's a sayin' thet come acrost ther waters thet no man kin lick his own daddy. I reckon hit still holds good."

Still the son remained as unmoving as bronze while his eyes sustained unflinchingly the wrathful gaze of a patriarchal order. Then he spoke in a voice carefully schooled to quietness.

"As to thet sayin'," he suggested evenly, "I reckon mebbe hit mought be disproved, but I hain't aimin' to try hit. Ye've done said some right-hard things to-day an' some thet wasn't hardly justified – but I aims ter fergit 'em."

Suddenly, by virtue of a leaping light in his eyes, the boy in jeans and hodden-gray stood forth strangely transfigured. Some spirit revelation seemed to have converted him into a mystifying incarnation of latent, if uncomprehended power. It was as startling as though a road-side beggar had tossed aside a drab cloak and hood of rags and revealed beneath it, the glitter of helmet and whole armor.

"I aims ter fergit hit all," he repeated. "But don't seek ter fo'ce me ner ter drive me none – fer thet's a thing I kain't hardly suffer. As fur as a man kin go outen loyalty I'll go fer *you*– but I've got ter go in my own fashion – an' of my own free will. Ye've done said that I went erbout seekin' trouble an' I hain't got no doubt ye believes what ye says albeit most of hit's false. Ye says I lays drunk

sometimes. That's true an' hit's a shameful thing fer a man ter admit, but hit's a thing I've got ter fight out fer myself. Hit don't profit neither of us fer ye ter vilify me."

He broke off abruptly, his chest heaving, and to Lone Stacy it seemed that the air was electrically charged, as with the still tensity that goes, windless and breathless, before the bursting of thunder heads among the crags. Then Bear Cat spoke again somewhat gropingly and with inarticulate faultiness, as though a flood pressure were seeking egress through a choked channel. The words were crude, but back of them was a dammed-up meaning like the power of hurricane and forest fire. "Thar's somethin' in me – I don't know how ter name it – thar's somethin' in me sort of strugglin' an' a-drivin' me like a torment! That weakness fer licker – I hates hit like – like all hell – but I hain't *all* weakness! That thing, whatever hit be – sometimes jest when hit seems like hit ought ter raise me up – hit crushes me down like the weight of ther mountings themselves."

He wheeled suddenly and disappeared into the house where he deposited his book on the mantel-shelf and from behind the door swung a grain sack to his shoulder. Then he left the house.

Lone Stacy turned to his wife and lifted his hands with a gesture of baffled perplexity as he inquired, "Does ye understand ther boy? He's our own blood an' bone, but sometimes I feels like I was talkin' ter a person from a teetotally diff'rent world. Nobody round hyar don't comprehend him. I've even heered hit norated round amongst foolish folks that he talks with graveyard ha'nts an' hes a witch-craft charm on his life. Air he jest headstrong, maw, or air he so master big that we kain't comprehend him? No man hain't never called me a coward, but thar's spells when I'm half-way skeered of my own boy."

"Mebby," suggested the woman quietly, "ef ye gentled him a leetle mite he wouldn't contrary ye so much."

Lone Stacy nodded his head and spoke with a grim smile. "Seems like I've got ter be eternally blusterin' at him jest ter remind myself that I'm ther head of this fam'ly. Ef I didn't fo'ce myself ter git mad, I'd be actin' like he was my daddy instid of me bein' his'n."

CHAPTER II

The afternoon was half spent and the sun, making its way toward the purpled ridges of the west, was already casting long shadows athwart the valleys. Along a trail which wound itself in many tortuous twists across forested heights and dipped down to lose itself at intervals in the creek bed of Little Slippery, a mounted traveler rode at a snail-like pace. The horse was a lean brute through whose rusty coat the ribs showed in under-nourished prominence, but it went sure-footedly up and down broken stairways of slimy ledges where tiny waterfalls licked at its fetlocks and along the brinks of chasms where the sand shelved with treacherous looseness.

The rider, a man weather-rusted to a drab monotone, slouched in his saddle with an apathetic droop which was almost stupor, permitting his reins to flap loosely. His face, under an unclean bristle of beard, wore a sleepy sneer and his eyes were bloodshot from white whiskey.

As he rode, unseeing, through the magnificent beauty of the Cumberlands his glance was sluggish and his face emotionless. But at last the horse halted where a spring came with a crystal gush out of the rhododendron thickets, and then Ratler Webb's stupefaction yielded to a semi-wakefulness of interest. He rubbed a shoddy coat-sleeve across his eyes and straightened his stooped shoulders. The old horse had thrust his nose thirstily into the basin with evident eagerness to drink. Yet, after splashing his muzzle about for a moment he refused refreshment and jerked his head up with a snort of disgust. A leering smile parted the man's lips over his yellow and uneven teeth:

"So ye won't partake of hit, old Bag-o'-bones, won't ye?" he inquired ironically. "Ye hain't nobody's brag critter to look at, but I reckon some revenue fellers mought be willin' to pay a master price fer ye. Ye kin stand at ther mouth of a spring-branch an' smell a still-house cl'ar up on hits headwaters, kain't ye?"

For a while Webb suffered the tired horse to stand panting in the creek bed, while his own eyes, lit now with a crafty livening, traveled up the hillside impenetrably masked with verdure, where all was silence. Somewhere up along the watercourse was the mash-vat and coil which had contaminated this basin for his mount's brute fastidiousness: an illicit distillery. This man clad in rusty store clothes was not inspired with a crusading ardor for supporting the law. He lived among men whose community opinion condones certain offenses – and pillories the tale-bearer. But above the ethical bearing of local standards and Federal Statutes, alike, loomed a matter of personal hatred, which powerfully stimulated his curiosity. He raised one hand and thoughtfully stroked his nose – recently broken with workman-like thoroughness and reset with amateurish imperfection.

"Damn thet Bear Cat Stacy," he muttered, as he kicked his weary mount into jogging motion. "I reckon I'll hev my chance at him yit. I'm jest a-waitin' fer hit."

A half-mile further on, he suddenly drew rein and remained in an attitude of alert listening. Then slipping quietly to the ground, he hitched his horse in the concealment of a deep gulch and melted out of sight into the thicket. Soon he sat crouched on his heels, invisible in the tangled laurel. His place of vantage overlooked a foot-path so little traveled as to be hardly discernible, but shortly a figure came into view around a hulking head of rock, and Ratler Webb's smile broadened to a grin of satisfaction. The figure was tall and spare and it stooped as it plodded up the ascent under the weight of a heavy sack upon its shoulders. The observer did not move or make a sound until the other man had been for several minutes out of sight. He was engaged in reflection.

"So, thet's how ther land lays," he ruminated. "Bear Cat Stacy's totin' thet gryste over to Bud Jason's tub-mill on Little Ivy despite ther fact thet thar's numerous bigger mills nigher to his house. Thet sack's full of *sprouted* corn, and he dasn't turn it in at no *reg'lar* mill. Them Stacys air jest about blockadin' up thet spring-branch."

He spat at a toad which blinked beadily up at him and then, rising from his cramped posture, he commented, "I hain't plumb dead sartin yet, but I aims ter be afore sun-up ter-morrer."

Bear Cat Stacy might have crossed the ridge that afternoon by a less devious route than the one he followed. In so doing he would have saved much weariness of leg and ache of burdened shoulder, but Ratler Webb's summing up had been correct, and though honest corn may follow the highways, sprouted grain must go by blinder trails.

When he reached the backbone of the heights, he eased the jute sack from his shoulders to the ground and stretched the cramp out of his arms. Sweat dripped from his face and streamed down the brown throat where his coarse shirt stood open. He had carried a dead weight of seventy pounds across a mountain, and must carry back another as heavy.

Now he wiped his forehead with his shirt-sleeve and stood looking away with a sudden distraction of dreaminess. A few more steps would take him again into the steamy swelter of woods where no breath of breeze stirred the still leafage, and even in the open spaces the afternoon was torridly hot. But here he could sweep with his eyes league upon league of a vast panorama where sky and peak mingled in a glory of purple haze. Unaccountably the whole beauty of it smote him with a sense of undefined appreciation and grateful wonderment. The cramp of heart was eased and the groping voices of imagination seemed for the time no longer tortured nightmares of complaint.

There was no one here to censor his fantasies and out of the gray eyes went their veiling sullenness and out of the lips their taut grimness. Into eyes and lips alike came something else – something touched with the zealously of aspiration.

"Hit's right over thar!" he murmured aloud but in a voice low pitched and caressing of tone. "I've got ter get me money enough ter buy thet farm offen Kinnard Towers."

He was looking down upon a point far below him where through a cleared space flashed the shimmer of flowing water, and where in a small pocket of acreage, the bottom ground rolled in gracious amenability to the plow and harrow.

Again he nodded, and since he was quite alone he laughed aloud.

"She 'lows thet's ther place whar she wants ter live at," he added to himself, "an' I aims ter satisfy her."

So after all some of his day-dreams were tangible!

He realized that he ought to be going on, yet he lingered and after a few moments he spoke again, confiding his secrets to the open woods and the arching skies – his only confidants.

"Blossom 'lowed yestiddy she was a-goin' over ter Aunt Jane Colby's this mornin'. 'Pears like she ought ter be passin' back by hyar about this time."

Cupping his hands at his lips, he sent out a long whoop, but before he did that he took the precaution of concealing his sack of sprouted grain under a ledge. Then he bent listening for an answer – but without reward, and disappointment mantled in his gray eyes as he dropped to the age-corroded rock and sat with his hands clasped about his updrawn knees.

It was very still there, except for the industrious hammering of a "peckerwood" on a decayed tree trunk, and the young mountaineer sat almost as motionless as his pedestal.

Then without warning a lilting peal of laughter sounded at his back and Turner came to his feet. As he wheeled he saw Blossom Fulkerson standing there above him and her eyes were dancing with the mischievous delight of having stalked him undiscovered.

"It's a right happy thing fer you, Turner Stacy, that I didn't aim ter kill ye," she informed him with mock solemnity. "I've heered ye brag thet no feller hereabouts could slip up on ye in the woods, unbeknownst."

"I wasn't studyin' erbout nobody slippin' up on me. Blossom," he answered calmly. "I hain't got no cause ter be a-hidin' out from nobody."

She was standing with the waxen green of the laurel breaking into pink flower-foam at her back and through the oak and poplar branches showed scraps of blue sky – the blue of June.

A catch came into Turner's voice and he said somewhat huskily, "When they christened ye Blossom they didn't misname ye none."

Blossom, he thought, was like a wild-rose growing among sun-flowers. When the evening star came up luminous and dewy-fresh over the darkening peaks, while twilight still lingered at the edges of the world, he always thought of her.

But the charm was not all in his own eye: not all the magic endowment of first love. The mountain preacher's daughter had escaped those slovenly habits of backwoods life that inevitably coarsen. Her beauty had slender strength and flower freshness.

Now she stood holding with one hand to the gnarled branch of a dogwood sapling. A blue sunbonnet falling back from her head left the abundance of her hair bared to the light so that it shimmered between brown and gold.

She was perhaps sixteen and her heavily lashed eyes were brownish amber and just now full of a mirthful sparkle.

"Ye seemed ter be studyin' about somethin' almighty hard," she insisted teasingly. "I thought for a minute that mebbe ye'd done growed thar."

Turner Stacy smiled again as he looked at her. In his eyes was unveiled and honest worship.

"I was a'studyin' about you, Blossom. I don't know no way ter do that save almighty hard. Didn't ye hear me whoop?"

The girl's head nodded.

"Why didn't ye answer me?"

"I aimed ter slip up on ye, if I could, Turner, but I didn't low it would be so plumb easy. – You made believe that yore ears could hear the grass a-growin'."

The youth took a sudden step toward her and stood close, so close that her breath touched his face fragrantly as she looked up with a witching mockery in her eyes. His heart fluttered with the clamor of impulse to seize her in his arms, but his half-lifted hands dropped to his sides.

He was not quite twenty-one and she was only sixteen, and the code of the mountains is strict with the simplicity of the pioneer. A woman gives her lips in betrothal or, giving them lightly, drops to the caste of a light woman.

So the boy drew back with a resolute jerk of his head.

"I was a-studyin' erbout some day, Blossom," he said, "when thar's a-goin' ter be a dwellin'-house down thar. Not a house of warped timbers whar the hawks scratch their backs under the floors – but a *real* house. Mebby by thet day an' time thar'll be a highway men kin travel without torment." As he paused, at a loss for power of architectural enlargement, the girl sighed.

"Then I reckon ye don't hardly 'low ter raise thet house in my lifetime, Turner," she teased. "I'll most likely be too old ter visit ye thar afore a highway gits built."

But he shook his head. "I aims ter speed up ther comin' of sich things," he announced with the splendid effrontery of youth. "Hit hain't been so long since ther fust wagon crossed Cedar Mountain. We're liable to see balloons comin' afore we die."

"Aunt Jane Colby was tellin' me about that first wagon to-day at dinner," Blossom assented. "She says one old man asked folks whether it was true or whether he was fitified. He said: 'What manner of *contrivance* air thet? Hit's got four wheels an' one pair's bigger then t'other pair, an' two of 'em goes round faster then t'other two an' the Lord A'mighty only knows how hit manages ter keep up with hitself.'"

They both laughed with young condescension for the old-fashioned and then Turner went on, haltingly by reason of callow diffidence.

"Ef thet house couldn't be reared in time fer *you* ter come to hit, Blossom – hit wouldn't be no manner of use ter me a-tall."

"Does ye aim ter make me a present of a house?" she challenged and again the provocative allurements of her swept him so that the smooth sinews of his arms tightened as if with physical effort.

"I means thet someday – when I've done something worth doin' an' when ye're a leetle bit older yoreself, Blossom, you're agoin' ter marry me, an' we're goin' ter dwell thar – together."

The girl's cheeks reddened furiously and for a moment she made no response, then she declared with a stout self-assertion designed to mask her confusion, "I reckon I'll hev somethin' ter say about thet."

"Ye'll have *everything* ter say about hit, Blossom, but" – there was a purposeful ring in his voice that hinted at ultimate victory – "but some day I aims ter persuade ye ter say, 'yes.'"

Her cheeks were brightly pink and she pretended to be engrossed in the demeanor of a squirrel that chattered quarrelsomely at them from a nearby poplar. Turner Stacy dropped his voice until it was very soft.

"I kin bide my time an' wait twell ye're ready, Blossom, but if ye don't *never* say hit, I don't hardly see how I kin go on livin'."

"I'm right glad ef ye likes me, Turner," she demurely assured him. "We've growed up together an' ef ye was to go away somewhar's an' leave me, I reckon I'd nigh die of lonesomeness."

Distrust of effusiveness was bred in his bone. Laconic utterance was his heritage, and now that his heart demanded expression and his eyes kindled with the dreamer's fire, he stood struggling against the fettering of his tongue. Then abruptly, tumultuously he burst out, talking fast.

"I hain't got ther gift of speech, Blossom; I only knows thet hit hain't enough ter jest have ye miss me ef I went away. I knows thet when ye stands thar with ther sun on yore hair hit would be springtime fer me, even ef thar war snow on ther hillsides an' ice in ther creek. I knows thet I'm standin' hyar on solid rock. Yore paw says these-hyar hills were old when ther Alps hadn't riz up yit outen ther waters, but when I looks at ye, Blossom, this mountain's shakin' under me ... an' yore face is ther only thing thet's steady afore my eyes."

He broke off with something like a choke in his throat and Blossom was trembling a little under that first impact of new emotion that comes with the waking of the senses. Then she remembered the stories of his escapades and her eyes clouded. Her hand fell flutteringly on his arm.

"If – if ye cares thet much about me, Turner, I wish – I don't aim ter nag ye – but I wish ye'd promise me thet ye won't give men cause ter say ye drinks too much."

Turner's brow contracted and his lips stiffened. The defensive mask which seemed sullen because it was his idea of impassiveness set itself again, but he nodded.

"Thet's a fair thing," he said slowly at last. "Drinkin' hain't hardly a thing a gal kin understand noways. I hain't jest a common drunkard, Blossom. Thar's times though when I feels es ef I war a-livin' in a jail-house – an' seekin' ter git free. Thar's su'thin' in me – I don't know jest what – thet's always fightin'. These hyar hills with their ign'rance an' dirt an' poverty seems ter be on top of me 'stid of underneath me. Thet's when I drinks too much. Fer a little spell I seems ter dream I'm free."

A few minutes later the girl started down the "yon" side of the wooded slope, going with a light step and humming a ballade that had come across the sea with the beginnings of America, and the boy looked after her with a passionate tenderness that was far from stoical.

If most of his dreams were intangible and misty, this, his greatest and brightest dream, was at least clear and vivid.

When he could no longer see the flash of her blue dress between the interlacing branches he turned, and drawing his sack of sprouted corn out of its hiding place, hefted it to his shoulders. He would have to hurry now to finish his task and get back by dusk.

CHAPTER III

Old man Bud Jason stood at the door of his tub-mill, leaning on the long hickory staff which he always carried. He stood gauntly tall even now that his once-broad shoulders sagged and his mane of hair was white, and from his lips came a querulous mumbling as though he were awaiting some one tardy of arrival. At last, though, he gave a grunt of relief when the thicket far above him stirred and the figure of Bear Cat Stacy appeared, bending under his load of grist.

He turned then into the shack and drew out a sack of meal from the bottom of a pile, and as he finished this task a shadow fell across the door. Turner Stacy let his burden fall and availed himself of the opportunity to drop into a sitting posture on the step of the shanty, resting his back against a post. His broad chest heaved and a profound sigh of relief broke from his panting lips. The old miller stood regarding him for a little while without words, then broke into volcanic utterance:

"Hell's banjer! May God Almighty help a country whar a young pa'r of shoulders like your'n don't find no worthier use than man-powerin' good corn acrost ther ridges ter turn hit inter bad licker."

Turner Stacy glanced up with mild surprise for the sentiment.

"I hain't nuver heered ye cavil with a man's license ter use his own corn as he sees fit, afore, Bud," was his casual reply, and the white-bearded one wagged his head and laughed tremulously after the fashion of the old.

"I reckon ye don't mistrust me none, Bear Cat, even ef I does hit now, but here of late I've cogitated a heap whilst I've been a-settin' hyar listenin' ter ther creak of that old mill. Seems almost like ther wheel was a-lamentin' over hits job. Thar bein' sich a sight of wickedness in ther community whar my grand-children hes got ter be reared up is a powerful solemn thing fer me ter study over, an' I've jes erbout concluded that whilst ther whiskey-makin' goes on ther killin's an gin'ral wickedness won't hardly diminish none."

Furrows of dubious thought etched themselves on the young man's forehead.

"Ef ye feels thet-a-way, Bud, why does yer consent ter grind corn fer blockaders?" he demanded, and the reply was prompt:

"I don't grind hit only fer a few men thet I'm beholden to." Pausing a moment, he became more specific. "Yore paw stood over my body onct when I'd done been shot outen my saddle, an' fought off numerous enemies single-handed, thereby savin' me from death in ther creekbed. I couldn't hardly deny him ther use of my mill even ef his corn *hes* got sprouts in ther grain two inches long, now, could I?"

The boy looked abstractedly away, then suddenly blurted out: "I disgusts blockadin', too, Bud, but pap 'lows hit's ther only way ter mek a livin' hyarabouts."

"Lots of folks argues hit out in like fashion, but I don't hold with 'em." The speaker rapped the boards with his long staff and spoke with conviction. "What these mountings needs air a mite of l'arnin' an' a leetle common sense an' a heap of good roads. Ef prosperity ever comes ter these hills, sonny, hit'll come along a highway – an' so long as stills don't thrive none along highways, hit looks mightily like a sorry chance." After a thoughtful pause he added, "Hit won't never change, so long es hits only furriners thet aims ter alter hit. Revenuers kain't do nothin'. Damn thar skunk hides anyhow! They're our mortal enemies." The old man drew himself up as if he were seeing a vision and his eyes held an almost fanatical gleam. "But mark down my words! Some day thar'll rise up a mountain man – a man thet hain't never met up with fear an thet's as steadfast as ther hills he sprung from. *Thet* man will change hit all, like ther sun changes fog. I wisht I mout live ter see thet day."

"Hit'll tek a powerful towerin' man ter bring sich things ter pass," mused the listener and the oracle declared vehemently:

"Hit teks a powerful towerin' man ter lead any fight ter victory, whether hit's a-guidin' ther Children of Israel outen thar bondage or our benighted children outen thars."

Suddenly the miller laid a trembling hand on the boy's arm and demanded in a hushed voice: "Why shouldn't hit be you, Bear Cat? Folks says ye bears a charmed life, thet thar hain't enough lead in ther mountings ter kill ye. I heered Kinnard Towers say with my own ears, thet hit war a God's blessin' ther feud ended afore ye got yore growth – an' Kinnard don't fear many. When a man thet's hardly nothin' but a saplin' of a boy bears a repute like thet – hit must denote thet thar's power in him beyond ther common!"

The boy stood silent for a moment and slowly his brow drew into a black scowl.

"I reckon, Bud, one reason air this," he said bitterly, "thet I'm accounted ter be a drunkard my own self an' like as not, one sich reason es thet air plenty."

Turner glanced up to the bristling ridge which he must climb. Already the west was kindling into a flare of richness and the skyline hills were dyed with ashy purple.

"I've done over-tarried," he said abruptly, as he lifted his sack from the floor, but his face wore a glow which was not altogether from the sinking sun. "I reckon I'd better be on my way – but I hain't denyin' thet I've done hed thoughts like your'n myself, Bud."

But young Stacy had not gone far when that sense of intensified woodcraft which Blossom had derided caused him to halt dead in his tracks.

The sound that had first arrested him had been nothing more than a laugh, but, in it, he had recognized a quality that bespoke derisive hostility and a thickness that indicated drink.

He had left the place empty except for Old Bud Jason and no one could have reached it, unannounced by normal sounds, so soon unless the approach had been achieved by stealth.

Bear Cat Stacy put down his sack and worked his way back, holding the concealment of rock and laurel; guarding each footfall against the betrayal of a broken twig – and, as yet, denied a view of the tub-mill. But his cars were open and doing duty for his eyes.

"Wa'al," came the miller's voice in a wrathful tremolo, "what business brings ye hyar es ef ye war aimin' ter lay-way somebody? Folks gin'rally comes hither upstandin' – an' open."

This time the voice of the new arrival was sneeringly truculent:

"Does they come thet-a-way when they fatches in sprouted corn thet they dastn't take elsewhere?"

Bear Cat stiffened as he recognized the voice of Ratler Webb, whom he had not met since their encounter in which a nose had been broken. He knew that in the breast of this man, hitherto unchallenged as neighborhood bully, an ugly and dangerous grudge was festering.

Now it seemed that the old miller, because of friendship for the Stacys was to be heckled, and Bear Cat's wrath boiled. He heard Bud Jason inquiring in tones no longer querulous but firmly indignant:

"Is thet all ye come fer? Ter blackguard me?"

Ratler answered in a voice savoring more of highwayman's coercion than request.

"I was jest a-funnin' with ye, Old Bud, but I'd be mighty obleeged ter ye fer a leetle dram of licker. My bottle's nigh empty an' I've got a far way ter travel yit."

Turner Stacy had now arrived at a point from which he could see around the hulking shoulder of sandstone and the picture which met his eye was not reassuring.

The miller stood barring the door to his shack and the visitor, inflamed of eye, a little unsteady on his feet, confronted him with a swagger of lawless daredeviltry.

"I hain't got no licker. I don't never use hit," replied Jason curtly. "So ef thet's all thet brought ye hyar, ye've already got yore answer an' ye mout es well be farin' on."

Webb's leer darkened to malignity and his voice came in a snarl.

"Ye hain't hardly got no tolerance fer drinkin', hes ye, Bud? Albeit ye hain't none too sanctified ter grind up all ther sprouted corn thet other fellers fatches in ter ye."

The old fellow was alone and unarmed save for his hickory staff, but he was vested with that authority which stiffens a man, standing on his own threshold and facing an insolent trespasser. His manner was choleric and crisp in its note of command.

"I don't aim ter waste no time cavilin' with a drunken carouser. I bids ye ter leave my place. Begone!"

But the traveler, inflamed with the venom of the drunken bully, lurched forward, whipping a revolver from its sagging pocket. With an oath he rammed the muzzle close against the pit of the other's stomach.

Bud's level eyes did not falter. He gripped his useless hickory as if it had been a licitor's staff of unchallengeable office. Perhaps that steady moment saved his life, for before his assailant's flood of obscene vilification had reached its period, Ratler Webb leaped back – interrupted. He changed front, wheeling to protect his back against the logs of the rude wall and thrusting his pistol before him, while his jaw sagged abruptly in dismay.

Bear Cat stood facing him, ten yards distant, and his right hand was thrust into his opened shirt, under the armpit, where the mountain man carries his holster. That the position of the hand was a bluff, covering an unarmed helplessness, Ratler Webb did not know.

"Air ye follerin' revenuin' these days, Ratler?" inquired Stacy in a voice of such velvet softness that the other responded only with an incoherent snarl. "Because ef ye air, numerous folks hyarabouts will be right glad ter find out who it is that's informin' on 'em."

"Damn ye! Keep thet hand whar hit's at!" ordered the aggressor violently and like the cornered rat he had become doubly dangerous. He had set out only to torture a defenseless victim, and now it seemed a question of killing or being killed, so he loaded his voice with truculence as he went on.

"Ef ye seeks ter draw hit out or come a step frontwards, so help me Almighty God I'll kill ye in yore tracks!"

Turner Stacy smiled. Upon his ability to do so with a semblance of quiet contempt he was staking everything.

"Shoot whenever ye gits ready, Ratler," he challenged. "But don't do hit onless ye're expectin' ter die, too. When this trigger-work commences, I aims ter *git* ye."

"Move a hand or a foot then, an' see – " The voice was desperately high pitched and nasal now, almost falsetto, but through its threat Bear Cat recognized an undercurrent of sudden terror. The desperado remembered that his horse stood hitched a quarter of a mile away. His right boot sole had been freshly patched and left a clearly identifying mark in the mud. He had prepared no alibi in advance, and within a few hours after Turner fell scores of his kinsmen would be baying on the trail.

"Shoot!" taunted Bear Cat Stacy. "Why don't ye shoot?" – and then with an effrontery which dazed his antagonist, he deliberately moved several steps forward – halting nearer the pistol's muzzle.

"I don't aim ter kill ye onless I has ter," stormed Webb with weakening assurance. "Halt! I'm givin' ye fa'r warnin'. Hit's self-deefense ef ye crowds me."

Stacy spoke again, standing once more motionless.

"Ye couldn't shoot thet pistol at me ef I walked in on ye with my hands over my head. My time hain't come yit ter die, because ther's things I was born ter do – an' God Almighty aims ter hev me live till I've done 'em. He don't aim ter hev me hurt by no coward like you, I reckon. Ye couldn't shoot any man noways whilst his eyes was lookin' full at ye. Ye has need ter lay hid in ther la'rel afore ye kin pull yore trigger finger. I dares ye to shoot!"

The white-bearded miller stood motionless, too, measuring all the chances. For a moment he wondered whether it would be possible to strike up the armed hand with his long staff, but he wisely repressed the impulse. This after all was a new sort of combat, a duel of wills rather than of weapons. He knew that Bear Cat Stacy was unarmed because he had so recently seen the sweat-drenched shirt clinging close to the arched chest.

Ratler Webb's hand no longer trembled with the uncertainty of tipsiness. His eyes were no longer obfuscated and muddled with whiskey fumes. He had reverted to the feral instincts of desperation – and was suddenly sobered.

He gripped his out-thrust pistol in both hands for greater surety and half-crouched with knees bent under him, ready either to spring or brace himself against attack. His eyes, gleaming with blood-passion, traveled shiftily so that he could keep watch on both his possible adversaries.

The other and younger man stood upright, but his muscles, too, were poised and balanced with all nicety of readiness and his eyes were measuring the distance between: gauging sundry odds of life and death.

For a moment more the tableau held in silence. Both the miller and the boy could hear the labored, almost gasping breath of the man with the pistol and both knew that the mean temper of his heart's metal was weakening.

Then when a squirrel barked from the timber, Ratler Webb started violently and above the stubble of dirty beard, sweat drops began to ooze on his face.

Why didn't Bear Cat Stacy say something? Why didn't somebody move? If he fired now he must kill both men or leave a witness to blab deadly information close on the heels of his flight! In his heart welled a rising tide of panic.

Turner knew by instinct that every moment he could hold Ratler there with his pistol leveled, was for the desperado, a moment of weakening resolve and nerve-breaking suspense. But he also knew another thing. When the strain of that waiting snapped Ratler would either run or shoot. Mountain annals hold more instances of the latter decision than the former, but that was the chance to be taken.

Webb carried a notched gun. He had forced many fights in his day, but in all of them there had been the swift tonic of action and little time to think. Now he dared not lower his weapon in surrender – and he was afraid to fire. He felt that his lips were growing dry and thickening. He thrust out his tongue to lick them, and its red tip gave, to his ugly features, a strange grotesqueness.

Under the brown of wind and sun and the red of liquor-flush his face paled perceptibly. Then it grew greenish yellow with a sick clamminess of dread.

At last with a discernible quaver in his voice he broke the unendurable silence, and his words came brokenly and disjointed:

"I didn't aim ter force no quarrel on ye, Bear Cat... Ef ye plumb compels me ter do hit, I've got ter kill ye, but I hain't a-hankerin' none fer ther task."

"Thet's a lie, too. Ye come hyar a-seekin' of *evidence* because ye're harborin' a grudge erginst me an' ye dastn't satisfy hit no other way."

There was a pause, then Webb said slowly, and with a half-heartedness from which all the effrontery had ebbed:

"I 'lows ter go on erbout my business now, but if either one of ye moves from whar ye're standin' twell I'm outen range I aims ter kill ye both."

Shifting his revolver to his right hand and feeling behind him with his left, he began backing away, still covering his retreat and edging a step at a time toward the corner of the shack, but at the second step, with a swiftness which vindicated his name, the Bear Cat sprang.

The old miller shook his head, but made no outcry. He heard the thud of two bodies and the grunt driven from a chest by the impact of charging shoulders. He saw two figures go down together while a tongue of flame and a muffled roar broke belatedly from the mouth of the pistol.

Whether the bullet had taken effect or, if so, who was its victim, he could not at first distinguish. Two human beings, muscled like razor-backs were writhing and twisting in a smother of dust, their limbs clinched and their voices mingled in snarling and incoherent savagery. The mountain ethics of "fist and skull" impose no Queensbury restrictions. Tooth and knee, heel and knuckle may do their best – and worst.

But the pistol itself flew clear and the old miller picked it up, turning again to observe the result of the encounter.

The fighters had struggled up again to their feet and were locked in a bone-breaking embrace of hatred. For the moment the advantage seemed to rest with Webb, who was clutching Turner's head in the distressing chancery of his powerful right arm and doing his utmost to break the neck. Bear Cat's breathing was a hoarse and strangling agony, but his fists battered like unremitting flails against the ribs and kidneys of his antagonist. As they swayed and tottered their brogans were ploughing up the hard soil and, totally blinded by sweat and rage, they wavered perilously close to the edge of the huge rock – with its ten-foot drop to the mill race.

Even as Old Bud gave his warning cry, they went down together – and fell short of the brink, escaping that danger. Stacy writhed free from the neck-grip, and both came up again, leaping into a fresh embrace of panthers, with eyes glaring insanely out of blood-smear'd faces.

Then it all ended abruptly. Bear Cat wrenched himself free and sent a chance blow, but one behind which went all his weight and passion, to the other's mouth. The smitten head went back with a jerk. Webb reeled groggily for an instant, then crumpled, but before he had quite fallen Stacy, with an insensate fury, was dragging him to his feet and clutching at the throat which his fingers ached to strangle.

At that instant, the old miller seized his arms.

"Hold on thar, Bear Cat," he cried with his quavering voice. "He's already licked. You'll kill him ef ye hain't heedful."

"I *aims* ter kill him," panted the boy, casting off the interference of aged arms with the savagery of a dog whose fangs have been pried too soon from the throat of its victim.

But Bud Jason clung on, reiterating: "Fer shame, son! Thet hain't *yore* manner of conduct. Fer shame!"

Unsteadily, then, with a slow dawning of reason Bear Cat Stacy staggered back and leaned heavily against the wall of the tub-mill, breathing in sob-like gasps. His shirt was half torn from his body and for the first time the miller saw the ugly gash where a pistol bullet had bitten its grazing course along his left shoulder. Grime and blood stained him and for a while he stood gazing down on the collapsed figure at his feet – a figure that stirred gropingly.

"I reckon," he said slowly, "I'd jest about hev finished him, ef hit hadn't a-been fer *you*, Bud. I'm beholden ter ye. I reckon I was seein' red."

Together they lifted Ratler Webb and gave him water from the gourd that hung by the door. When he was able to stand, dourly resentful, baleful of eye but mute as to tongue, Bear Cat spoke briefly with the victor's authority:

"I aims ter keep thet pistol o' your'n fer a spell, Ratler. I don't hardly trust ye with hit jest yit. When ye wants hit, come by my house and ask fer hit."

The bully turned sullenly away. He spoke no word of farewell and offered no protest, but when he was out of sight the miller shook his head and his voice was troubled.

"Of course ye knows, son, thet he hain't never agoin' ter fergit hit? So long as ther two of ye lives ye've got ter keep on watchin' him."

Turner nodded. He was bathing his shoulder and spreading cobwebs on its grazed wound.

"I've done wasted a heap of time," he said irrelevantly. "An' hit's comin' on to rain, too. I reckon I'll be benighted afore I gets over ter ther still."

Starting away, he paused and turned shamefacedly back for a moment.

"Hit won't profit us none to norrate this matter abroad," he suggested. "I've got enough name already fer gittin' into ructions. Paw don't like hit none."

Gazing after the retreating figures the old man wagged his head and his expression was one of foreboding.

"Meanness an' grudge-nursin' kin bring on a heap of pestilence," he mused. "This Ratler will nurse his on ther bottle, an' he won't never wean hit – an' some day – ! But it don't profit a feller ter borry trouble. These hills hes got enough misfortunes withouten thet."

Already twilight was settling over the valleys and the ridges were starkly grim as their color died to the neutrality of night, and the murk of a gathering storm.

CHAPTER IV

With a mutter of distant thunder in his ears, the young mountaineer plodded "slavishly" on under his load as night closed about him. The path twisted among heaped up bowlders where a misstep might mean broken bones and crawled through entanglements of fallen timber: of gnarled rhododendron and thorn-leaved holly. It wormed into dew-drenched thicknesses where branches lashed the burden-bearer's face with the sting of whips, and soon the colossal barriers began to echo with the storm roar of high places. The clouds were ripped with the blue-white blades of lightning. The rock walls of the ranges seemed quaking under the thunder's incessant cannonading, and the wind's shrieking mania. Then through the rent and buffeted timber-tops the rain burst in a lashing curtain of water as violent as a shot-shower.

Bear Cat Stacy, wet to the skin, with the steaming sweat of toil and fight turned into a marrow-pinching chill, cast about him for a place where he could protect his sack of meal until an abatement should come to the storm's violence.

As he sat under a dripping roof of shelving rock to which he had groped his way by the beacon of the lightning, a startled owl swept past him, almost brushing his face with its downy wings.

His wet clothes hung to his flesh with what seemed icy coldness. His shoulder throbbed with an abomination of pain and his bones ached with a dull wretchedness.

But after a time the wind and thunder dropped away to whimpering echoes. It was as if the hound pack of the furies had been whistled in, its hunt ended.

Turner rose and stamped his numbed feet. There was yet a long way to go before he arrived at the low-built shed, thatched with brush and screened behind a fallen hemlock top, where the Stacy still lay hidden.

At last he was there, with every muscle proclaiming its location by the outcry of sore tissues, and ahead of him lay the task of watching and feeding the fire under the mash kettle until dawn.

"Ye kin lay down when ye're ready, Lee," he said shortly to the stockily built man whom he was relieving from duty there. "I'll keep ther fire goin' an' call ye round about dawn."

Taking up the rifle to which he had fallen heir, as picket, he made his way from the sentinel's shelter to the still-house itself, stooping low, so that the waning fire might not throw his figure or face into relief. He piled a handful of wood under the kettle and crawled back into the timber.

The heavens were full of stars now: not the small light-points of skies arching over lowlands, but the gorgeous, great stars of the walled highlands.

His mother had done this sort of work to keep him alive, while his father was in prison! If he went on doing it, and if Blossom married him, they faced a future of the same drab decay! At the thought of that prospect he ground his chattering teeth and cursed under his breath.

The dull glow of the fire on a tin bucket and cup held his eyes with a spell of fascination. It was white liquor, raw, sweetish and freshly brewed. A gleam of craving flashed into his eyes: a craving that had come down through generations of grandsires – even though his own father had escaped it. Turner put out one hand, trembling with anticipation.

Here was warmth! Here was to be had for the taking a glow about the heart and a quickened current in the veins. Here was the stuff from which ease and waking dreams would come; release from his aching chill and dulness of spirit!

Bear Cat's eyes burned thirstily. He seemed only a vessel of flesh overflowing with craving – with a torture of craving – an utter hell of craving! Then he drew back the eagerly extended hand.

"No," he said grimly. "Blossom air right. Ther stuff'll ruin me."

Resolutely he turned his back and stood facing the woods, listening to the drip of drenched leafage. Through raw hours he struggled with his appetite. Each time that he went back to throw fresh

faggots on the fire he moved warily around the bucket, seeking to keep his eyes averted, but each time his gaze came back to it, and rested there thirstily.

Twice as his watch drew near its end he dipped the cup into the pail only to spill back the contents again, almost wildly, watching the thin trickle; and greedily sniffing its sweetish invitation of odor. Once the rim met his lips and the taste touched his tongue, but he violently spat it out and wiped his lips on the sleeve of his shirt.

"Hits ther devil's holy water," he murmured to himself. "Thet's what Brother Fulkerson says – an' I reckon he's right."

The evening star always reminded him of Blossom. He thought of it as her star, and upon it, as upon her own face, he kept his eyes fixed for encouragement as his spirit's resistance waned in the mounting tide of exhaustion. But when even that beacon was gone behind the mountain-top he felt the despair of one whose last ally has abandoned him to face travail unsupported.

He fell back on his dreams; dreams of what Lincoln had faced and conquered; of what he, too, might achieve. But now he could see them only dispiritedly as hollow shapes; misty things without hope or substance. That bucket now – a sip from it would rehabilitate them, give them at least the semblance of attainability. There lay relief from despair!

His mind flashed back to his father's rebuke and his answer: "Ye says I lay drunk. Thet's true an' hit's a shameful thing fer a man ter admit... But hit's a thing I've got ter fight out fer myself."

A great indignation against his father's misunderstanding possessed him. He must fight in his own way! Even Blossom had only asked him not to drink "too much."

When it needed only an hour more for the coming of dawn, his face grew darkly sullen.

"Hit's hell thet I've got ter spend my whole life a-brewin' ther stuff ergin my will – takin' chances of ther jail-house fer hit – an' yit I kain't have a drink when I'm wet ter ther bone," he growled.

Going as if drawn by a power stronger than his own volition, he moved balkingly yet with inevitable progress once more to the bucket. He half filled the cup – raised it – and this time gulped it down greedily and recklessly to the bottom.

Immediately his chilled veins began to glow with an ardent gratefulness. The stars seemed brighter and the little voices of the night became sweeter. The iron-bound gates of imagination swung wide to a pageantry of dreams, and as he crouched in the reeking underbrush, he half forgot his discontent.

Repeatedly he dipped and drained the cup. He was still on duty, but now he watched with a diminished vigilance. Gradually his senses became more blunt. The waking dreams were vaguer, too, and more absurd.

He still tended the fire under the kettle – but he laughed scornfully at the foolish need of keeping his face always in the shadow. Then suddenly he dropped down close to the dark earth, let the cup splash into the bucket, and thrust forward his rifle.

His ears had caught a sound which might have been a raccoon stirring in the brush – or a fox slipping covertly through the fallen hemlock top.

But there was no repetition, so he laughed again and with the first pallid hint of dawn on the ridges he shook the shoulder of his sleeping companion. Then he himself sank down in the heavy torpor of exhaustion and drunkenness.

At the same time, because it would soon be light, the living creature which had made the sound began creeping away, and in doing so it avoided any other alarms. It was the figure of a man who had learned what he came there to determine.

When Lone Stacy plodded up to his still-house some hours later, he exchanged nods with the squat mountaineer whom he found waiting.

"Whar's Turner?" was his brief inquiry and the reply matched it in taciturnity. "In thar – a-layin' drunk."

The father went over and looked scowlingly down at the prostrate figure stretched awkwardly in open-mouthed stupor.

"I reckon," he announced succinctly, "thar hain't nothin' fer hit but ter suffer him ter sleep hit off."

With the toe of his boot Lone Stacy stirred the insensate body which sprawled there; all its youthful vitality stilled into grotesque stagnation. But when the hired man, Lee, was out of sight the bearded face twitched with a spasm of distress.

Its eyes traveled in a silent pathos from the sight of sagging jaw and hunched shoulders to the unresponsive majesty of the calm hills as if beseeching comfort there. In his only son's spirit had seemed to burn a fire of promise which even he could not understand. Was that fire to be quenched into the stale ashes of habitual drunkenness?

A groan rumbled in his throat.

Yet, had he remembered his Scriptures, Samson, the Mighty, had surrendered in his moment of weakness to the allurements and the shears of Delilah! Afterward, he had pulled down the pillars of the temple.

These hills that had stood upright in days when the Alps and the Himalayas had not yet stirred in conception, looked down placid, and unsympathetic. Perhaps the eternal spirit of the range was not ashamed of this erring child, asleep on its bosom. Perhaps, cognizant alike of tempest and calm, it recognized this son's kinship with itself. The prophecy which dwells in the immemorial may have foreseen gathering powers of hurricane and might, which should some day make him rise, above lesser summits. Possibly as he slept the great, silent voices were crooning a lullaby over offspring destined for mastery.

When Ratler Webb had turned away from the tub-mill his brain was still half stunned from the jarring punishment of battle. He was thoroughly conscious only of deep chagrin and a gnawing hunger for reprisal.

From childhood he retained no tender memories.

There was no one upon whom he had a claim of blood, and neighborhood report had not let him forget that he was a woodscolt. In hill parlance a woodscolt signifies one whose birth has been sanctioned by no prior rites of matrimony.

Since he could remember he had existed only by virtue of the same predatory boldness which gives the lean razor-back strength and innate craftiness to live.

Just now his whole abundant capacity for hatred was centered on Bear Cat Stacy, yet since Bear Cat's kinsmen peopled every creek and spring-branch of this country he could not be casually murdered.

Any word slipped to the ear of the revenue man might be traced back to him and after that he could no longer live among his native hills. Still, he reflected as he slowly rubbed his fingers along his uneven nose, time brings changes and chances. The possession of definite evidence against his enemy might some day bear fruit.

So Ratler did not ride home after his encounter at the mill. He took refuge instead in an abandoned cabin of which he knew, strategically located within a mile of the place where he had surmised the Stacy family were making illicit whiskey. While the storm raged, threatening to bring down the sagging roof timbers about his ears, he sat before its dead and ruined hearth, entertaining bitter thoughts.

Between midnight and dawn he stepped over the broken threshold and began his reconnaissance. For two hours he crouched, wet and cramped, in the laurel near enough to throw a stone against the kettle of the primitive distillery – waiting for that moment of relaxed vigilance, when the figure that moved in the shadows should permit a ray from the fire to fall upon its features.

When dawn had almost come his vigil was rewarded and he had turned away again.

Blossom Fulkerson knew none of these things at noon of the day following the fight at the mill when, in the road, she encountered Lone Stacy making his way back to his house for his midday dinner, but as the old man stopped and nodded she read trouble in his eyes.

"Air ye worried about somethin', Mr. Stacy?" she demanded, and for a little space the man stood hesitantly silent.

At last he hazarded, "Little gal, thar's a thing I'd like ter name ter ye. I reckon if anybody kin holp me hit mout be you."

The girl's eyes lighted with an instinctive sympathy – then shadowed with a premonition of what was coming.

"Is hit – about – Turner?"

The father nodded his head gravely. His eyes wore the harassed disquiet of a problem for which he knew no solution.

"Does ye mean that he's – he's – " She broke off abruptly and Lone Stacy answered her with unrelieved bluntness.

"He's a-layin' up thar drunk ergin, an' he's got a gash on one shoulder that's powder burned. I reckon he's been engagin' in some manner of ruction."

For a moment the girl did not speak, but her cheeks paled and tears swam abruptly in her eyes. She raised one hand and brushed them fiercely away.

She had awakened this morning with a new and unaccountable happiness in her heart. In all the lilt and sparkle of the world and all the tunefulness of the young summer there had seemed a direct message to herself. In her memory she had been hearing afresh the crude but impassioned eloquence with which the boy had talked to her yesterday. Now he lay up there at the distillery in the heavy sleep of the drunkard.

"Ther boy's all I've got," announced Lone Stacy with an unaccustomed break in his voice. "I reckon mebby ef I hadn't been so harsh I mout hev more influence with him." Then he turned abruptly on his heel and trudged on.

Blossom Fulkerson slipped into the woods and came to a sun-flecked amphitheater of rock and rhododendron where the ferns grew lush and tall, by the sparkle of water. There she sank down and covered her face with her hands. Her sobs shook her for a while, and then washing the tears away, she knelt and prayed with a passionate simplicity.

Sometimes she lifted a pale face and her lips twisted themselves pathetically in the earnestness of her prayer.

The Almighty to Whom she made her plea, and Who knew everything, must know, even as she knew, that Turner Stacy was not like those rowdy youths who habitually disgraced the hills. That occasional smile which lurked with its inherent sweetness under his affected sullenness must mean *something*.

Turner had always been her willing vassal, and "sometime" she had supposed, though hitherto that had always seemed a vaguely distant matter like the purple haze on the horizon, they would be avowed sweethearts.

Yesterday, though, as she walked back from the meeting on the ridge it had seemed as if she had spent a moment in that languorous land where the far mists drowse, – and yet the glamour had not faded. She hadn't sought to analyze then, she had only felt a new thrill in her heart as she instinctively broke clusters of pink-hearted bloom from the laurel.

She left the woods after a while and as she came out again to the high road, she heard a voice raised in the high-pitched, almost falsetto, minors of mountain minstrelsy.

It was not a pleasing voice, nor was the ballad a cheery one. As for the singer himself, the twisting of the way still concealed him from view, so that his song proclaimed him like a herald in advance.

"He stobbed her to ther heart an' she fell with a groan.

He threw a leetle dirt *ov*-er her, an' started fer home,"
wailed the dolorous voice of the traveler. There was a splashing of hoofs in shallow water, then
a continuation

"His debt ter ther devil now William must pay,
Fer he fell down an' died afore break of day."

Thus announced, a mule plodded shortly into sight, and upon his back, perching sidewise, sat
a tow-headed lout of a boy with staring, vacant eyes and a mouth which hung open, even when he
desisted from song.

With an access of callow diffidence he halted his mount at sight of Blossom, staring with a
nod and a bashful "Howdy."

"Howdy, Leander," accosted the girl. "How's all your folks?"

Leander White, of Crowfoot Branch, aged fifteen, gulped twice with prodigious and spasmodic
play of his adam's apple, before he eventually commanded voice to reply:

"They're all well... I'm obleeged ... ter ye." Then, however, reassured by the cordial smile on
the lips of Blossom Fulkerson, his power of speech and his hunger for gossip returned to him in
unison.

"But old Aunt Lucy Hutton, over acrost ther branch, she fell down yistiddy an' broke a bone
inside of her, though."

"Did she?" demanded the girl, readily sympathetic, and Leander, thus given sanction as a
purveyor of tidings, nodded and gathered confidence. "Huh-huh, an' Revenuers raided Joe Simmons's
still-house on ther headwaters of Skinflint an' cyarried off a *beautiful* piece o' copper – atter they'd
punched hit full o' holes."

"Revenuers!" Into the girl's voice now came a note of anxiety.

"Huh-huh, revenuers. Folks says they're gittin' bodaciously pesky these days."

"Ye ain't – ye ain't seen none of 'em yourself, have ye, Leander?" The question came a bit
breathlessly and the boy forgot his bashfulness as he expanded with the importance of his traveler's
tales.

"Not to know 'em fer sich," he admitted, "but I met up with a furriner a few leagues back along
ther highway. He was broguein' along mighty brash on his own two feet. La! But he was an elegant
party ter be a-ridin' on shoe-leather, though!"

"What manner of furriner was he, Leander?" demanded Blossom with a clutch of fright at her
heart, but the boy shook his head stupidly.

"Wa'al he was jest a feller from down below. Ter tell hit proper, I didn't hev much speech with
him. We jest met an' made our manners an' went our ways. He 'lowed ter go ter Lone Stacy's house."

"Lone Stacy's house," echoed the girl faintly.

"Reckon' I'll be a-ridin' on," drawled the young horseman nonchalantly. "Reckon I've done told
ye all ther tidings I knows."

Blossom stood, for a while, rooted where he had left her, listening to the splash of the mule's
feet along the creek. If a prying eye should discover the Stacy still to-day it would find not only "a
beautiful piece of copper" but Bear Cat lying there incapacitated and helpless!

Her heart missed its beat at the thought. The hills seemed to close in on her stiflingly with all
their age-old oppression of fears and impending tragedies, and she sat down by the roadside to think
it out. What should she do?

After a while she saw the tall figure of the elder Stacy climbing the mountainside, but he was
taking a short cut – and would not come within hailing distance. Her eye, trained to read indications,
noted that a rifle swung in his right hand.

Bitterly she had been taught by her father to resent the illicit business to which Turner's service
was grudgingly given. But above all ethical hatred of law-breaking rose the very present danger to
Turner himself. Laws were abstract things and Turner was Turner!

There was only one answer. She must watch and, if need arose, give warning.

Just where the brook that trickled down from the still gushed out to the creek and the road which followed its course, lay a steeply sloping field of young corn. Along its back grew rows of "shuckybeans," and here Blossom took her station for her self-appointed task of sentry duty.

CHAPTER V

Jerry Henderson had lost his way.

Aching muscles protested the extra miles because back there at Marlin Town he had been advised to cross Cedar Mountain on foot.

"Unless they suspicions ye, 'most any man'll contrive ter take ye in an' enjoy ye somehow," his counselors had pointed out. "But thar's heaps of them pore fam'lies over thar thet hain't got feed fer a ridin' critter nowadays."

Now Cedar Mountain is not, as its name mendaciously implies, a single peak but a chain that crawls, zig-zag as herringbone, for more than a hundred miles with few crossings which wheels can follow.

It is a wall twenty-five hundred feet high, separating the world from "back of beyond." Having scaled it since breakfast, Jerry Henderson was tired.

He was tanned and toughened like saddle-leather. He was broad of shoulder, narrow of thigh, and possessed of a good, resolute brow and a straight-cut jaw. His eyes were keen with intelligence and sufficiently cool with boldness.

Arriving at a narrow thread of clear water which came singing out at the edge of a corn-field, his eyes lighted with satisfaction. Tilled ground presumably denoted the proximity of a human habitation where questions could be answered.

So he stood, searching the forested landscape for a thread of smoke or a roof, and as he did so he perceived a movement at the edge of the field where the stalks had grown higher than the average and merged with the confusion of the thicket.

Jerry turned and began making his way along the edge of the patch, respecting the corn rows by holding close to the tangle at the margin. Then suddenly with a rustling of the shrubbery as startling as the sound with which a covey of quail rises from nowhere, a figure stepped into sight and the stranger halted in an astonishment which, had Blossom Fulkerson realized it, was the purest form of flattery.

He had seen many women and girls working in the fields as he had come along the way and most of them had been heavy of feature and slovenly of dress. Here was one who might have been the spirit of the hills themselves in bloom; one who suggested kinship with the free skies and the sunlit foliage.

With frank delight in the astonishing vision, Jerry Henderson stood there, his feet well apart, his pack still on his shoulders and his lips parted in a smile of greeting and friendliness.

"Howdy," he said, but the girl remained motionless, vouchsafing no response.

"I'm a stranger in these parts," he volunteered easily, using the vernacular of the hills, "and I've strayed off my course. I was aiming to go to Lone Stacy's dwelling-house."

Still she remained statuesque and voiceless, so the man went on: "Can you set me right? There seems to be a sort of a path here. Does it lead anywhere in particular?"

He took a step nearer and eased his pack to the ground among the briars of the blackberry bushes.

Abruptly, as if to bar his threatened progress, Blossom moved a little to the side, obstructing the path. Into her eyes leaped a flame of Amazonian hostility and her hands clenched themselves tautly at her sides. Her lips parted and from her throat came a long, mellow cry not unlike the yodel of the Tyrol. It echoed through the timber and died away – and again she stood confronting him – wordless!

"I didn't mean to startle you," he declared reassuringly, "I only wanted information."

Again the far-carrying but musical shout was sent through the quiet of the forest – his only answer.

"Since you won't answer my questions," said Jerry Henderson, irritated into capriciousness, "I think I'll see for myself where this trail leads."

Instantly, then, she planted herself before him, with a violently heaving bosom and a wrathful quivering of her delicate nostrils, Her challenge broke tensely from her lips with a note of unyielding defiance.

"Ye can't pass hyar!"

"So you *can* talk, after all," he observed coolly. "It's a help to learn that much at all events."

He had chanced on a path, he realized, which some moonshiner preferred keeping closed and the girl had been stationed there as a human declaration, "no thoroughfare."

Still he stood where he was and presently he had the result of his waiting.

A deep, masculine voice, unmistakable in the peremptoriness of its command, sounded from the massed tangle of the hillside. It expressed itself in the single word "Begone!" and Henderson was not fool enough to search the underbrush for an identifying glimpse of his challenger.

"My name is Jerry Henderson and I was seeking to be shown my way," he said quietly, keeping his eyes, as he spoke, studiously on the face of the girl.

"Begone! I'm a-warnin' ye fa'r. Begone!"

The wayfarer shrugged his shoulders. Debate seemed impracticable, but his annoyance was not lessened as he recognized in the clear eyes of the young woman a half-suppressed mockery of scorn and triumph.

Henderson stooped and hefted his pack again to his shoulders, adjusting it deliberately. If it must be retreat, he wished at least to retire with the honors of war. The girl's expression had piqued him into irascibility.

"I'd heard tell that folks hereabouts were civil to strangers," he announced bluntly. "And I don't give a damn about whatever secret you're bent on hiding from me."

Then he turned on his heel and started, not rapidly but with a leisurely stride to the road. He seemed to feel the eyes of the girl following him as he went, and his spirit of resentment prompted an act of mild bravado as he halted by the rotten line of fence and unhurriedly tightened the lace of a boot.

"Hasten!" barked the warning voice from the laurel, but Henderson did not hasten. He acknowledged the disquieting surmise of a rifle trained on him from the dense cover, but he neither looked back nor altered his pace. Then he heard a gun bark from the shrubbery and a bullet zip as it found its billet in a tree trunk above his head, but that he had expected. It was merely a demonstration in warning – not an attempt on his life. As long as he kept on his way, he believed hostilities would go no further.

Without venturing to use his eyes, he let his ears do their best, and a satirical smile came to his lips as he heard a low, half-smothered scream of fright break from the lips of the girl whom he could no longer see.

And, had he been able to study the golden-brown eyes just then, he would have been even more compensated, for into them crept a slow light of admiration and astonished interest.

"He ain't nobody's coward anyways," she murmured as the figure of the unknown man swung out of sight around the bend, and some thought of the same sort passed through the mind of the elderly man in the thicket, bringing a grim but not an altogether humorless smile to his lips.

"Wa'al, I run him off," he mused, "but I didn't hardly run him no-ways *hard!*"

Jerry Henderson had borne credentials from Uncle Israel Calvert who kept a store on Big Ivy, and he had been everywhere told that once Uncle Billy had viséd his passports, he would need no further safe-conduct.

In the encounter at the cornfield there had been no opportunity to show that bill of health and it was only after an hour spent in walking the wrong way, that its possessor met the next person to whom he could put questions. Then he learned that "Lone Stacy dwelt in a sizeable house over on Little Slippery," – but that he had strayed so far from the true course that now he must climb a mountain or take a detour and that in either event he would have to hasten to arrive there before nightfall.

So the shadows were lengthening when he turned into the course of what must be "Little Slippery" – and came face to face with two men of generous stature, one elderly and the other youthful. He noted that the older of these men carried a rifle on his shoulder and was conscious of a piercing scrutiny from both pairs of eyes.

"I'm seeking Lone Stacy," began Henderson, and the older face darkened into a momentary scowl of animosity, with the coming of the curt reply:

"That's my name."

The traveler gave a violent start of astonishment. It was a deep-chested voice which, once heard, was not to be confused with other voices, and Jerry Henderson had heard it not many hours before raised in stentorian warning from the depth of the thickets. But promptly he recovered his poise and smiled.

"I have a piece of paper here," he said, "from Uncle Israel Calvert. He said that if he vouched for me you would be satisfied."

As Lone Stacy accepted the proffered note with his left hand he passed his rifle to the younger man with his right, and even then he held the sheet unopened for a space while his serious gaze swept the stranger slowly from head to foot in challenging appraisal.

He read slowly, with the knitted brows of the unscholastic, and as he did so the youth kept his eye on Henderson's face – and his finger on the trigger.

Having seen the boy's face, Henderson found it hard to shift his glance elsewhere. He had encountered many mountain faces that were sinister and vindictive – almost malign, but it was not the unyielding challenge which arrested him now. It was something far more individual and impressive. There are eyes that reflect light with the quicksilver responsiveness of mirrors. There are others, though more rare, which shine from an inner fire.

Bear Cat Stacy's held the golden, unresting flame that one encounters in the tawny iris of a captive lion or eagle. Such eyes in a human face mean something and it is something which leads their possessor to the gallows or the throne. They are heralds of a spirit untameable and invincible; of the will to rend or rebuild.

Henderson found himself thinking of volcanoes which are latent but not extinct. It was a first glimpse, but if he never again saw this boy, who stood there measuring him with cool deliberation, he would always remember him as one remembers the few instantly convincing personalities one has brushed in walking through life.

But when Lone Stacy had finished his perusal, the nod of his head was an assurance of dissipated doubt. There was even a grave sort of courtesy in his manner now, as he announced:

"That's good enough fer me. If Uncle Israel vouches fer ye, ye're welcome. He says hyar 'ther bearer is trustworthy' – but he don't say who ye air. Ye said yore name war Jerry Henderson, didn't ye?"

"That *is* my name," assented the newcomer, once more astonished. "But I didn't realize I'd told it yet."

With an outright scorn for subterfuge the older man replied, "I reckon thar hain't no profit in a-beatin' ther devil round ther stump. You've heered my voice afore – an' I've seed yore face. Ye tole me yore name back thar – in ther la'el, didn't ye?"

Henderson bowed. "I *did* recognize your voice, but I didn't aim to speak of it – unless you did."

"When I says that I trusts a man," the moonshiner spoke with an unambiguous quietness of force, "I means what I says an' takes my chances accordin'. Ef a man betrays my confidence – " he paused just an instant then added pointedly – "he takes *his* chances. What did ye 'low yore business war, hyarabouts, Mr. Henderson?"

"I mean to explain that to you in due time, Mr. Stacy, but just now it takes fewer words to say what's *not* my business."

"Wall then, what *hain't* yore business?"

"Other people's business."

"Wa'al so far as hit goes that's straight talk. I favors outright speech myself an' ye don't seem none mealy-mouthed. Ye talks right fer yoreself – like a mountain man."

"You see," said Henderson calmly, "I *am* a mountain man even if I've dwelt down below for some years."

"You – a mountain man?" echoed the bearded giant in bewilderment and the visitor nodded.

"Ever hear of Torment Henderson?" he inquired.

"Colonel Torment Henderson! Why, hell's fiddle, man, my daddy sarved under him in ther war over slavery! I was raised upon stories of how he tuck thet thar name of 'Torment' in battle."

"He was my grandpap," the stranger announced, dropping easily into the phrases of the country.

"Mr. Henderson," said the old man, drawing himself up a trifle straighter, "we're pore folks, but we're proud ter hev ye enjoy what little we've got. This hyar's my son, Turner Stacy."

Then Bear Cat spoke for the first time. "I reckon ye be leg-weary, Mr. Henderson. I'll fotch yore contraptions ter ther house."

There remained to the splendidly resilient powers of Bear Cat's physical endowment no trace of last night's debauch except that invisible aftermath of desperate chagrin and mortification. As he lifted the pack which Henderson had put down something like admiring wonderment awoke in him. Here was a man born like himself in the hills, reared in crude places, who yet bore himself with the air of one familiar with the world, and who spoke with the fluency of education.

As the wearied traveler trudged along with his two hosts, he had glowing before his eyes the final fires of sunset over hills that grew awesomely somber and majestic under the radiance of gold and ash of rose. Then they reached a gate, where a horse stood hitched, and before them bulked the dark shape of a house whose open door was a yellow slab of lamplight.

From the porch as they came up, rose a gray figure in the neutrality of the dying light; a man with a patriarchal beard that fell over his breast and an upper lip clean shaven, like a Mormon elder. Even in that dimness a rude dignity seemed inherent to this man and as Henderson glanced at him he heard Lone Stacy declaring, "Brother Fulkerson, ye're welcome. This hyar is Mr. Henderson." Then turning to the guest, the householder explained. "Brother Fulkerson air ther preacher of God's Word hyarabouts. He's a friend ter every Christian an' a mighty wrestler with sin."

As the stranger acknowledged this presentation he glanced up and, standing in the light from the door, found himself face to face with yet another figure; the figure of a girl who was silhouetted there in profile, for the moment seemingly frozen motionless by astonishment. Her face was flooded with the pinkness of a deep blush, and her slender beauty was as undeniable as an axiom.

Lone Stacy turned with an amused laugh, "An' this, Mr. Henderson," he went on, "air Brother Fulkerson's gal, Blossom. I reckon ye two hev met afore – albeit ye didn't, in a way of speakin', make yore manners ther fust time."

Blossom bowed, then she laughed shyly but with a delicious quality of music in her voice.

"I reckon ye 'lowed I didn't know nothin' – I mean anything – about manners, Mr. Henderson," she confessed and the man hastily assured her:

"I 'lowed that you were splendidly loyal – to somebody."

As he spoke he saw Bear Cat at his elbow, his eyes fixed on the girl with a wordless appeal of contrition and devotion, and he thought he understood.

"Howdy, Blossom," murmured Turner, and the girl's chin came up. Her voice seemed to excommunicate him as she replied briefly: "Howdy, Turner."

This was a lover's quarrel, surmised Henderson and discreetly he turned again to the host, but, even so, he saw Turner step swiftly forward and raise his hands. His lips were parted and his eyes full of supplication, but he did not speak. He only let his arms fall and turned away with a face of stricken misery.

Blossom knew about last night, reflected Bear Cat. He was, as he deserved to be, in disgrace.

Then as the girl stood looking off into the gathering darkness her own face filled wistfully with pain and the boy, dropping to a seat on the floor of the porch, watched her covertly with sidewise glances.

"Blossom met me down ther road," observed the minister, "an' named ter me thet she hed – " He paused, casting a dubious glance at the stranger, and Lone Stacy interrupted: "She named ter ye thet she stood guard at ther still an' warned Mr. Henderson off?"

Brother Fulkerson nodded gravely. "I was a little mite troubled in my mind lest she'd put herself in jeopardy of the law. Thet's why I lighted down an' hitched hyar: ter hev speech with ye."

"Ye needn't worrit yoreself none, Brother Fulkerson," reassured the host. "Mr. Henderson comes vouched fer by Uncle Israel."

The preacher sat for a space silent and when he next spoke it was still with a remnant of misgiving in his tone.

"I don't aim to go about crossin' good men and a-cavilin' with thar opinions," he began apologetically. "Like as not heaps of 'em air godlier men than me, but I holds it to be my duty to speak out free." Again he paused and cast a questioning glance at his host as though in deference to the hospitality of the roof, and the tall mountaineer, standing beside the post of his porch, nodded assent with equal gravity.

"Talk right fer yoreself, Brother Fulkerson. I don't never aim ter muzzle no man's speech."

"Waal, this day I've rid some twenty miles acrost high ridges and down inter shadowy valleys, I've done traversed some places thet war powerful wild an' laurely. Wharsoever God's work calls me, I'm obleeged ter go, but I raised my voice in song as I fared along amongst them thickets, lest some man thet I couldn't see; some man a-layin' on watch, mout suspicion I was seekin' ter discover somethin' he aimed ter keep hid – jest as ye suspicioned Mr. Henderson, hyar."

Lone Stacy stroked his beard.

"I reckon thet war ther wisest way, Brother Fulkerson, unless every man over thar knowed ye."

"I reckon God likes ther songs of his birds better," declared the preacher, "then ther song of a man thet *hes* ter sing ter protect his own life. I reckon no country won't ever prosper mightily, whilst hit's a land of hidin' out with rifle-guns in ther laurel."

There was no wrath in the eyes of the host as he listened to his guest's indictment or the voice of thrilling earnestness in which it was delivered. He only raised one hand and pointed upward where a mighty shoulder of mountain rose hulking through the twilight. Near its top one could just make out the thread-like whiteness of a new fence line.

"Yonder's my corn patch," he said. "When I cl'ared hit an' grubbed hit out my neighbors all came ter ther workin' an' amongst us we toiled thar from sun-up twell one o'clock at night – daylight an' moonlight. On thet patch I kin raise me two or three master crops o' corn an' atter *thet* hit won't hardly raise rag weeds! A bushel o' thet corn, sledded over ter ther nighest store fotches in mebbly forty cents. But thar's two gallons of licker in hit an' *thet's* wuth money. Who's a-goin' ter deny me ther rightful license ter do hit?"

"Ther Law denies ye," replied the preacher gravely, but without acerbity.

"Thar's things thet's erginst ther law," announced the old man with a swift gathering of fierceness in his tone, "an' thar's things thet's *above* ther law. A criminal is a man thet's done befouled his own self-respect. I hain't never done thet an' I hain't no criminal. What do *you* think, Mr. Henderson?"

Henderson had no wish to be drawn, so soon, into any conflict of local opinion, yet he realized that a candid reply was expected.

"My opinion is that of theory only," he responded seriously. "But I agree with Brother Fulkerson. A community with secrets to hide is a hermit community – and one of the strangers that is frightened away – is Prosperity."

Bear Cat Stacy, brooding silently in his place, looked suddenly up. Hitherto he had seen only the sweet wistfulness of Blossom's eyes. Now he remembered the words of the old miller.

"Some day a mountain man will rise up as steadfast as the hills he sprung from – an' he'll change hit all like ther sun changes fog!" Perhaps Turner Stacy was ripe for hero-worship.

Over the mountain top appeared the beacon of the evening star – luminous but pale. As if saluting it the timber became wistful with the call of whippoorwills and fireflies began to flit against the sooty curtain of night.

Something stirred in the boy, as though the freshening breeze brought the new message of an awakening. Here was the talk of wise men, concurring with the voices of his dreams! But at that moment his mother appeared in the doorway and announced

"You men kin come in an' *eat*, now."

CHAPTER VI

In former days an Appalachian tavern was a "quarter-house"; a hostelry where one paid a quarter for one's bed and a quarter, each, for meals. Now the term has fallen into such disuse as to be no longer generic, but locally it survived with a meaning both specific and malodorous. The press of Kentucky and Virginia had used it often, coupled with lurid stories of blood-lettings and orgies; linking with it always the name of its proprietor, Kinnard Towers.

How could such things go on in the twentieth century? questioned the readers of these news columns, forgetting that this ramparted isolation lives not in the twentieth century but still in the eighteenth; that its people who have never seen salt water still sing the ballads of Walter Raleigh's sea-rovers, and that from their lips still fall, warm with every-day usage, the colloquialisms of Chaucer and of Piers the Ploughman.

The Quarterhouse stood in a cleft where the mountains had been riven. Its front door opened into Virginia and its rear door gave into Kentucky. Across the puncheon floor was humorously painted a stripe of whitewash, as constantly renewed as the markings of a well-kept tennis court – and that line was a state boundary.

Hither flocked refugees from the justice of two states, and if a suddenly materializing sheriff confronted his quarry in the room where each day and each night foregathered the wildest spirits of a wild land, the hounded culprit had only to cross that white line and stand upon his lawful demand for extradition papers. Here, therefore, the hunted foxes of the law ran to ground. The man who presided as proprietor was a power to be feared, admired, hated as individual circumstance dictated, but in any case one whose wrath was not to be advisedly stirred.

He had found it possible to become wealthy in a land where such achievement involves battenning on poverty. Cruel – suave; predatory – charitable, he had taken life by his own hand and that of the hireling, but also he had, in famine-times, succored the poor.

He had, in short, awed local courts and intimidated juries of the vicinage until he seemed beyond the law, and until office-holders wore his collar.

Kinnard Towers was floridly blond of coloring, mild of eye and urbanely soft-spoken of voice.

Once, almost two decades ago, while the feud was still eruptive, it had seemed advisable to him to have Lone Stacy done to death, and to that end he had bargained with Black Tom Carmichael.

Black Tom had been provided with a double-barreled gun, loaded with buckshot, and placed in a thicket which, at the appointed hour, the intended victim must pass. But it had chanced that fate intervened. On that day Lone Stacy had carried in his arms his baby son, Turner Stacy, and, seeing the child, Black Tom had faltered.

Later in the seclusion of a room over the Quarterhouse, the employer had wrathfully taken his churl to task.

"Wa'al, why didn't ye git him?" was the truculent interrogation. "He passed by close enough fer ye ter hit him with a rock."

"He was totin' his baby," apologized the designated assassin shamefacedly, yet with a sullen obstinacy, "I was only hired ter kill a growed-up man. Ef ye'd a-give me a rifle-gun like I asked ye 'stid of a scatter-gun I could've got him through his damned head an' not harmed ther child none. Thet's why I held my hand."

Kinnard Towers had scornfully questioned: "What makes ye so tormentin' mincy erbout ther kid? Don't ye know full well thet when he grows up we'll have ter git *him*, too? Howsoever next time I'll give ye a rifle-gun."

Like all unlettered folk the mountaineer is deeply superstitious and prone to believe in portents and wonders. Often, though he can never be brought to confess it he gives credence to tales of sorcery and witchcraft.

Turner Stacy was from his birth a "survigrous" child, and he was born on the day of the eclipse. As he came into the world the sun was darkened. Immediately after that a sudden tempest broke which tore the forests to tatters, awoke quiet brooks to swirling torrents, unroofed houses and took its toll of human life. Even in after years when men spoke of the "big storm" they always alluded to *that* one.

An old crone who was accounted able to read fortunes and work charms announced that Turner Stacy came into life on the wings of that storm, and that the sun darkened its face because his birth savored of the supernatural. This being so, she said, he was immune from any harm of man's devising. Her absurd story was told and retold around many a smoky cabin hearth, and there were those who accorded it an unconfessed credence.

Later Black Tom was given a rifle and again stationed in ambush. Again Lone Stacy, favored by chance, carried his baby son in his arms. Black Tom, whose conscience had never before impeded his action, continued to gaze over his gun-sights – without pressing the trigger.

Towers was furious, but Carmichael could only shake his head in a frightened bewilderment, as if he had seen a ghost.

"Ther brat looked at me jest as I was about to fire," he protested. "His eyes didn't look like a human bein's. He hain't no baby – he was born a man – or somethin' more then a man."

As affairs developed, the truce was arranged soon afterward, and also the marked man's death became unnecessary, because he was safe in prison on a charge of moonshining.

Neither Lone Stacy nor his son had ever known of this occurrence, and now the Stacys and the Towers met on the road and "made their manners" without gun-play.

But to Kinnard Towers local happenings remained vital and, for all his crudity, few things of topical interest occurred of which he was not duly apprised.

Into his dwelling place came one day the Honorable Abraham Towers, his nephew, who sat in the state Legislature at Frankfort. The two were closeted together for an hour and as the nephew emerged, at the end of the interview, Kinnard walked with him to the hitching-post where the visitor's horse stood tethered.

"I'm obleeged ter ye, Abe," he said graciously. "When this man Henderson gits hyar, I'll make hit a point ter hev casual speech with him. I aims ter l'arn his business, an' ef what ye suspicions air true, he'll have dealin's with me – or else he won't hardly succeed."

So it happened logically enough that on the evening of Jerry's arrival, Kinnard Towers mounted and started out over the hill trails. He rode, as he always did when he went far abroad, under armed escort since tyrants are never secure. Four rifle-equipped vassals accompanied him; two riding as advance guard and two protecting the rear.

Kinnard's destination was the house of Lone Stacy on Little Slippery, a house whose threshold he could not, in the old days, have crossed without blood-letting; but these were the days of peace.

Arriving, he did not go direct to the door and knock, but discreetly halting in the highway, lifted his voice and shouted aloud, "Halloo! I'm Kinnard Towers an' I'm a-comin' in."

The door was thrown promptly open and Lone Stacy appeared, framed between threshold and lintel, holding a lamp aloft and offering welcome.

"Gentlemen," said the host in a matter-of-fact voice, "ef you'll excuse me, I'll rest yore guns."

Then in observance of a quaint and ancient ceremonial, each armed guardian passed in, surrendering his rifle at the threshold. In retarded Appalachia so runs the rule. To fail in its fulfilment is to express distrust for the honesty and ability of the householder to protect his guests, and such an implication constitutes a grave discourtesy.

Inside a fire roared on the hearth, for even in June, the mountain nights are raw.

Henderson, watching the small cavalcade troop in, smiled inwardly. He was not unmindful of the identity or the power of this modern baron, and he was not without suspicion that he himself was the cause of the visit.

"I chanced ter be farin' by, Lone," Kinnard Towers enlightened his host easily, "an' I 'lowed I'd light down an' rest a little spell."

"Ye're welcome," was the simple reply. "Draw up ter ther fire an' set ye a cheer."

The talk lingered for a space on neighborhood topics, but the host had found time, between hearing the shout outside and replying to it, to say in a low voice to his guest: "I reckon atter Kinnard Towers comes in we won't talk no more erbout my still – jest stills in gin'ral," and that caution was religiously observed.

The kitchen tasks had been finished now and while the men sat close to the smoking hearth the faces of the women looked on from the shadowed corners of the room, where they sat half obscured upon the huge four-poster beds.

The man who had crossed Cedar Mountain lighted his pipe from the bed of coals and then, straightening up, he stood on the hearth where his eyes could take in the whole semicircle of listening faces. They were eyes that, for all their seeming of a theorist's engrossment, missed little.

This house might have been a pioneer abode of two hundred years ago, standing unamended by the whole swelling tide of modernity that had passed it by untouched.

The leaping blaze glittered on the metal of polished rifles stacked in a corner, and on two others hanging against the smoke-dimmed logs of the walls. Red pods of peppers and brown leaves of tobacco were strung along the rafters. Hardly defined of shape against one shadowy wall, stood a spinning wheel.

Henderson knew that the room was pregnant with the conflict of human elements. He realized that he himself faced possibilities which made his mission here a thing of delicate manipulation; even of personal danger.

The blond man with the heavy neck, who sat contemplatively chewing at the stem of an unlighted pipe, listened in silence. He hardly seemed interested, but Henderson recognized him for the sponsor and beneficiary of lawlessness. He more than any other would be the logical foe to a new order which brought the law in its wake – and the law's reckonings.

Near to the enemy whom he had heretofore faced in pitched battle, sat old Lone Stacy, his brogans kicked off and his bare feet thrust out to the warmth; bearded, shrewd of eye, a professed lover of the law, asking only the exemption of his illicit still. He, too, in the feud days had wielded power, but had sought in the main to wield it for peace.

And there, showing no disposition to draw aside the skirts of his raiment in disgust, sat the preacher of the hills whose strength lay in his ability to reconcile antagonisms, while yet he stood staunch, abating nothing of self-sacrificial effort. It was almost as though church and crown and commoner were gathered in informal conclave.

But luminous, like fixed stars, gleamed two other pairs of eyes. As he realized them, Henderson straightened up with such a thrill as comes from a vision. Here were the eyes of builders of the future – agleam as they looked on the present! Blossom's were wide and enthralled and Turner Stacy's burned as might those of a young crusader hearing from the lips of old and seasoned knights recitals of the wars of the Sepulchre.

Bear Cat Stacy saw in this stranger the prophet bearing messages for which he had longed – and waited almost without hope. But Kinnard Towers saw in him a dangerous and unsettling agitator.

"You said," declared Henderson, when the theme had swung back again to economic discussion, "that your cornfield was good for a few crops and then the rains would wash it bare, yet as I came along the road I saw an out-cropping vein of coal that reached above my head, and on each side of me were magnificent stretches of timber that the world needs and that is growing scarce."

"Much profit thet does me," Lone Stacy laughed dryly. "Down at Uncle Israel's store thar's a dollar bill thet looks like hit's a-layin' on ther counter – but when ye aims to pick hit up ye discarns thet hit's pasted under ther glass. Thet coal an' timber of mine air pasted ter ther wrong side of Cedar Mounting."

"And why? Because there are few roads and fewer schools. It's less the cost and difficulties of building wagon roads than something else that stands in the way. It's the laurel."

"The laurel?" repeated Lone Stacy, but the preacher nodded comprehendingly, and the visitor went on:

"Yes. The laurel. I've been in Central American jungles where men died of fever because the thick growth held and bred the miasma. Here the laurel holds a spirit of concealment. If there wasn't a bush in all these hills big enough to hide a man, the country would be thrown open to the markets of the world. It's the spirit of hiding – that locks life in and keeps it poor."

"I presume ye means on account of ther blockade licker," replied the host, "but thet don't tech ther root of ther matter. How erbout ther fields thet stand on end; fields thet kain't be plowed an' thet ther rains brings down on yore head, leavin' nuthin 'thar but ther rock?"

Henderson had the power of convincing words, abetted by a persuasive quality of voice. As a mountain man he preached his faith in the future of the hills. He spoke of the vineyards of Madeira where slopes as incorrigibly steep as these were redeemed by terracing. He talked of other lands that were being exhausted of resources and turning greedy eyes upon the untapped wealth of the Cumberlands. He painted the picture glowingly and fervently, and Turner Stacy, listening, bent forward with a new fire in his eyes: a fire which Kinnard Towers did not fail to mark.

"When ther railroad taps us," interpolated Lone Stacy, in a pause, "mebby we kin manage ter live. Some says ther road aims ter cross Cedar Mounting."

"Don't deceive yourself with false hopes," warned the visitor. "This change must be brought about from inside – not outside. The coming of the railroad lies a decade or two away. I've investigated that question pretty thoroughly and I know. The coal-fields are so large that railroads can still, for a long time to come, choose the less expensive routes. Cedar Mountain balks them for the present. It will probably balk them for the length of our lives – but this country can progress without waiting for that."

"So ye thinks thet even without no railroad this God-forsaken land kin still prosper somehow?" inquired the host skeptically, and the visitor answered promptly:

"I do. I am so convinced of it that I'm here to buy property – to invest all I have and all my mother and sisters have. I think that by introducing modern methods of intensive farming, I can make it pay a fair return in my own time – and when I die I'll leave property that will ultimately enrich the younger generations. I *don't* think it can make me rich in my lifetime – but *some* day it's a certainty of millions."

"Why don't ye buy yoreself property whar ther railroad will come in yore own day, then? Wouldn't thet pay ye better?"

The suggestion was the first contribution to the conversation that had come from Kinnard Towers, and it was proffered in a voice almost urbane of tone.

Henderson turned toward him.

"That's a straight question and I'll answer it straight. To buy as much property as I want along a possible railway line would cost too much money. I'm gambling, not on the present but on the future. I come here because I know the railroad is *not* coming and for that reason prices will be moderate."

As he made this explanation the newcomer was watching the face of his questioner almost eagerly. What he read there might spell the success or failure of his plans. Any enterprise across which Kinnard Towers stamped the word "prohibited" was an enterprise doomed to great vicissitude in a land where his word was often above the law.

But the blond and florid man granted him the satisfaction of no reply. He gazed pensively at the logs crackling on the hearth and his features were as inscrutably blank as those of the Sphinx.

After a moment Towers did speak, but it was to his host and on another topic.

"Lone," he said, "thet firewood of yourn's right green an' sappy, hain't it? Hit pops like ther fo'th of July."

Brother Fulkerson spoke reflectively: "We needs two more things then we've got in these hills – an' one thing less then we've got. We wants roads an' schools – and the end of makin' white licker."

Henderson saw Blossom slip from the bed and flit shadow-like through the door, and a few moments later he missed, too, the eagerly attentive presence of the boy. Blossom had escaped from the reek of tobacco smoke inside, to the soft cadences of the night-song and the silver wash of the moonlight.

Turner Stacy found her sitting, with her face between her palms, under a great oak that leaned out across the trickle of the creek, and when he spoke her name, she raised eyes glistening with tears.

"Blossom," he began in a contrite voice, "ye're mad at me, ain't ye? Ye've done heerd about – about last night." Then he added with moody self-accusation, "God knows I don't blame ye none."

She turned her head away and did not at once answer. Suddenly her throat choked and she broke into sobs that shook her with their violence. The young man stood rigid, his face drawn with self-hatred and at last she looked up at him.

"Somehow, Turner," she said unsteadily, "hit wouldn't of been jest ther same ef hit had been any other time. Yestiddy – up thar on ther ridge – ye promised me thet ye'd be heedful with licker."

"I knows I did," he declared bitterly. "Ye've got a right ter plumb hate me."

"Ef I'd a-hated ye," she reminded him simply, "I wouldn't sca'cely have watched ther road all day." Then irrelevantly she demanded, "How did ye git yore shoulder hurt?"

The wish to defend himself with the palliations of last night's desperate fatigue and the chill in his wound was a strong temptation, but he repressed it. Knowledge of his encounter with Ratler Webb would only alarm her and conjure up fears of unforgiving vengeance.

"Hit war just a gun thet went off accidental-like," he prevaricated. "I wasn't harmed none, Blossom." Then in a tense voice he continued: "I only aimed ter drink a leetle – not too much – an' then somehow I didn't seem ter hev ther power ter quit."

He felt the lameness of that plea and broke off.

"I'd been studyin' about what you said on ther ridge," she told him falteringly, and the tremor of her voice electrified him. Again the mountains on their ancient foundations grew unsteady before his eyes.

"Does ye mean thet – thet despite last night – ye keers fer me?"

He bent forward, lips parted and heart pounding – and her reply was an unsteady whisper.

"I hain't plumb dead sartain yit, Turner, but – but this mornin' I couldn't think of nothin' else but you."

"Blossom!" exclaimed the boy, his voice ringing with a solemn earnestness. "I don't want thet ye shall hev ter feel shame fer me – but –"

Once again the words refused to come. The girl had risen now and stood slender in the silver light, her lashes wet with tears. With that picture in his eyes it became impossible to balance the other problems of his life. So he straightened himself stiffly and turned his gaze away from her. He was seeing instead a picture of the squat shanty where the copper worm was at work in the shadow, and for him it was a picture of bondage.

So she waited, feeling some hint of realization for the struggle his eyes mirrored.

There would be many other wet nights up there, he reflected as his jaw set itself grimly; many nights of chilled and aching bones with that wild thirst creeping seductively, everpoweringly upon him out of the darkness. There would be the clutch of longing, strangling his heart and gnawing at his stomach.

But if he *did* promise and failed, he could never again recover his self-respect. He would be doomed. With his face still averted, he spoke huskily and laboriously.

"I reckon thar hain't no way ter make ye understand, Blossom. I don't drink like some folks, jest ter carouse. I don't oftentimes want ter tech hit, but seems like sometimes I jest *has* ter hev hit. Hit's most gin'rally when I'm plumb sick of livin' on hyar withouten no chance ter better myself."

Even in the moonlight she could see that his face was drawn and pallid. Then abruptly he wheeled:

"Ther Stacys always keeps thar bonds. I reckons ye wants me ter give ye my hand thet I won't never tech another drop, Blossom, but I kain't do thet yit – I've got ter fight hit out fust an' be plumb dead sartain thet I could keep my word ef I pledged hit – "

Blossom heard her father calling her from the porch and as she seized the boy's arms she found them set as hard as rawhide.

"I understands, Turney," she declared hastily, "an' – an' – I'm a-goin' ter be prayin' fer ye afore I lays down ternight!"

As Turner watched the preacher mount and ride away, his daughter walking alongside, he did not return to the house. He meant to fight it out in his own way. Last night when the hills had rocked to the fury of the storm – he had surrendered. To-night when the moonlit slopes drowsed in the quiet of silver mists, the storm was in himself. Within a few feet of the gate he took his seat at the edge of a thick rhododendron bush, where the shadow blotted him into total invisibility. He sat there drawn of face and his hands clenched and unclenched themselves. He did not know it, but, in his silence and darkness, he was growing. There was for him a touch of Golgotha in those long moments of reflection and something of that anguished concentration which one sees in Rodin's figure of "The Thinker" – that bronze man bent in the melancholy travail of the birth of thought.

When an hour later Kinnard Towers and his cortège trooped out of Lone Stacy's house, Jerry Henderson, willing to breathe the freshness of the night, strolled along.

The men with the rifles swung to their saddles and rode a few rods away, but Towers himself lingered and at last with a steady gaze upon the stranger he made a tentative suggestion.

"I don't aim ter discourage a man thet's got fine ideas, Mr. Henderson, but hev ye duly considered thet when ye undertakes ter wake up a country thet's been slumberin' as ye puts hit, fer two centuries, ye're right apt ter find some sleepy-heads thet would rather be – left alone?"

"I'm not undertaking a revolution," smiled the new arrival. "I'm only aiming to show folks, by my own example, how to better themselves."

The man who stood as the sponsor of the old order mounted and looked down from his saddle.

"Hain't thet right smart like a doctor a-comin' in ter cure a man," he inquired dryly, "a-fore ther sick person hes sent fer him? Sometimes ther ailin' one moutn't take hit kindly."

"I should say," retorted Henderson blandly, "that it's more like the doctor who hangs out his shingle – so that men can come if they like."

There was a momentary silence and at its end Towers spoke again with just a hint of the enigmatical in his voice.

"Ye spoke in thar of havin' personal knowledge thet ther railroad didn't aim ter come acrost Cedar Mounting, didn't ye?"

"Yes."

"Well now, Mr. Henderson – not meanin' ter dispute ye none – I don't feel so sartain about thet."

"I spoke from fairly definite information."

The man on horseback nodded.

"I aims ter talk pretty plain. We're a long ways behind ther times up hyar, an' thet means thet we likes ter sort of pass on folks thet comes ter dwell amongst us."

"I call that reasonable, Mr. Towers."

"I'm obleeged ter ye. Now jest let's suppose thet ther railroad *did* aim ter come in atter all an' let's jest suppose for ther fun of ther thing, thet hit likewise aimed ter grab off all ther best coal an' timber rights afore ther pore, ign'rant mountain-men caught on ter what war happenin'. In sich a case, ther fust step would be ter send a man on ahead, wouldn't hit – a mountain man, if possible – ter preach thet ther railroad didn't aim ter come? Thet would mean bargains, wouldn't hit?"

Jerry Henderson laughed aloud.

"Do you mean that you suspect me of such a mission?"

Glancing about to assure himself that no one heard except his single auditor, the erstwhile hirer of assassins bent over his saddle pommel. Into the suavity of his voice had crept a new hardness and into the pale color of his eyes an ominous glint.

"Back in ther days of ther war with England, Mr. Henderson, I've heered tell thet our grandsires hed a flag with a rattlesnake on hit, an' ther words, 'Don't tread on me!' Some folks says we're right-smart like our grandsires back hyar in ther timber."

"If that's a threat, Mr. Towers," said Henderson steadily, "I make it a point never to understand them."

"An' I makes hit a point never ter give them more then onct. I don't say I suspicions ye – but I do *p'intedly* say this ter ye: Whatever yore real project air, afore ye goes inter hit too deep – afore ye invests all ye've got, an' all yore mother hes got an' all yore sister hes got, hit mout be right heedful ter ride over ter my dwellin'-house an' hev speech with me."

An indignant retort rose to Jerry's lips, but with diplomatic forbearance he repressed it.

"When I've been here a while, I guess your suspicions will be allayed without verbal assurances, Mr. Towers."

"Even if ye only comes preachin' ther drivin' out of licker," said Towers slowly, "ye're treadin' on my friends. We suffers Sabbath talk like thet from preachers, but we don't relish hit on week-days from strangers. In thar a while back I listened. I seen ye an' Brother Fulkerson a-stirrin' up an' onsettlin' ther young folks. I kin feel ther restless things thet's a-ridin' in ther wind ter-night, Mr. Henderson, an' hit hain't sca'cely right ter bring trouble on these folks thet's shelterin' ye."

Bear Cat Stacy, unseen but eagerly listening, felt a leaping of resentment in his veins. All the feudal instincts that had their currents there woke to wrath as he heard his hereditary enemy warning away his guest. It was the intolerable affront of a hint that the power of the Stacys had dwindled and waned until it could no longer secure the protection of its own roof-trees.

With the anger of Marmion for Angus, sternly repressed but forceful, Bear Cat suddenly stood out revealed in the moonlight. He had only to take a step, but the effect was precisely that of having been suddenly materialized out of nothingness, and when his voice announced him, even the case-hardened control of Kinnard Towers suffered a violent jolt of surprise.

"I reckon, Kinnard Towers," said the boy with a velvety evenness of voice, "ther day hain't hardly come yit when ther Stacys hes ter ask ye what visitors they kin take inter thar dwellin'-houses. I reckon mebby Mr. Henderson's ideas may suit some folks hyarabouts, even if they don't pleasure you none. So long as he aims ter tarry hyar, an' we aims ter enjoy him, ther man thet seeks ter harm him will hev ter come hyar an' git him."

Never since the fend had ended in a pact of peace, had two factional leaders come so near a rupture. Henderson could feel the ominous tensy in the air, but Towers himself only shook his head and laughed. It was a good-humored laugh, since this was not the time for open enmity.

"Oh, pshaw, son! I reckon nobody don't aim no harm to Mr. Henderson. I jest knows this country an' he ought ter realize thet my counsel mout help him." There was a brief pause and then with an audacity of bantering Kinnard proceeded. "I've done heered thet ye tuck yore dram onct in a while yoreself – mebby you've got friends thet makes licker – an' you knows how they mout feel about too much talk."

Bear Cat Stacy stood with his shoulders drawn back and his eyes smoldering.

"Thet's my business," he retorted curtly, but the Quarterhouse baron went on with the same teasing smile.

"Mebby so, son, but hit kinderly 'peared like ter me thet Brother Fulkerson's gal war a-'lowin' thet hit war *her* business, too. I overheered yore maw say somethin' 'bout yore drinkin' some last night an' I seed Blossom's purty eyes flash."

The mounted man waved his hand and rode away, his escort falling in at front and rear, but when the cavalcade had turned the angle of the road Kinnard Towers beckoned Black Tom Carmichael to his side and spoke grimly.

"Thar's trouble breedin', Tom, an' this young Bear Cat Stacy's in ther b'ilin'. Ye played ther fool when yer failed ter git him as a kid. Hit war only a-layin' up torment erginst ther future."

Henderson lay long awake that night in the loft which he shared with Bear Cat. He heard the snores of the man and woman sleeping below, but the unmoving figure beside him had not relaxed in slumber. Henderson wondered if he were reflecting upon that talk by the gate and all the dark possibilities it might presage.

It was almost dawn, when Bear Cat slipped from under his quilt, drew on his shoes and trousers and left the loft-like attic, his feet making no sound on the rungs of the ladder.

What furtive mission was taking him out, pondered Henderson, into the laurel-masked hills at that hour?

But out in the creek-bed road, with the setting moon on his face, Bear Cat Stacy paused and drank in a long breath.

"He seen Blossom's eyes flash, he said," murmured the boy with his hands clenched at his sides, then he threw back his shoulders and spoke half aloud and very resolutely: "Wa'al they won't never hev ter flash no more fer thet cause." After a little while, his gaze fixed on the myriad stars, he spoke again. "God Almighty, I needs thet ye should help me now. I aims ter go dry fer all time – an' I kain't hardly compass hit withouten ye upholds me."

Wheeling abruptly, he went with long strides around the turn of the road. A half hour later he was noiselessly opening the gate of the preacher's house. He meant to wait there until Blossom awoke, but prompted by habit he gave, thrice repeated, the quavering and perfectly counterfeited call of a barn owl. Since she had been a very small girl, that had been their signal, and though she would not hear it now, it pleased him to repeat it.

Then to his astonishment he heard, very low, the whining creak of an opening door, and there before him, fully dressed, intently awake, stood the girl herself.

"Blossom," said Bear Cat in a low voice that trembled a little, "Blossom, I came over ter wail hyar till ye woke up. I came ter tell ye – thet I'm ready ter give ye my hand. I hain't never goin' ter tech a drap of licker no more, so long es I lives. I says hit ter ye with God Almighty listenin'."

"Oh, Turney – !" she exclaimed, then her voice broke and her eyes swam with tears. "I'm – I'm right proud of ye," was all she could find the words to add.

"Did I wake ye up?" demanded the boy in a voice of self-accusation. "I didn't aim to. I 'lowed I'd wait till mornin'."

Blossom shook her head. "I hain't been asleep yit," she assured him. Her cheeks flushed and she drooped her head as she explained. "I've been a-prayin, Turney. God's done answered my prayer."

Turner Stacy took off his hat and shook back the dark lock of hair that fell over his forehead. Beads of moisture stood out on his temples.

"Did ye keer – thet much, Blossom?" he humbly questioned, and suddenly the girl threw both arms about his neck. "I keers all a gal *kin* keer, Turney. I wasn't sartain afore – but I knowed hit es soon as I begun prayin' fer ye."

Standing there in the pallid mistiness before dawn, and yielding her lips to the pressure of his kiss, Blossom felt the almost religious solemnity of the moment. She was crossing the boundary of acknowledged love – and he had passed through the stress of terrific struggle before he had been able to bring her his pledge. His face, now cool, had been hot with its fevered passion. But she did not know that out of this moment was to be born transforming elements of change destined to shake her life and his; to quake the very mountains themselves; to rend the old order's crust, and finally, after tempest and bloodshed – to bring the light of a new day. No gift of prophecy told her that, of the parentage of this declaration of her love and this declaration of his pledge, was to be born in him a

warrior's spirit of crusade which could only reach victory after all the old vindictive furies had been roused to wrath – and conquered – and the shadow of tragedy had touched them both.

And had Bear Cat Stacy, holding her soft cheek pressed to his own, been able to look even a little way ahead, he would have gone home and withdrawn the hospitality he had pledged to the guest who slept there.

CHAPTER VII

Because Jerry Henderson viewed the life of the hills through understanding eyes, certain paradoxes resolved themselves into the expected. He was not surprised to find under Lone Stacy's rude exterior an innate politeness which was a thing not of formula but of instinct.

"Would hit pleasure ye," demanded the host casually the next morning, "ter go along with me up thar an' see that same identical still thet I tuck sich pains yestiddy ye *shouldn't* see?" But Henderson shook his head, smiling.

"No, thank you. I'd rather not see any still that I can avoid. What I don't know can't get me – or anyone else – into trouble."

Lone Stacy nodded his approval as he said: "I didn't aim ter deny ye no mark of *confidence*. I 'lowed I'd ought ter ask ye."

Turner Stacy stood further off from illiteracy than his father. In the loft which the visitor had shared with him the night before he had found a copy of the Kentucky Statutes and one of Blackstone's Commentaries, though neither of them was so fondly thumbed as the life of Lincoln.

By adroit questioning Jerry elicited the information that the boy had been as far along the way of learning as the sadly deficient district schools could conduct him; those shambling wayside institutions where, on puncheon benches, the children memorize in that droning chorus from which comes the local name of "blab-school."

Turner had even taken his certificate and taught for a term in one of these pathetic places. He laughed as he confessed this: "Hit jest proves how pore ther schools air, hyarabouts," he avowed.

"I expect you'd have liked to go to college," inquired Henderson, and the boy's eyes blazed passionately with his thwarted lust for opportunity – then dimmed to wretchedness.

"Like hit! Hell, Mr. Henderson, I'd lay my left hand down, without begrudgin' hit, an' cut hit off at ther wrist fer ther chanst ter do thet!"

Henderson sketched for him briefly the histories of schools that had come to other sections of the hills; schools taught by inspired teachers, with their model farms, their saw-mills and even their hospitals: schools to which not only children but pupils whose hair had turned white came and eagerly learned their alphabets, and as much more as they sought.

The boy raised a hand. "Fer God's sake don't narrate them things," he implored. "They sots me on fire. My grandsires hev been satisfied hyar fer centuries an' all my folks sees in me, fer dreamin' erbout things like thet, is lackin' of loyalty."

Henderson found his interest so powerfully engaged that he talked on with an excess of enthusiasm.

"But back of those grandsires were other grandsires, Turner. They were the strongest, the best and the most American of all America; those earlier ancestors of yours and mine. They dared to face the wilderness, and those that got across the mountains won the West."

"Ours didn't git acrost though," countered the boy dryly. "Ours was them thet started out ter do big things an' failed."

Henderson smiled. "A mule that went lame, a failure to strike one of the few possible passes, made all the difference between success and failure in that pilgrimage, but the blood of those empire-builders is our blood and what they are now, we shall be when we catch up. We've been marking time while they were marching, that's all."

"Ye've done been off ter college yoreself, hain't ye, Mr. Henderson?"

"Yes. Harvard."

"Harvard? Seems ter me I've heered tell of hit. Air hit as good as Berea?"

The visitor repressed his smile, but before he could answer Bear Cat pressed on:

"Whilst ye're up hyar, I wonder ef hit'd be askin' too master much of ye ef – " the boy paused, gulped down his embarrassment and continued hastily – "ef ye could kindly tell me a few books ter read?"

"Gladly," agreed Henderson. "It's the young men like you who have the opportunity to make life up here worth living for the rest."

After a moment Bear Cat suggested dubiously: "But amongst my folks I wouldn't git much thanks fer tryin'. Ther outside world stands fer interference – an' they won't suffer hit. They believes in holdin' with their kith an' kin."

Again Henderson nodded, and this time the smile that danced in his eyes was irresistibly infectious. In a low voice he quoted:

"The men of my own stock

They may do ill or well,
But they tell the lies I am wonted to,
They are used to the lies I tell.
We do not need interpreters
When we go to buy and sell."

Bear Cat Stacy stood looking off over the mountain sides. He filled his splendidly rounded chest with a deep draft of the morning air, – air as clean and sparkling as a fine wine, and into his veins stole an ardor like intoxication.

In his eyes kindled again that light, which had made Henderson think of volcanoes lying quiet with immeasurable fires slumbering at their hearts.

Last night the boy had fought out the hardest battle of his life, and to-day he was one who had passed a definite mile-post of progress. This morning, too, a seed had dropped and a new life influence was stirring. It would take storm and stress and seasons to bring it to fulfilment, perhaps. The poplar does not grow from seed to great tree in a day – but, this morning, the seed had begun to swell and quicken.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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