HEART of the BLUE RIDGE



WALDRON BAILY

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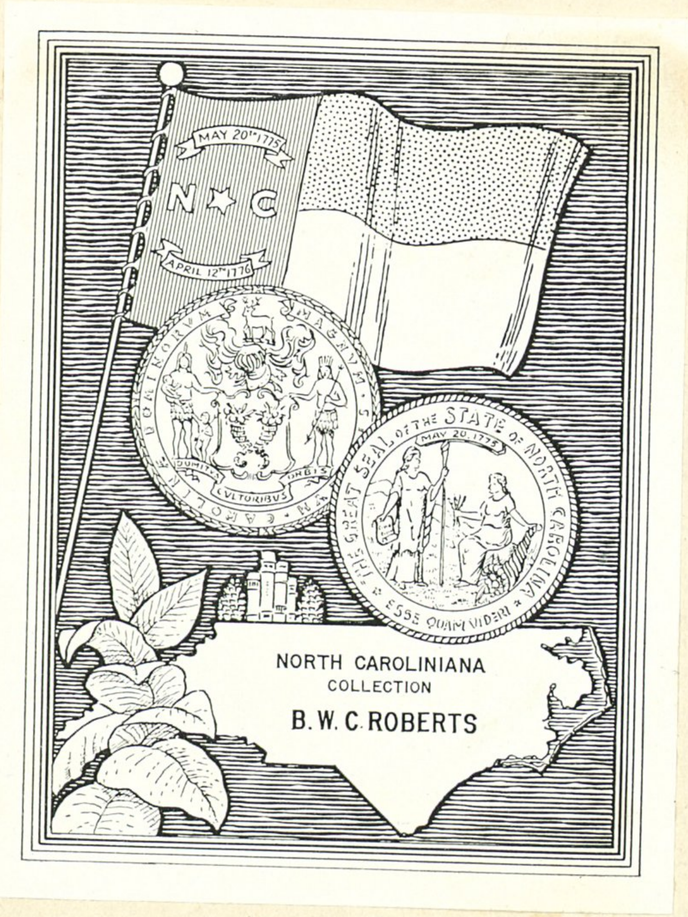
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Heart of the Blue Ridge



They went sedately, in all seeming, for the mountain folk are chary in demonstrations of affection

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BY

WALDRON BAILY

FRONTISPIECE BY

DOUGLAS DUER

NEW YORK

W. J. WATT & COMPANY

PUBLISHERS



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TO

Irving Bacheller

WITH THE APPRECIATION OF THE AUTHOR

Heart of the Blue Ridge

HEART OF THE BLUE RIDGE

CHAPTER I

WHERE the trail bent over a knoll, Zeke halted, and put down from his shoulder the hickory cudgel with its dangling valise of black oilcloth—total of baggage with which he was faring forth into the world. Then, he straightened himself, and looked back over the way he had come.

There, to the east, the dusk of night still lay somberly, hardly touched by the coming dawn. Through the shadows, the mountain masses loomed formidable and mysterious, vaguely outlined against the deeper gloom of valleys. The melancholy of the scene seemed a fit setting for the cottage that rested invisible within the forest, a half-mile distant from him. In imagination, he saw the withered old woman, his mother, still standing on the threshold, looking toward him, even as he looked toward her,

her heart warm with love, her every thought a prayer for his happiness. It was borne in on Zeke once again that she would be very lonely in her desolate home, where death had spared to her only this son. . . . And, now, he was gone from her! A poignant sorrow welled in him.

Zeke thrust the emotion away, lest it unman him. He faced about, drearily enough, and stood with downcast, unseeing eyes, in anxious pondering. And then, presently, assuagement was granted him. He lifted his gaze, and behold! here was another world, all of soft splendors, of throbbing radiance.

The eager beams of the unrisen sun shimmered above the mountain ranges of the horizon, and streamed toward the zenith in a panoply of harmonious hues, colorful promise of the May morning's joyous mood. Of a sudden, under the soothing influence, the watcher became listener as well. His ears noted with delight the glad singing of the birds in the wood around about. His glance caught the white gleam of the tiny belled blossoms that clustered on a crooked sour-wood by the path, and the penetrant perfume of them stirred to life a new and subtler emotion. A flame of tenderness burned in the clear hazel of his eyes, as he stared out over the trail before him. Under the increasing light his gaze could distinguish the line of the valley a mile further on, in which the Siddon cottage lay

hidden. His firmly-set lips relaxed abruptly into a smile of wistful softness. He swung stick and bag across his shoulder once again, and set off briskly down the slope of the knoll. His thoughts were no longer gray over the mother who mourned his going: they were roseate with anticipations of beholding the girl he loved. Now, the mood of the morning danced in his blood. The palpitant desire of all nature in the spring thrilled through his heart. His mind was filled with a vision of her gracious young loveliness, so soon to be present before him at their meeting. . . . Their meeting—their parting! At thought of that corollary, a cold despair clutched the lad, a despair that was nothing like the sedate sorrow over leaving his mother, a despair that was physical sickness, wrenching, nauseating, but passed beyond the physical to rack the deeps of being. For the first time, jealousy surged hideous in him, born of the realization that she must be left exposed to the wooing of other men—she, the utterly desirable! In a fierce impulse of mingled fear and rage, he stopped short, and cried out:

"I'll be damned if they kin steal her! She's mine. She done told me so, and Plutiny wouldn't lie!"

From an ambush of laurel bushes close beside the path, a tall, slender form stood forth, the lissome figure of a girl in the budding charm of womanhood.

There was a lithe, curving beauty in the lines that the scant homespun gown outlined so clearly. The swift movement by which she revealed herself was instinct with grace. As she rested motionless, with arms extended in a gesture of appeal, there was a singular dignity in the pose, a distinction of personality that was in no wise marred by bare feet and shapeless gown; not even by the uncouthness of dialect, when she spoke. And winsomeness of form and bearing was crowned by the beauty of her face, in which the insipidity of regular features was redeemed by exquisite coloring of rose and white, and by the dusk brilliance of the eyes. The tender lips were wreathed to playful reproach, as she addressed the lover for whom she thus waited at the dawn:

"Zekie—oh, Zekie! Ye hain't a-cussin' o' me, be ye?"

The young man, surprised, started, and regarded the girl in confusion. The red that had suffused his tanned cheeks deepened to a burning blush of embarrassment, as he realized that his outburst had been overheard by her who had been the cause of it. But his eyes met her quizzical glance with candid directness. After a moment, he spoke. All the harshness was gone from his voice; its soft drawl was vibrant with tenderness.

"No, Honey, I hain't a'cussin' o' you-all. I was

jest a-mentionin' some folks. But I hain't a-feared. Nobody hain't a-goin' to steal yer love from me."

"Nobody—never, Zeke!" the girl answered, simply. There was an infinite honesty, an unalterable loyalty, in the curt words.

As he listened, the flush died from the lover's face; contentment shone in his expression.

"I knowed hit, Honey—I knowed hit all the time. I know when I come back I'll find ye waitin'."

"Ye'll come back, I reckon, with fool idees 'bout what yer women-folks ought to wear, like them furriners down below." Her face relaxed into a genial smile, which brought a dimple to shadow the pink bloom of her cheek. But there was a trace of pensiveness; the vague hint of jealousy in the slow tones:

"Yes, I'll be a-waitin' till ye come, Zekie. An' if the wearin' o' shoes an' stockin's 'll make ye any happier, why, I guess I kin stand 'em—an' them ladies' straighteners, too. Yep, I'd wear 'em, if they did squeeze me fit to bust."

Since Plutina had thus come to meet him, there was no need that he should follow further the trail toward the Siddon cabin, which lay out of his course. At the girl's suggestion that she should accompany him a little way on the first stage of his journey out into the world, the two turned back toward the broader path, which led to the south-

west until it met the North Wilkesboro' road. The two walked side by side, along this lovers' lane of nature's kindly devising. They went sedately, in all seeming, for the mountain folk are chary in demonstrations of affection. Yet, beneath the austere mask imposed by convention, their hearts were thrilling with the rapture each found in the near presence of the other. The glamour of romance was like a golden mist over all the scene, irradiating each leaf and flower, softening the bird-calls to fairy flutings, draping the nakedness of distant rugged peaks, bearing gently the purling of the limpid brook along which the path ran in devious complacence. Often, indeed, the lovers' way led them into the shallows, through which their bare feet splashed unconcerned. The occasional prismatic flash of a leaping trout in the deeper pools caught their eyes. So, presently, the girl was moved to speak—with visible effort, very shyly, for the expression of her love in words was a thing unfamiliar, difficult.

"I sha'n't have nobody to make flies fer now," she said dully. "I jest hain't a-goin' arter the trout fer fun no more till ye comes back."

Zeke would have answered, but he checked the words at his lips, lest the trembling of his voice might betray a feeling deemed inconsistent with manliness. They went forward in silence, a-quiver

with desire each of the other, yet mute with the forced repression of custom. Now, too, the sorrow of the parting so close at hand, colored their mood more and more, so that the golden glamour first dimmed and then changed into a sinister pall which overhung all the loveliness of the morning. At a turn in the path, where it topped a rise, before descending a long slope to the highway, Zeke came to a standstill. The girl paused obediently beside him. He fumbled in a pocket awkwardly, and drew forth a tiny square of coffee-colored stone, roughly lined, which he held out toward his companion. The tracery of the crystal formed a Maltese cross. The girl expressed no surprise. She accepted the token with a grave nod as he dropped it into her palm, and she remained gazing down at it with eyes hidden under the heavy white lids and long, curving lashes of shadowy brown.

Zeke spoke, very earnestly:

"Hit's fer good luck, Tiny—fer good luck to he'p ye while we're apart. Mebby, hit'll git in hits work by softenin' the hardness o' yer gran'pap's heart agin me."

In truth, the concentration of his thought on the fragment of stone had been enough of itself to give a talisman occult potence. That concentration of desire for the girl's well-being was not merely of this moment. It had been with him constantly dur-

ing long hours of tedious clambering yesterday, when he followed the channel of Garden Creek through its tortuous course among the ravines of the Blue Ridge, through the narrow defile of the Devil's Garden, sunless, strewn with rubble of boulders, with a chaos of shattered rock masses—débris, superstition said, of cataclysm—of the Crucifixion, when the mountain crests tore themselves asunder, and cast their pinnacles into the abyss for rage and grief. The searcher had climbed on and on, until he reached the nook sacred to the crystals. For concerning these, also, the superstition had its say, and told that the little pieces of stone, with the cross marked on each, were, in fact, the miraculously preserved tears shed by the fairies of these fastnesses in the dread hour of the Saviour's anguish. The lover had sought long for a crystal that should be perfect. Now that it lay within the girl's hand, he was content of his toil. Surely, whatever the truth concerning its origin, it was a holy thing, for the emblem it bore. It would serve to shield her against aught evil that might threaten—even the grandfather's enmity against him, which set a barrier between them and happiness. The crystal would abide with her in sign of his love's endurance, strong to save her and to cherish her against any ill. He sighed with relief, when she raised the crystal, and dropped it within her bosom.

Still, as always, fearful of showing emotion too openly, Zeke hastened to introduce a new topic. He took from a pocket a book of twelve two-cent postage stamps, to secure which he had trudged the four miles from his mother's cabin to the Cherry Lane post-office. The book, in its turn, was proffered to Plutina, who accepted it in mild bewilderment.

The lover explained:

"Honey," he said, without any embarrassment over the fact, "ye knows my ole mammy hain't edicated, an' I want ye to write for her once a month, arter I write to tell ye whar I'll be."

The girl nodded tacit acceptance of the trust, and consigned the stamps to a resting place alongside the crystal. And then, after a little, she spoke heavily:

"I reckon as how you-all better be a-joggin', Zeke."

For answer, the lad caught the girl in his arms, and gave her a kiss on either cheek—the hearty, noisy smacks of the mountaineer's courting. But, in the next instant, he drew her close in an embrace that crushed the two warm bodies to rapture. His lips met hers, and clung, till their beings mingled. Afterward, he went from her voicelessly. Voicelessly, she let him go. . . . There could be no words to comfort the bitterness of such parting.

CHAPTER II

WHEN he was come within view of Joines' mill and store on Roaring River, Zeke halted again for a final look back toward the wild home land, which he was now leaving for the first time. The blackness of his mood after parting with the girl had passed, though melancholy still made him its own. The resilience of youth was turning his spirits again toward the hopes that had inspired this going forth from his own familiar little wilderness into the vast and unknown wilderness of the world beyond. As he stared out at the scattered peaks, reared like conning towers over the sprawling medley of ridge and valley, a throb of fondness shook his heart. It was not sprung from esthetic appreciation of the wild and romantic landscape, though this had been sufficient to justify the stir of feeling. His sensibility was aroused by the dear friendliness of all the scene, where hollows and heights had been his constant haunts through all the days of childhood and adolescence until this hour. Of a sudden, he realized as never before a profound tenderness for this country of beetling crags

and crystal rivers, of serene spaces and balsamic airs. Hitherto, he had esteemed the neighborhood in some dull, matter-of-course fashion, such as folk ordinarily give to their native territory. But, in this instant of illumination, on the eve of separating himself from the place, love of it surged within him. This was his home, the dwelling of his dear ones. He felt toward it a quick reverence as for something strangely sacred. His eyes went to the great bulk of Stone Mountain, which jutted just before him to the east, its league of naked rock lying like some monstrous guardian of the place. Somehow, the dignity of the massive curving cliffs soothed him, heartened him anew. The immutability of the huge mound of stone was a prophecy. Through the ages, it had maintained its ward steadfastly. So it would remain. A gush of confidence washed away the last of the watcher's depression. He could go on his way undismayed. These things here that were so dear to him would abide his return. The old mother and Plutina would rest secure against his homecoming. The time, after all, would not be long. Meantime, there was the great adventure. Zeke whirled, and trudged blithely onward.

Opportunity had come to Zeke Higgins, and he had not hesitated to seize it. His desire for a larger life than that of the tiny, scrabbly mountain farm had been early excited; it had per-

sisted; it had increased steadily, though the possibility of its realization had seemed remote. Stark poverty demanded that he remain to coax a scant living from the soil for his mother. Yet, his determination was fixed. He got some smattering of education, along with Plutina, from a kindly Quaker who came among the "Boomers" of the Blue Ridge as a missionary school-teacher. Thus, Zeke learned surprisingly much. His thirsty brain took up knowledge as a sponge takes up water. So great was his gratitude to this instructor that, when the stranger was revealed as a revenue officer questing illicit stills, Zeke, despite inherited prejudice, guided the hunted man by secret trails over the mountains into Virginia, and thereby undoubtedly saved a life. Indeed, the disappearance of the officer was so well contrived that the mountaineers themselves for a time did not suspect the fact of the escape. There is a great basin in the rock on the north side of Stone Mountain. It has been hollowed out through centuries by the little stream that comes leaping madly down the ledges. The cauldron has a sinister repute. It is deemed the sepulchre of more than one spy, cast down into the abyss from the mountain's brim. It was generally believed that the false school-teacher was of the number.

Somehow, long afterward, report had it that the man was alive. Rumor implicated Zeke as having

had a share in the fellow's escape. Old Dick Siddon, Plutina's grandfather, heard. He had hated the "revenuers" always. Since the death of his only son at their hands, his hatred had become a mania. He was a strong man, fierce in anger. When he bade his grandchild dismiss her favored suitor, she feigned obedience. She, and Zeke as well, knew the futility of fighting the old man's prejudices. But, with the optimism of youth, the lovers hoped for happiness. A little older, they might at least defy the hostile guardian. In the meantime, Zeke was determined to attain material prosperity during the period of waiting.

Then, Richard Sutton came into the mountains of the Blue Ridge. He chanced on Zeke, made use of the lad as a guide. Soon mutual liking and respect developed. Sutton was a manufacturer of tree-nails—the wooden pins used in ships' timbers. Here in the ranges was an abundance of locust timber, the best for his need. And there was much talk of a branch railway to come. His alert business imagination saw that a factory located at the source of supply would be advantageous. He saw, too, the capacity for development in his young friend. Zeke's familiarity with the region might be valuable—more valuable still his popularity and the respect accorded him in the community. Sutton suggested to the young man that he should come to New York

presently, there to learn the details of manufacture, with the prospect of return, later on, to manage the business in the mountains. Naturally, the project was splendid to Zeke's ambition. His only fear had been lest his departure be delayed by lack of money, for pride would not let him confess his extremity to Sutton. There must be some cash in hand for his mother's support, until he should be able to send her more. Then, as he fretted, opportunity favored him anew, for a surveying party came to run a railroad branch north to Stone Mountain. He was employed as ax-man and assistant cook. His wages solved the difficulty, so far as his mother's need was concerned. For the rest, he took only a small sum to his own use, since he was minded to work his way north on shipboard from Norfolk. It was in accord with such high hopes that this May morning found him tramping, barefooted, into Joines' store, with the black oilcloth valise slung from his shoulder.

The halt here was a necessary feature in Zeke's itinerary. On a previous visit to the store, he had purchased a pair of serviceable, if rather ungainly, shoes. Since he would have no occasion for their use at home, he had saved himself the trouble of carrying them to and fro.

"I reckon I'll take them-thar shoes o' mine," he said to the grizzled proprietor, after an exchange of friendly greetings with the few loungers present.

These were well aware of his planned departure, though ignorant of his definite aims.

"Ye hain't a-goin' to put 'em on yit, be ye?" the storekeeper inquired, solicitously.

"Not till I git to North Wilkesboro'," Zeke answered, to the obvious relief of the assembly, as he opened the bag. While he was busy stowing the shoes, the onlookers commented cynically on the follies of fashion.

"An' I've hearn tell," one concluded, "that durn-nigh everybody done war shoes in the city, all year roun'."

Perhaps the young man felt a pleasant glow of superiority in reflecting on the fact that such following of city fashion would soon distinguish him. But his innocent vanity was not to be unduly flattered.

"Ca'late to stay away till ye've made yer fortin, in course, sonny?" one of the older men suggested. He enjoyed some local reputation as a wag, the maintenance of which so absorbed his energies that his wife, who had lost whatever sense of humor she might once have had, toiled both indoors and out.

"Why, yes, o' course," Zeke replied unsuspectingly.

"Better kiss we-uns good-by, sonny," was the retort. "You-all 'll be gone quite some time."

The sally was welcomed with titters and guffaws. Zeke was red to the ears with mortification and

anger, as he shut the valise, shouldered it, and strode to the door. But even in the time of that passing, he mastered his mood in a measure. He had no wish to make his farewell to these neighbors in bitterness of spirit. So, at the door, he turned and grinned amiably on the group.

"I want pleasant things to remember hyarabouts, all thet-thar long time I got to be away," he said, with a quizzical drawl; "so I kain't be a-kissin' o' ye none. My stomick hain't none so strong nohow," he added, with the coarseness that usually flavored the humor of the countryside.

Then, abruptly, the smile left his lips; the lines of his face hardened; the hazel eyes brightened and widened a little. His low, slow voice came firmly, with a note of tense earnestness. It was as if he spoke to himself, rather than to the slouching men, who regarded him curiously.

"I hain't leavin' all this-hyar 'cause I don't love hit," he declared. "I do love hit, an' I aim to come back by-an-bye—I shore do!"

Forthwith, embarrassed anew by this unmeditated outburst, he hurried off, amid an astonished silence which was broken at last by the storekeeper.

"Thet-thar Zeke Higgins," he ventured, somewhat indistinctly through his matting of whiskers, "I swow if he hain't got right feelin's, fer all he's so durn peart." And his cronies nodded assent.

As he pressed onward, the adventurer quickly regained his poise. The novelty of the situation thrilled him agreeably. His thoughts were crowded with imaginings of the strange things to come. Ambitious vision of himself successful among the city's throngs made his pulses beat faster. He felt that he had within him the power to achieve something worth while in the world. Certainly, he would not fail for lack of striving. But no triumph elsewhere could ever wean him from his love for the Blue Ridge—for his home country. Yes, it was as he had said there in the store: He would come back. He would come back to the cabin in the "cove" under the shadows of Stone Mountain—back to the old mother, back to Plutina. A warmth of exquisite tenderness vibrated through him, as his hope leaped to that home-coming, to the time when once again the girl should rest clinging on his bosom. And a great peace lay under all his joy of anticipation. His love knew no doubt. She had given her heart to him. Through his every wandering, whatever might betide, her love would be with him, to comfort him in sorrow, to crown him in happiness. A bird's song recalled the lilt of her laughter. He saw again the tremulous curving of her mouth, red against the fine warm pallor of her face at parting. Passion welled in him. He halted yet once again, and stood with face suffused, gazing back. It was

as if he were swayed by a sudden secret sense that warned him of her misery in this hour of his exaltation—her misery where she lay prone under the tangle of laurel by Garden Creek, sobbing out that anguish which is the penalty woman must pay for love.

Zeke's eyes fastened anew on the rounded bulk of Stone Mountain's cliffs. The immutability of them, and the majesty, relieved the tenseness of his mood. He resumed his way serenely. . . . But Plutina wept on, unassuaged.

When he drew near to North Wilkesboro', where he proposed to make a first essay in railway journeying, Zeke seated himself under the shade of a grove of persimmon-trees by the wayside, there painfully to encumber his feet with the new shoes. As he laced these, he indulged in soliloquy, after a fashion bred of his lonely life, on a subject born of his immediate surroundings.

"I hain't noways superstitious," he mused complacently, "but this grove ain't no nice place, bein' as it must be a nigger cemetery. Uncle Dick Siddon says they's always niggers buried whar they's persimmon-trees, an' he says the niggers come first. An' Uncle Dick, he ought to know, bein' he's eighty-odd-year old. Anyhow, it seems reasonable, 'cause niggers do swaller the stuns when they eats persimmons, an' so, o' course, jest nacher'ly the trees

'll spring up where the niggers git planted. So they'd be ha'nts like 's not. But I hain't superstitious—not a mite. Mr. Sutton, he said such things as ha'nts an' witch-doctors an' such was all plumb foolishness. Still, my mammy has seen—"

He fell silent, recalling old wives' tales of fearsome things seen and heard of nights. The shoes adjusted, he took from the black bag a holster, which sheltered a formidable-appearing Colt's revolver. Having made sure that the weapon was loaded and in perfect order, Zeke returned it to the holster, which he put on snugly under the left arm-pit. These final preparations complete, he got up, and hastened into the town.

One bit more of his musings he spoke aloud, just before he entered the main street:

"No, I hain't superstitious. But, by crickey! I'm plumb tickled I giv Plutiny thet fairy cross. They say them stones is shore lucky."

At the railway station, Zeke asked for a ticket to Norfolk.

"Want a return-trip ticket?" the friendly station-agent suggested. He supposed the young mountaineer was taking a pleasure excursion to the city.

But Zeke shook his head defiantly, and spoke with utter forgetfulness of his experience in Joines' store.

"No," he declared stoutly, "I hain't a-comin' back till I've made my fortin."

"You'll be a long time gone from this-here State o' Wilkes," the agent vouchsafed dryly. He would have said more, but his shrewd eyes saw in this young man's expression something that bade him pause, less sceptical. The handsome and wholesome face showed a strength of its own in the resolute curving nose and the firmly-set lips and the grave, yet kindly, eyes, with a light of purposeful intelligence glowing within their clear deeps. The tall form, broad of shoulder, deep of chest, narrow of hip, though not yet come to the fulness of maturity, was of the evident strength fitted to toil hugely at the beck of its owner's will. The agent, conscious of a puny frame that had served him ill in life's struggle, experienced a half-resentment against this youth's physical excellence. He wondered, if, after all, the boast might be justified by the event.

"Train in ten minutes," he said curtly, as he pushed out the ticket.

So, presently, Zeke, found himself seated for the first time on the red plush seat of a railway carriage. The initial stage of his journey was ended; the second was begun.

CHAPTER III

THE right of way from North Wilkesboro' to Greensboro' runs through a region where every vista delights the eye with wild and romantic scenes. The rails follow the course of the upper reaches of the Yadkin River, with swift succession of vicious curves and heavy grades. The twistings of the road-bed, so advantageous for presenting the varied loveliness of the wilds, were by way of being a real torture to the young adventurer, who sat in seeming stolidity near the rear door of the smoking-car, with the black bag between his feet. Even experienced travelers found the lunges of the train trying to their nerves as it shot at speed around "hairpin" bends, or hurled itself to the fall of a steeper descent. To Zeke, who for the first time knew the roar and jolt of such travel, this trip was a fearsome thing. To sit movelessly there, while the car reeled recklessly on the edge of abysses, was a supreme trial of self-control. The racking peril fairly sickened him. A mad impulse of flight surged in him. Yet, not for worlds would he have let anyone guess his miserable alarm.

Nevertheless, one there was who apprehended in some measure the ordeal through which the mountaineer was passing—happily, a kindly observer. An elderly man, across the aisle from Zeke, regarded his fellow passenger with particular intentness. It seemed to him that, in some vague way, the clean-cut face was familiar. His curiosity thus aroused, he perceived the tenseness of expression and attitude, and shrewdly suspected the truth. It was with benevolent intent, rather than for the gratification of inquisitiveness, that he finally got up and seated himself in the vacant place alongside the younger man.

Zeke's perturbation caused him to start nervously at this advent of a stranger, but a single glance into the wrinkled, yet hale, face of the man reassured him. The visitor's amiable character showed plainly in his dim blue eyes, which twinkled merrily. Moreover, there was a sure witness of worth in the empty sleeve, pinned to his left breast, on which showed the cross of honor. The humor lurking in the eyes was grotesquely manifested in his first address:

"This-hyar railroad hain't no fitten one fer beginners," he announced, with a chuckle. "Hit's plumb likely to make a squirrel into a nut."

Zeke smiled, somewhat ruefully. He understood the play on words since "boomer," the mountaineers' own name for the red squirrel, is often

applied to themselves. But the distraction afforded by the garrulous veteran was a relief. A new spur was given to their mutual interest when, after telling his name, it was discovered that his father had been a company-mate with Seth Jones, the veteran, in the Twelfth North Carolina Volunteers. The old man's curiosity was highly gratified by this explanation of the inherited likeness that had puzzled him, and he waxed reminiscent and confidential. The diversion was welcome to his listener, where doubtless many another might have found the narrative of by-gone campaigns tedious in this prolix retelling. Ultimately, indeed, the youth's sympathies were aroused by Jones' tale of misfortune in love, wherein his failure to write the girl he left behind him had caused her first to mourn him as dead, and eventually to marry her second choice.

"But I've jest got scrumptious news," he exclaimed, his rheumy eyes suddenly clear and sparkling. "Seems as how Fanny's a widder. So, I'm a-goin' to try my luck, an' no shelly-shallyin', now I've got her located arter a mighty lot o' huntin'. Yes, sir, sonny," he concluded, with a guffaw, "old as I be, I'm a-goin' a-courtin'. If I ever see ye ag'in, I'll tell ye how it comes out. I s'pose I seem plumb old fer sech foolishness to a boy like you be, but some hearts keep young till they stop. I'm

pretty spry fer my age, too, if I do say so as shouldn't."

Zeke was not so surprised by the old man's hopes as he might have been, were it not for the example of Plutina's grandfather, who, somewhat beyond fourscore, was still scandalously lively, to the delectation of local gossip. But, though after the departure of Jones at a junction, Zeke reflected half-amusedly on the rather sere romances of these two ancient Romeos, he was far from surmising that, at the last, their amorous paths would cross.

There was still further harrowing experience for Zeke after reaching the Southern Railway's terminal on the pier at Pinner's Point, in Virginia, for here he was hurried aboard the ferry-boat, and was immediately appalled by the warning blast of the whistle. Few bear that strident din undismayed. This adventurer had never heard the like —only the lesser warning of locomotives and the siren of a tannery across twenty miles of distance. Now, the infernal belching clamor broke in his very ears, stunning him. He quivered under the impact, stricken to the soul for seconds of shock. But the few careless eyes that chanced to scan the mountaineer noted no faltering in face or form. He stood to all appearance serenely, easily poised, his attitude replete with the grace of physical power, his mouth firmly closed, his widely-set eyes unwavering.

Even the cudgel, and the black bag still dangling from it, could not offset a certain aloof dignity that masked distress by stern effort of will.

Nothing further occurred for a little to afflict the traveler's unaccustomed nerves, and he soon found himself pleasurably absorbed in contemplation of the novel surroundings. The boat was nearing the Norfolk landing when his eyes fell on a dog, held in leash by a young woman. Both the beast and its mistress commanded his instant attention, in which wonder was the chief emotion. The dog itself was a Boston bull-terrier, which was a canine species wholly strange to the mountaineer's experience, limited as it had been to hounds and mongrels of unanalyzable genealogy. The brute's face had an uncanny likeness to a snub-nosed, heavy-jowled "boomer" whom Zeke detested, and he eyed the creature askance by reason of the resemblance.

"Hit's plumb man-faced," was his verdict. "'I shore prefer 'em jest plain dawg." His eyes went then from the leash to the girl holding it, and he hardly restrained a gasp, in which admiration was mingled with amazement. The ordinary observer would have seen only a pretty girl, of the fluffy blond type, smartly tailored in blue serge, with the skirt decorously slit. But Zeke saw a vision from another world than that of the slatternly mountain women, whose toil left them neither opportunity nor

ambition for nicety in dress, which, indeed, was finally prohibited by ignorance as well as poverty. This girl stood out in startling relief, marvelous revelation from the new world he was entering. Slowly, with concentration, the young man scrutinized the vision, noting every detail, from the natty turban with its swaying feather wand to the daintily pointed ties, above which were to be glimpsed trim silk-clad ankles. Yet, the novel charm of her failed utterly to disturb the loyalty of his heart. His hungry soul found exquisite satisfaction in the spectacle of feminine refinement thus presented for the first time, but his devotion to the roughly garbed mountain girl was in no wise imperiled. On the contrary, his imagination busied itself with an effort to picture Plutina thus splendidly arrayed.

"I 'low she's plumb handsome," he meditated. "But, shucks! Tiny beats her holler. In them duds, she'd have her skun a mile. . . . But thet-thar man-faced dawg! I'd shore hate like pizen to be found daid along with thet ornery pup."

As he mused, no hint came out of the future as to the time when, in very truth, he would be close to death, and that same dog an actor in the drama, one to be deeply esteemed, not contemned. But that time was not yet. In fact, the immediate future was not destined to remove his prejudice against the bull-terrier. On the contrary!

The fixity of Zeke's staring penetrated the girl's consciousness. She turned abruptly, and her blue eyes met his in a cool glance that seemed to pass through him and on, as if he were something quite invisible, altogether beneath notice. Zeke felt the rebuke keenly, though innocent of intentional offense. The instincts of gentlemanly blood from which he was somewhere distantly descended made him realize his fault in manners, though he had had no guidance from experience. The ready blush burned hot on brow and cheeks; he dropped his gaze confusedly to the dog.

Even the beast, he perceived, reprobated his conduct. It was staring up at him fiercely from red eyes, and the hackles stood erect, though it did not growl. Evidently, it resented undue attention to its mistress.

There was a movement forward of the passengers, as the ferry-boat drew into its slip. Zeke advanced with the others, following close behind the girl and the dog, which strained at the leash in order still to stare menacingly at the young man. Then, without warning, the action became swift and violent. The ferry-boat crashed against the yielding walls of the slip. Zeke, unprepared for the shock, was thrown from his balance. One of the heavy new shoes smashed down on a paw. The dog sprang and snapped. The jaws missed, because

the girl tugged at the leash in the same second. Zeke instinctively kicked at the brute in self-defense. His foot took the animal fairly in the jaw, and lifted it from the floor, just as the girl turned. She cried out in shrill anger at this rough stranger's wanton attack on her pet, for so she interpreted the event. She maintained her hold on the leash bravely, lest worse follow. But her strength was insufficient to restrain the creature of fighting breed. It lunged forward with such suddenness that both its mistress and its enemy were taken unawares. The girl was dragged in tow. Zeke would have leaped aside, but he was too late to escape the encounter, though he mitigated it. The iron jaws clanged shut, but in the slack of the victim's sturdy jeans, instead of in the flesh. The massive mouth was locked vise-like. Because of the cloth's sturdiness, the dog swung clear of the floor. The girl still strove frantically, though vainly, at the leash, shrieking commands which were unheeded. Zeke, confused, chagrined, ashamed, wrathful, shook himself violently to be free, without avail. The other passengers scurried forth, with a panic cry of "Mad dog!"

Zeke's wrath mounted. He had had little training in self-restraint, and his passions were of the primitive sort. Now, abruptly, the lesser emotions were overwhelmed by the might of his rage. He

was conscious only of the humiliating fact that this hideous man-faced dog had fastened itself on him, and there hung. Zeke bent and twisted, his two hands on the creature's jaws. Then he set himself to wrench them apart. His strength, great as it was availed nothing against that remorseless grip. The resistance goaded him to fury. He gave over the effort to prise the teeth apart, and put all his might into a frenzied pull. There were instants of resistance, then the hissing noise of rending cloth. A huge fragment of the stout jeans was torn out bodily. Zeke hurled the animal violently from him. The leash was snapped from the girl's hands. The dog's body shot across the cabin, hurtled against the wall. The indomitable brute tumbled to the floor, and lay there stunned. But even in defeat, he carried down with him between rigid jaws the blue-jeans banner of victory.

With a bound, the girl crossed the space, and fell on her knees beside the inert form, crooning over it pitifully. In the same moment, the gust of anger in Zeke ended. He stood motionless, except for his quickened breathing, with eyes fast on the girl. Remorse stabbed him as he realized her distress, for which he was responsible. He went toward her hesitatingly, forgetful of bag and stick, which had fallen at the outset of the mêlée. He ventured to address her, stammering confusedly.

"I 'low he hain't daid, nor nothin' like thet," he said; "jest takin' a nap-like." His wrath gave a final flicker, as he looked down at the ugly face cushioned within the girl's hands. "An ornery critter like thet-thar pup ought to be kept shet-up," he concluded spitefully.

The girl lifted a face in which blue eyes were flaming.

"It's you ought to be shut up, you horrible man!" she cried. "And you will be. I'll see to that."

"Now, don't be plumb foolish," Zeke expostulated. "The varmint hain't hurt none—not a mite, ma'am."

"Beast!" the girl ejaculated, concisely.

Zeke retorted with high indignation.

"I jest nacher'ly hain't a-goin' to stand still an' say 'Thank ye!' while I'm bein' et up piecemeal by no dawg—specially one with a face like his'n."

He would have said more, but paused with mouth agape, eyes widening, his expression horror-stricken. For, just then, the bull-terrier snorted loudly, and unclosed its red eyes. The clenched jaws, too, relaxed. Thus released, the broad strip of jeans fluttered to the floor. Its movement caught Zeke's gaze. He recognized the cloth. The ghastly truth burst in his brain. In an agony of embarrassment, he clasped his hands to that portion of his person so fearfully despoiled. Moved by his

sudden silence, impressed perhaps by some subtle impact of this new and dreadful emotion on his part, the girl looked up. She, too, had noted subconsciously the fall of the cloth from the dog's jaws. Now. as she saw the young man's face of fire and observed his peculiar posture, she understood. Her own crimson cheeks rivaled those of the afflicted one. She turned and bent low over her reviving pet. Her shoulders were shaking, Zeke was shuddering.

CHAPTER IV

THE conventions of dress are sometimes pestilential. If any doubt this truth let him remember the nightmares wherein his nudity made torment. And, while remembering the anguish such lack of clothing has occasioned in dreams, let him think with pity on the suffering of Zeke whose plight was real. It was in sooth, a predicament to strain the *savoir faire* of the most polished courtier. Perhaps, the behavior of the mountaineer was as discreet as any permitted by the unfortunate circumstances, and could hardly have been improved on by the Admirable Crichton himself. He simply retained an immobile pose, facing the girl, with his whole soul concentrated in desire that the earth should split asunder to engulf him. The tide of his misery was at its flood, so that it grew no worse when some deck-hands thrust the forward doors open, and a policeman bounded into the cabin, drawn revolver in hand.

But the bull-terrier was to escape the fate unjustly inflicted on so many of its fellows. The

girl, crouching over the dog, barred the policeman's purpose.

"Get away from him, miss," the officer directed. "He ain't safe, even if he's quiet. I know mad dogs. A bullet's the only medicine."

"Chub isn't mad in the least," the girl snapped; "though he's been through enough to make him crazy—and so have I. If you're so anxious to do your duty, officer," she added, bitterly, "why don't you arrest that horrid, hulking man over there?" She pointed a neatly gloved, accusing finger at the motionless Zeke, who was staring fixedly at the point where he hoped the abyss might yawn.

"What's he done?" the policeman inquired gruffly. He was miffed over this lost opportunity. The slayer of a mad dog is always mentioned as a hero in the newspapers.

The girl stood up. The dog, at the end of the leash, also stood up, and shook itself. It had, to all seeming, recovered fully. It regarded Zeke intently from its red eyes. But it did not growl. It was plain that the bull-terrier was thinking deeply, and that Zeke was the center around which thought revolved. But, if the dog did not growl, its mistress showed no lessening of hostility. She explained succinctly to the representative of the law:

"He assaulted my dog—with his feet and his hands."

"And maybe he bit him, too!" the policeman suggested, with heavy sarcasm. He could not forgive this pretty girl for foiling his heroism.

The girl did not heed. Her white brow was wrinkled in a frown. She was recalling, with an effort, her somewhat meager knowledge of legal terms.

"I shall charge him with homicidal assault," she announced firmly.

"I hope you'll tell that to the sarge," the officer chuckled, his pique forgotten in appreciation of the girl's naïve announcement. "I'll take this chap to the station-house. You'll appear against him, miss?" The girl nodded emphatically. He turned on Zeke, frowning. "Come on quiet, young feller, if you know what's good for ye." His practiced eye studied the young mountaineer's physique respectfully.

Zeke made no movement, nor answered nor lifted his eyes. The policeman attributed this demeanor to recalcitrancy. He put the revolver in his pocket, drew his club and took a step forward. Yet, he sensed something unfamiliar in the situation; the stiff posture of the arms and hands of the culprit attracted his attention. He felt vaguely that something of a painful nature was toward. He stopped short, puzzled, and spoke:

"What's the matter with ye, anyhow?" he demanded fiercely. "Hain't ye got any tongue?"

Then, at last, Zeke raised his eyes. They went first to the forward door, to make sure that the girl had vanished. There were only two mildly interested deck-hands in the cabin, beside the policeman, though soon the place would be filled with newly arriving passengers. He looked at the officer squarely, with despair in his expression:

"Hit ain't my tongue—hit's my pants!" he said huskily. "Hit's the seat of my pants. Hit's—hit's thar!" He nodded toward the strip of jeans left on the floor by the dog.

The policeman stared at the fragment of cloth, then his gaze returned appreciatively to the victim's hands. He threw his head back and bellowed with laughter, echoed raucously by the deck-hands. Zeke waited grimly until the merriment lessened a little.

"I hain't a-stirrin' nary a step to no jail-house," was his morose announcement, "unless somebody gits me some pants with a seat to 'em."

The policeman liked his ease too well to fight needlessly, and he had an idea that the thews and sinews of the boomer might make a good account of themselves. Moreover, he was by way of being a kindly soul, and he apprehended in a measure the young man's misery.

"Can you dig up a pair of jumpers?" he asked

the deck-hands. "You can have 'em back by calling at the station to-morrow."

In this manner, the difficulty was bridged. Clad in the dingy and dirty borrowed garment, the burning shame fell from Zeke, and he was once again his own man. Nevertheless, he avoided looking toward the piece of torn cloth lying on the floor, as he went out with the policeman. He only wished that he might with equal ease leave behind all memory of the lamentable episode.

Zeke's tractability increased the favorable impression already made on the officer by the mountaineer's wholesome face and modest, manly bearing. It was evident that this was no ordinary rakehelly boomer come to town. There was, too, the black bag to witness that the prisoner was an honest voyager. On the way to the station, the constable listened with unusual patience to Zeke's curt account of the misadventure, and the narrative was accepted as truth—the more readily by reason of some slight prejudice against the dog, which had failed as an exploiter of heroism. In consequence, the policeman grew friendly, and promised intercession in his captive's behalf. This was the more effective when, on arrival at the station-house, it was learned that the girl with the dog had not appeared. Nor was there sign of her after a period of waiting. The sergeant at the desk decided that

there could be no occasion to hold the prisoner. But he frowned on the deadly weapon, which the usual search had revealed.

"'Twon't do for you to go totin' that cannon promiscuous," he declared. "You shore don't need a gun—you shore do need breeches. What's the answer? . . . Hock the gun, and buy some pants."

Thus simply did an alert mind solve all difficulties of the situation.

So in the end, Zeke issued safely from his first bout with mischance and found himself well content, for his dress now was more like that of the men about him. The new trousers were full length, which the jeans had not been, and the creases down the legs were in the latest style. The salesman had so stated, and Zeke observed with huge satisfaction that the stiffness of the creases seemed to mark the quality of the various suits visible in the streets. And his own creases were of the most rigid! Zeke for the first time in his life, felt that warm thrill which characterizes any human integer, whether high or low, when conscious of being especially well dressed.

Followed an interval of loitering. The sights of the town formed an endless panorama of wonder to the lad's eager vision. Though he was a year past the age of man's estate, this was his first opportunity

of beholding a town of any size, of seeing face to face things of which he had heard a little, had read more. His fresh, receptive mind scanned every detail with fierce concentration of interest, and registered a multitude of vivid impressions to be tenaciously retained in memory.

And ever with him, as he roamed the streets, went a tall slender girl, barefooted, garbed in homespun, with great dark brown eyes that looked tenderly on him from beneath the tumbled bronze masses of her hair. No passer-by saw her, but the mountaineer knew her constant presence, and with her held voiceless communion concerning all things that he beheld. His heart exulted proudly over the bewildering revelations of many women, both beautiful and marvelously clad in fine raiment—for this girl that walked with him was more radiantly fair than any other.

It was late afternoon when, finally, Zeke aroused himself to think of the necessities of his position. Then, after a hasty and economical meal at a lunch counter near the water-front, he made haste to the pier, where his attention was at once riveted on an Old Dominion Liner, which was just backing out into the river. He watched the great bulk, fascinated, while it turned, and moved away down the harbor, to vanish beyond Sewall's Point, on its way toward Hampton Roads. Immediately afterward, his attention was attracted to a much smaller steamer, which drew in on the opposite side of the wharf. There chanced to be no one else near, and, as the boat slid into the slip, a man in the bow hurled a coil of rope toward Zeke, with an aim so accurate that it fell across Zeke's shoulder.

"Don't dodge it, you lubber!" the man roared, in answer to the mountaineer's instinctive movement. "Haul it in, an' make fast to the punchin'."

Zeke obeyed readily enough, hauled in the hawser, and made the loop fast over the piling. At the same moment, he saw two negroes, blacker from soot and grime than nature had made them, who leaped down from the deck, and scampered out of sight. He heard the captain in the pilot-house shouting down the tube.

"There go your —— nigger stokers on the run."

Zeke could both see and hear the man in the engine-room, who vowed profanely that he would ship a pair of white men, to sail before ten that night. It seemed to the listener that the situation might develop to his advantage. When, presently, the captain descended to the dock, Zeke made bold to accost that red-faced and truculent-appearing person. Much to his surprise, his request for work met with an amiable reply. The captain verified what Zeke already knew, that the engineer had

need of men, and bade the inquirer get aboard and offer himself.

In the engine-room, the harried chief scowled on the intruder.

"What the devil do you want?" he cried harshly.

But Zeke's purpose was too earnest to be put down by mere ungraciousness.

"Work," he replied with a smile.

Something in the applicant's aspect mitigated the engineer's asperity.

"Ever fire a boiler?" he questioned, more affably.

"Yes, an' no," Zeke answered; "not any real steam b'iler. But, when hit comes to keepin' a hick'ry fire under a copper kittle, an' not scorchin' the likker, wall, I 'lows as how I kin do hit. An' when it comes to makin' o' sorghum m'lasses, I hain't never tuk off my hat to nobody yit. Fer the keepin' o' proper temp'rature folks says, I'm 'bout's good's anybody in Wilkes."

"Humph!—boomer," the engineer grunted, and there was silence for a moment. When next he spoke, his manner was kindly.

"Those niggers of mine skedaddled 'cause they're lazy and worthless. But the stoke-hole is hell, all right. It ain't no place for a youngster like you. I'll hustle round to the gin-mills an' get hold of a pair of tough guys. But there's something else," he went on, as Zeke's face fell. "If you can make

sorghum molasses and moonshine without scorchin' 'em, you'll fill the bill, I reckon. We cruise off the coast for menhaddin—fat backs—for the oil in 'em. We carry steam-jacket kettles. I've got a green man now who's no good. I'll fire him and take you on. Thirty a month and your board—more by-and-bye, if you suit."

Zeke, elated at this opportunity, felt, nevertheless, that honesty required of him some further explanation. But the engineer dismissed consideration of the future.

"A month will give you enough for your fare to New York. If you ain't pressed for time, a voyage will do you good. But don't let the captain get a sight of that black bag, or it'll go overboard. Sailors are afeared of 'em," he chuckled. "*The Neuse*, my old ship, ran into *The Blanche* off Creek Beacon, in a fog, and sunk her. We rescued officers and crew, but the captain—Smith, his name was—couldn't stop cussin' 'cause he'd allowed a nigger mammy to go aboard as a passenger along with her old black bag, which was the why of the wreck, 'cording to his way of thinking. Took his friends nigh onto a year, to convince him that *The Neuse* was to blame for the collision. I suspect he'll always have it on his conscience that he did finally collect damages off our owners." The engineer

chuckled again. "Stow your bag under your bunk in the fore peak before the captain comes aboard."

The Bonita was a stanchly built and seaworthy craft with a draft of less than twelve feet under full cargo, which made possible her use of the shorter and smoother inland water-way from Norfolk to Beaufort, North Carolina, where was the factory. Zeke, who would remain idle until the first catch of fish, went early to his bunk the first evening aboard, wearied by the long and exciting day. He had, indeed, scarce time to contemplate a guardian vision of Plutina ere his senses were locked in slumber, and his next consciousness was of a dim morning light struggling into the gloom of the stuffy peak, and the jolting rhythm of the engine, which announced that the voyage was begun. When he hurried on deck, he was at first disappointed to learn that the boat was still some distance from the open sea, for which he longed with all an inlander's curiosity over the mystery of endless waters. *The Bonita* was now working forward slowly through the old Dismal Swamp Canal, to reach the Pasquotank River and Albemarle Sound. Zeke's astonished eyes perceived in every direction only the level, melancholy expanse of the swamp. His sensitive soul found, nevertheless, a strange charm and beauty in the scene. There was space here, even as in the mountains. Yet this calm was not of strength, he

felt vaguely, like that he had known, but the tranquillity of nature in another, a weaker, less-wholesome mood, apathetic, futile. The thickly dotting cypresses and junipers, bedecked with streaming draperies of Spanish moss, touched the vistas with a funereal aspect. The languid movement of the festoons under the breeze was like the sighings of desolation made visible. The dense tangle of the undergrowth stretched everywhere, repellent, unrelieved by the vivid color flashes of the mountain blossoms. Stagnant wastes of amber-hued water emphasized the dreariness.

Zeke's spirits were too exultant to suffer more than a fleeting depression from this first survey of the waste. He realized how unjust his impressions might be when he learned that this seemingly filthy water was highly esteemed. The deck-hand, filling the water barrel from a pail let over the ship's side, explained the swamp water's virtues.

"All the capens fill their barrels with it. Juniper water cures chills an' fever, an' keeps 'em off if ye hain't got 'em. Some says it's better 'n gin for the kidneys." But the deck-hand looked doubtful.

Zeke, still suspicious because of the unlikeness of this liquid to the crystal-clear element of the mountains, essayed an experimental swallow, then spat disgustedly.

"Hit may be all right fer med'cine, or yarb tea,"

was his verdict, "but it needs real water to wash it down."

The progress was tediously slow, for a strong southwest wind had come on, which lowered the water in the canal, so that *The Bonita* often went scraping along the bottom, and betimes stuck fast in the mud. When they were come to the Lake Drummond region, Captain Lee decided to tie up until a change or falling of the wind, with its consequent rise of water in the channel. At the point where they finally made fast to the bank, there was an old trail, a woods road long abandoned, running off into the jungle. Zeke promptly set off to explore this, and almost at once espied a wild turkey; a plump gobbler, feeding in the path before him. There could be no doubt as to the acceptability of such food aboard and Zeke hastened back to *The Bonita,* where the captain gladly loaned him a rifle. Thus equipped, Zeke returned to the wilderness trail. He was not surprised to find that the turkey had vanished, nor disheartened, for he was sure that a little patience would bring him in sight of game, and there was leisure a plenty since an interval must elapse after a change in the wind before the deepening of the water. Within a half-hour, he shot a turkey from its perch in a cypress. With much satisfaction, Zeke swung the gobbler, which was big and fat, over his shoulder, and set out to return. Almost at once,

however, his steps were arrested by the faint baying of a hound. As he listened, the sound grew louder, as if the dog drove its quarry toward him. The instinct of the chase dominated the mountaineer. He cast down the turkey, and waited, hopeful that a deer or bear might cross the path within range.

Soon, he heard a noisy crackling of underbrush a little to his right, but near at hand. With the rifle in readiness Zeke peered from the concealment of a cypress trunk. But it was neither the lithe leaping form of a deer, nor the uncouth shambling bulk of swamp bear that broke from the cover a moment later. Instead, there lurched into view a huge negro. The fugitive's clothing hung in shreds, witness of the cat's-briar claws; his face, from the same cause, was torn and bleeding. The breath wheezed loudly through the open mouth; the sweat ran in streams from the face; the eyes rolled whitely. There was terror in his expression. He carried a thick club. Now, as he came to a halt, it was plain to the watcher that the runner's fear had at last driven him to make a stand, when he could flee no further. Zeke had no difficulty in understanding the situation sufficiently well. The negro was undoubtedly a criminal who had fled in the hope of refuge from the law in the swamp's secret lurking places. Now trailed by the dog, he was brought to bay. Zeke determined, as a measure of prudence, to remain in-

active until the issue between man and dog should be adjusted. Otherwise, he might find himself engaged against both man and beast with only a single bullet to his aid.

The querulous cries of the dog here and there showed that the scent had been lost where the negro had splashed through some pool. Then, abruptly, a sharp volley announced recovery of the track. A minute later a huge black-and-tan body catapulted from the thicket into the open space of the trail. From his cover, Zeke watched excitedly. The negro, who had stood with club swung back ready for the blow, was caught at disadvantage by the pursuer's emergence at an unexpected point. The branches of the thicket projected to prevent a blow. The dog, silent now, hurled itself straight at the man's throat. But the negro, alert to the peril, avoided the charge by a swift spring to the side. Zeke heard the great jaws of the beast click shut as it shot harmlessly past its foe; he heard the savage growl with which it whirled to renew the attack. As it leaped a second time the negro's club fell true in a mighty stroke—caught the creature fair on the skull, stopped it in midair, dropped it dead to the ground.

Zeke's turn in the action was come, at last. Even as the negro stood gloating over his victory, the mountaineer, with leveled rifle, stepped from the

concealment of the cypress, and cried a sharp command:

"Drop thet-thar club, an' stand still whar ye be, if ye don't want to be kilt!"

The effect on the exultant negro was almost pitiful. Where had been the assurance of final escape was now the certainty of capture. The shock of contrasting emotions was too much for the fellow's strength, coarse-fibered and hardened as he was. He stared at Zeke with protruding eyes, his face grown gray. His thrilling joy in the slaying of the dog was lost in the black despair of defeat. The club fell from the trembling fingers, and in the next moment the man himself sagged to the ground and crouched whimpering, whining, in a child-like abandon to fatigue and grief. Then, presently, while the captor watched in some perplexity, the moaning ceased. In its stead came a raucous rhythm—the sleep of utter exhaustion.

A sound of footsteps on the path caught Zeke's ear. He turned, and saw close at hand a short, stockily built, swarthy-complexioned man of middle age, who came swinging forward at a lope. The newcomer halted at sight of the mountaineer.

"Seen anything of a big nigger or a hound passing this way?" he demanded.

Zeke nodded, gravely.

"Ye'll find the two of 'em right thar." He raised

the rifle, which the other man now observed for the first time, and with it pointed to where, beyond the cypress-tree, the negro huddled, breathing stertorously, beside the dead body of the dog.

CHAPTER V

DUN clouds of tragedy, crimson-streaked with sinister romance, shadow the chronicles of the forty-mile square that makes the Dismal Swamp. Thither, aforetime, even as to-day, men fled into the labyrinthine recesses to escape the justice—or the injustice—of their fellows. Runaway slaves sought asylum within its impenetrable and uncharted mazes of thicket and quaking earth, of fetid pool and slithering quicksands. Such fugitives came no more after the emancipation. Instead of slaves, there were black men who had outraged the law, who fled into the steaming, noxious waste in order to evade the penalty for crime. For a time, these evil-doers were hunted through the tortuous trails in the canebrakes with blood-hounds, even as their predecessors had been. But the kennels of the man-hunting dogs were ravaged by the black tongue, soon after the ending of the Civil War. Poisoners, too, took toll of the too intelligent brutes. The strain rapidly grew less—became extinct. Whereat, the criminals of Dismal Swamp rejoiced in unholy glee. Their numbers waxed. Soon, they came to be

a serious menace to the peace and safety of the communities that bordered on the infested region.

One sufferer from these conditions so resented the depredations of marauders that he bought in England two splendid stag-hounds, keen of scent, intelligent, faithful to their task, strong enough to throttle their quarry, be it deer or man. By the aid of these creatures, many criminals were captured. Their owner, by the intrepidity of his pursuit, was given a nickname, "Cyclone" Brant. The speed and force and resistlessness of him justified the designation. Together with his dogs, Jack and Bruno, he won local fame for daring and successful exploits against the lurking swamp devils. It was this man who now, canvas-clad, with rifle in hand, looked in the direction indicated by Zeke. He was dripping wet, plastered with slime of the bogs. For a few seconds, he stood staring in silence. Then a little, gasping cry broke from his lips. He strode forward, and fell to his knees beside the body of the dog. He lifted the face of the hound gently in his two hands, and looked down at it for a long time.

There was a film of tears in Brant's eyes when, at last, he put the head of the dog softly back on the earth, and stood up, and turned toward the mountaineer. He made explanation with simple directness. The negro was a notorious outlaw, for whose capture the authorities of Elizabeth City offered a

reward of five hundred dollars. Half of this sum would be duly paid to Zeke.

This news stirred the young man to the deeps. To his poverty-stricken experience, the amount was princely. The mere mention of it made privations to vanish away, luxuries to flourish. He had roseate visions of lavish expenditures: a warm coat for the old mother, furbelows for Plutina, "straighteners" even, if she would have them. The dreamer blushed at the intimacy of his thought. It did not, occur to his frugal soul that now he need not continue on *The Bonita*, but might instead go easily to New York by train. He was naïvely happy in this influx of good fortune, and showed his emotion in the deepened color under the tan of his cheeks and in the dancing lights of the steady eyes.

"I'm shore plumb glad I kotched him," he said eagerly, "if thar's a right smart o' money in hit. If he's as right-down bad as ye says he is, I'm powerfully sorry I didn't wing 'im 'fore he got yer dawg.'

Brant shook his head regretfully.

"It's my fault," he confessed. 'I oughtn't to have taken the chance with Bruno alone. I should have had Jack along, too. With more than one dog, a man won't stand against 'em. He'll take to a tree." He shook off the depression that descended as he glanced down at the stiffening body

of the beast. There was a forced cheerfulness in his tones when he continued: "But how did you get into the swamp? I take you to be from the mountains."

Zeke's manner suddenly indicated no small pride.

"I'm a sailor, suh," he explained, with great dignity. "I'm the cookin' chief on the fishin' steamer, *Bonita.*"

Brant surveyed the mountaineer with quizzically appraising eyes.

"Been a sailor long?" he questioned, innocently.

"Wall, no, I hain't," Zeke conceded. His voice was reluctant. "I was only tuk on las' night. I hain't rightly begun sailorin' yit. Thet's how I c'd come arter thet gobbler." He pointed to the bird lying at the foot of the cypress. Abruptly, his thoughts veered again to the reward. "Oh, cracky! Jest think of all thet money earned in two minutes! Hit's what I come down out o' the mountains fer, an' hit 'pears like I done right. I'd shore be tickled to see all thet-thar money in dimes an' nickels, n' mebby a few quarters thrown in!"

"You're tied up near here?" Brant inquired.

"'Bout a mile over," was the answer. "Will ye take yer nigger thar first?"

"Yes, I know Captain Lee. He'll give me a chance at your gobbler, and then passage to Elizabeth City."

That same afternoon, *The Bonita* continued her voyage. The captain obligingly made a landing at Elizabeth City, where Brant lodged his prisoner, and where the gratified Zeke stowed in his wallet ten times as much money as he had ever before possessed at one time. Naturally, he was in a mood of much self-complacency, for, in addition to the money gain, his adventure had notably increased his prestige aboard ship, where Brant's praise for his prompt and efficient action was respectfully accepted. Yet, despite his contentment, the mountaineer found himself strangely troubled as he lay in his bunk, after the ship had got under way. It may be that his perturbation had a physical cause, at least in part, for there was more movement now as the vessel slid through the waves of Pamlico Sound. It was while he tossed restlessly, troubled over this unaccustomed inability to sleep, that there came a memory of the black bag:

"I plumb fergot the dum hoodoo!" Zeke muttered, in huge disgust. "An' the chief said I must git another the first chance." Then he grinned vainGloriously into the darkness of the fore-peak. "But I reckon hit hain't put no cuss on me yit—seein' as how I got a job an' a peck o' money right smack off." Presently, however, his nervous mood suggested a sinister possibility. "P'rhaps, it don't work on land—only jest on the sea, or mebby jest whar

it happens to be at. Hit wa'n't 'long with me when I ketched the nigger. I 'low I ought to 'a' got rid o' the pesky thing like the chief said."

Zeke realized that sleep was not for him. If he had had any hope otherwise, it was ended when the fog-horn of *The Bonita* wound its melancholy blasts, and other trumpetings began to sound over the waste from near and far. Already, by dint of many inquiries, Zeke had acquired enough information to know that the mournful noise was the accompaniment of a fog. Curious to see, he rose, and felt his way to the small port-hole, through which he sought to peer out into the night. His vision compassed no more than a few fathom's distance; beyond, all was blackness. The port was open, and the cold mist stealing in chilled him. Zeke shivered, but an inexplicable disturbance of spirit kept him from the warmth of the blankets. He chose rather to slip on his trousers, and then again to gaze blindly out into the mysterious dark of this new world. He found himself hearkening intently for the varied calls of warning that went wailing hither and yon. The mellow, softly booming, yet penetrant notes of the conch-shells blown by the skippers of smaller craft, came almost soothingly to his ears. All the others, harsher, seemed tocsins of terror.

Standing there at the port, with the floating

drops of mist drenching his face, Zeke fell into a waking dream. He was again clambering over the scarped cliffs of Stone Mountain; beside him Plutina. His arm was about her waist, and their hands were clasped, as they crept with cautious, feeling steps amid the perils of the path. For over the lofty, barren summit, the mist had shut down in impenetrable veils. Yet, through that murk of vapor, the two, though they moved so carefully, went in pulsing gladness, their hearts singing the old, old, new, new mating song. A mist not born of the sea nor of the mountain, but of the heart, was in the lad's eyes while he remembered and lived again those golden moments in the mountain gloom. It seemed to him for a blessed minute that Plutina was actually there beside him in the tiny, rocking space of the fore-peak; that the warmth of her hand-clasp thrilled into the beating of his pulses. Though the illusion vanished swiftly, the radiance of it remained, for he knew that then, and always, the spirit of the girl dwelt with him.

The mountaineer's interval of peace was rudely ended. A wild volley of blasts from *The Bonita's* whistle made alarum. Bells clanged frantically in the engine-room close at hand. A raucous fog-horn clamored out of the dark. To Zeke, still dazedly held to thought of the mountains, the next sound was like the crashing down of a giant tree, which

falls with the tearing, splitting din of branches beating through underbrush. An evil tremor shook the boat. Of a sudden, *The Bonita* heeled over to starboard, almost on her beams' ends. Zeke saved himself from falling only by a quick clutch on the open port. From the deck above came a confusion of fierce voices, a strident uproar of shouts and curses. Then, *The Bonita* righted herself, tremulously, languidly, as one sore-stricken might sit up, very feebly. The sailors in the fore-peak, with a chorus of startled oaths, leaped from the bunks, and fled to the deck. Zeke followed.

Clinging to a stanchion, the mountaineer could distinguish vaguely, in the faint lights of the lanterns, the bows of a three-masted schooner, which had sheared through the port-side of *The Bonita.* The bowsprit hung far over the smaller ship, a wand of doom. The beating of the waves against the boat's side came gently under the rasping, crunching complaint of timber against timber in combat. The schooner's sails flapped softly in the light breeze. Zeke, watching and listening alertly, despite bewilderment, heard the roaring commands of a man invisible, somewhere above him, and guessed that this must be the captain of the schooner. He saw the crew of *The Bonita* clambering, one after another at speed, up the anchor chain at the bow of the destroyer. He realized

that flight was the only road to safety. But, even as he was tensed to dart forward, he remembered his treasure of money under the bunk pillow.

On the instant, he rushed to the fore-peak, seized the wallet and the black bag, and fled again to the deck. At the moment when he reappeared, a gust of quickening breeze filled the schooner's sails. The canvas bellied taut. The grinding, clashing clamor of the timbers swelled suddenly. The schooner wrenched herself free, and slipped, abruptly silent, away into the night and the mist. Ere Zeke reached the rail in his leap, the schooner had vanished. For a minute, he heard a medley of voices. Then, while he stood straining his eyes in despair, these sounds lessened—died. The mountaineer stood solitary and forsaken on the deck of a sinking ship.

Finally, Zeke spoke aloud in self-communion. The words rang a little tremulous, for he realized that he was at grips with death.

"Hit's what I gits fer fergittin'," was his regretful comment. "I reckon, if so be I'd ever got onto thet-thar schooner with this-hyar damn' bag, she'd 'a' sunk, too. Or, leastways, they'd have chucked me overboard like Jonah, fer causin' the hull cussed trouble with this pesky black bag o' mine."

Zeke perceived that the doomed vessel was settling by the head. He surmised that time was short.

Nevertheless, he took leisure for one duty he deemed of prime importance. With all his strength in a vicious heave, he cast the black bag from him into the sea.

"I hain't superstitious," he remarked, sullenly; "thet is, not exzackly. An' I reckon I'm gittin' rid o' that conjure satchel a mite late. I guess hit's done hit's damnedest a'ready."

Inquiries during the leisurely voyaging through the canal had given Zeke knowledge concerning the life-belts. Now, he buckled one of them about his body hastily, for even his ignorance could not fail to interpret the steady settling of the vessel into the water. The strain of fighting forebears in the lad set him courageous in the face of death. But his blood was red and all a-tingle with the joy of life, and he was very loath to die. His heart yearned for the girl who loved him. His desire for her was a stabbing agony. The thought of his mother's destitution, deprived of him in her old age, was grievous. But his anguish was over the girl—anguish for himself; yet more for her. The drizzle of the fog on his cheeks brought again a poignant memory of the mist that had enwrapped them on the stark rocks of the mountain. A savage revolt welled in him against the monstrous decree of fate. He cried out roughly a challenge to the elements. Then, in the next instant, he checked the futile outburst, and bethought him how best to meet the catastrophe.

The instinct of flight from the rising waters led Zeke to mount the pilot-house. The lanterns shed a flickering light here, and the youth uttered a cry of joy as his eyes fell on the life-raft. The shout was lost in the hissing of steam as the sea rushed in on the boilers. All the lights were extinguished now, save the running lamps with their containers of oil. Quickly, the noise from the boiler-room died out, and again there was silence, save for the occasional bourdoning of the horns or the mocking caress of the waves that lapped the vessel's sides—like a colossal serpent licking the prey it would devour betimes. In the stillness, Zeke wrought swiftly. He wasted no time over the fastenings. The blade of his knife slashed through the hemp lashings, and the raft lay clear. He made sure that it was free from the possibility of entanglement. Then, as the boat lurched sickeningly, like a drunken man to a fall, Zeke stretched himself face downward lengthwise of the tiny structure, and clenched his hands on the tubes. There was a period of dragging seconds, while *The Bonita* swayed sluggishly, in a shuddering rhythm. Came the death spasm. The stern was tossed high; the bow plunged for the depths. Down and down—to the oyster rocks

of Teach's Hole, in Pamlico Sound. As the vessel sank, the raft floated clear for a moment, then the suction drew it under, buffeted it—spewed it forth. It rode easily on the swirling waters, at last. As the commotion from the ship's sinking ceased, the raft moved smoothly on the surface, rocking gently with the pulse of the sea. Zeke, half-strangled, almost torn from his place by the grip of the water in the plunge, clung to his refuge with all the strength that was in him. And that strength prevailed. Soon, he could breathe fully once again, and the jaws of the sea gave over their gnawing. After the mortal peril through which he had won, Zeke found his case not so evil. The life was still in him, and he voiced a crude phrase of gratefulness to Him who is Lord of the deep waters, even as of the everlasting hills.

Near Teach's Hole, Ocracoke Inlet offers a shallow channel between the dunes from Pamlico Sound to the open sea. Here the varying tides rush angrily, lashed by the bulk of waves behind. Tonight, the ebb bore with it a cockle-shell on which a lad clung, shivering. But the soul was still strong in him for all his plight. He dared believe that he would yet return safe to the mountains, to the love that awaited him there.

Once the castaway smiled wryly:

"I hain't superstitious none—leastways, I dunno's I be," he muttered, doubtfully. "But hit's plumb lucky I got rid o' thet-thar dum black bag jest as I did, or I'd 'a' been a goner, shore!"

CHAPTER VI

THE days dragged heavily for Plutina, after the departure of her lover. She endured the period of tense waiting as best she might, since endure she must, but this passive loneliness, without a word from the man of her heart, was well-nigh intolerable. She did not weep—after that single passionate outburst while yet her lips were warm from his kiss. She was not of the weak fiber to find assuagement in many tears, nor had she nerves that needed the chemical soothing of flooded eyes. She had, indeed, strength sufficient for the trial. She bore her sorrow bravely enough, but it pierced her through and through. She knew her lover, and she knew herself. Because of that knowledge she was spared the shameful suffering of a woman who fears, with deadly fear, lest her lover be untrue. Plutina had never a doubt as to the faith of the absent one. A natural jealousy sometimes leaped in her bosom, at thought of him exposed to the wiles of women whom she suspected of all wantonness. But she had no cowardly thought that the fairest and most cunning of them

could oust her from the shrine of Zeke's heart. Her great grief lay in the failure of any word from the traveler. The days became weeks; almost a month had gone since he held her in his arms, and still no message came. This was, in truth, strange enough to justify alarm. It was with difficulty that she drove back a temptation to imagine evil happenings. She went oftener the six miles to the Cherry Lane post-office.

When she descended the trail toward Thunder Branch this morning, she saw Zeke's mother standing in the doorway of the cabin on the far side of the stream. The bent figure of the old woman rested motionless, with one hand lifted to shade her eyes from the vivid sunlight, as she watched the girl's approach.

"Mornin', Tiny," she said tenderly, as the girl crossed the clearing. "On yer way to the Lane, I reckon?"

"Mornin', Mis' Higgins," came the cheery answer. 'Yes, I 'lowed as how ye'd love to hear, an' I c'd git away. The corn's laid by; the sorghum cane's done hoed. 'Alviry's gone to he'p Gran'pap with a bee-tree. Hit's a big yaller poplar, up 'twixt Ted Hutchins' claim an' the ole mine-hole. Gran'pap 'lows as how hit'll have to be cut an' split, an' wuth hit—over a hundred pounds, all sour-wood honey, 'cept 'bout ten pounds early poplar. Gran'-

pap's right-smart tickled. I told Alviry to watch out he don't go an' tote half of it up to thet-thar Widder Brown. You-all must come over an' git what ye kin use o' the honey, Mis' Higgins, afore the widder gits her fingers in the jar."

"Ye don't opine thet-thar gran'pap o' your'n aims to git hitched ag'in at his age, do ye, Tiny? Hit'd be plumb scand'lous—an' him eighty past. At thet age, he's bound to have one foot in the grave, fer all he's so tarnation spry an' peart in his carryin's on."

"Lord knows what he'll do," the girl replied, carelessly. "He's allers been given credit fer havin' fotchin' ways with women. I hope he won't, though. They say, folks what marry upwards o' eighty is mighty short-lived."

The topic led Zeke's mother to broach apprehension of her own:

"Tiny, ye don't have no idee thet our Zeke's gone daffy on some o' them Evish-lookin' critters down below, like ye showed me their picters in the city paper oncet?"

"Naw, no danger o' thet," was the stout assurance. "Zeke's got too much sense. Besides, he hain't had no time to git rich yit. The paper done said as how them kind's arter the coin."

As she went her way, the girl's mind reveled in thoughts of the days to come, when Zeke should be

rich in sooth, and his riches for her. She swung her sun-bonnet in vigorous slaps against her bare legs, to scatter the ravenous mosquitoes and yellow flies, swarming from the thickets, and she smiled contentedly.

"P'r'aps, them women's got more edication 'n me," she mused aloud, complacently, "but I kin fill them silk stockin's plumb up." Her face grew brooding with a wistful regret in the sudden droop of the tender red lips. "I 'low I jest orter 'a' swung onto thet-thar neck o' his'n an' hollered fer Parson, and got spliced 'fore he went." She shook her head disconsolately. "Why, if he don't come back, I'll be worse nor the widders. Humph, I knows 'em—cats! They'll say: 'Tiny Siddon didn't never have no chance to git married—her disperzition an' her looks wa'n't compellin' 'nough to ketch a man."

The great dark eyes were clouded a little with bitter disappointment, when, two hours later, the girl came swiftly down the steep slopes from Cherry Lane, for once again there had been no letter for her. Despite her courage, Plutina felt a chill of dismay before the mystery of this silence. Though faith was unshaken, bewilderment oppressed her spirit. She could not understand, and because she could not understand, her grief was heavy to bear Then, presently, she chanced upon

a new mystery for her distraction—though this was the easier to her solving.

As she descended into a hollow by Luffman's branch, which joins Thunder Branch a little way above the Higgins' clearing, Plutina's alert ears caught a sound that was not of the tumbling waters. Through all the noises of the stream where it leaped and sprayed in miniature falls over cluttering bowlders and fallen pines, she could distinguish the splashing of quick footsteps in the shallows. Some instinct of caution checked the girl's advance. Instead of going forward openly, she turned aside and approached the bank where crowding alders and ivy formed a screen. Here, she parted the vines stealthily, and peered up the water-course.

A man was descending the run with hurried strides, wading with bare feet, or springing from rock to rock where were the deeper pools. A Winchester nestled in the crook of his left arm; two huge bear-traps, the jaws wickedly fanged, were swung from a rope over his right shoulder; a short-helved ax was thrust within his belt. He wore only a cotton shirt open at the neck, dirty throughout, patched jeans trousers, and a soft hat, green from long use. Beneath the shading brim showed a loutish face, the coarse features swollen from dissipation, the small black eyes bleared, yet alert and penetrating in their darting, furtive glances. It

was Dan Hodges, a man of unsavory repute. The girl, though unafraid, blessed the instinct that had guided her to avoid a meeting.

There were two prime factors in Plutina's detestation of Hodges. The first was due to his insolence, as she deemed it, in aspiring for her favor. With little training in conventional ideas of delicacy, the girl had, nevertheless, a native refinement not always characteristic of her more-cultured sister women. There was to her something unspeakably repugnant in the fact that this bestial person should dare to think of her intimately. It was as if she were polluted by his dreaming of her kisses, of her yielding to his caresses. That he had so aspired she knew, for he had told her of his desire with the coarse candor of his kind. Her spurning of the uncouth advances, had excited his wrath; it had not destroyed his hopes. He had even ventured to renew his suit, after the news of an engagement between Plutina and Zeke had gone abroad. He had winced under the scourge of the girl' scorn, but he had shown neither penitence nor remorse. Plutina had forborne any account of this trouble to her lover, lest, by bad blood between the two men, a worse thing befall.

The second cause of the girl's feeling was less direct, though of longer standing, and had to do with the death of her father. That Siddon, while

yet in his prime, had been slain in a raid on a still by the revenue officers, and that depite the fact that he was not concerned in the affair, save by the unfortunate chance of being present. Plutina, though only a child at the time, could still remember the horror of that event. There was a singular personal guiltiness, too, in her feeling, for, on the occasion of the raid, her grandfather had been looking out from a balcony, and had seen the revenue men urging their horses up the trail, the sunlight glinting on their carbines. He had seized the great horn, to blow a warning to those at the secret still on the mountain above. Plutina could remember yet the grotesque bewilderment on his face, as no sound issued—then the wrath and despair. The children, in all innocence, had stuffed the horn with rags. The prank had thus, in a way, cost two lives—one, that of "Young" Dick Siddon. The owner of the raided still had been Dan Hodges, and him Putina despised and hated with a virulence not at all Christian, but very human. She had all the old-time mountaineer's antipathy for the extortion, as it was esteemed, of the Federal Government, and her father's death had naturally inflamed her against those responsible for it. Yet, her loathing of Hodges caused her to regret that the man himself had escaped capture thus far, though twice his still had been destroyed, once within the year.

A high, jutting wall of rock hid the stream where it bent sharply a little way from Plutina's shelter. Presently, she became aware that Hodges had paused thus beyond the range of her vision, and was busy there. She heard the blows of the ax. General distrust of the man stirred up in her a brisk curiosity concerning the nature of his action in this place. On a previous day, she had observed that the limpid waters of the brook had been sullied by the milky refuse from a still somewhere in the reaches above. Now, the presence of Dan Hodges was sufficient to prove the hidden still his. But the fact did not explain his business here. That it was something evil, she could not doubt, for the man and his gang were almost outlaws among their own people. They were known, though unpunished, thieves, as well as "moonshiners," and there were whispers of more dreadful things—of slain men vanished into the unsounded depths of the Devil's Cauldron. The gorge of the community—careless as it had been of some laws in the past, and too ready to administer justice according to its own code—had risen against the vicious living of the gang that accepted Hodges as chief. It seemed to Plutina that duty conspired with curiosity to set her spying on the man.

The espionage, though toilsome enough, was not otherwise difficult. Toward the bend, the banks

rose sharply on both sides of the stream, forming a tiny cañon for the channel. The steep slope on the east side, where the girl now ascended, was closely overgrown with laurel and little thickets of ground pine, through which she was hard beset to force her way—the more since she must move with what noiselessness she might. But her strength and skill compassed the affair with surprising quickness. Presently, she came to the brim of the little cliff, and lying outstretched, cautiously looked down. Already, a hideous idea had entered her mind, but she had rejected it with horror. What she now saw confirmed the thought she had not dared to harbor.

Within this bend of the brook, the lessening volume of the channel had left a patch of rich soil, heavily overgrown with lush grasses and clusters of flowering weeds. A faint trace of passing steps ran across the bit of dry ground, the path of those that followed the stream's course. Fair in this dim trail, near the center of the plot, a stake had been driven deep. At the moment, Hodges was driving into the ground a similar stake, a yard further down. It was evident that the stakes had been previously left here in readiness, since he had not carried them in his descent, and the iron rings bound to them must have been attached in a forge. The two massive traps were lying half-hidden in

the luxuriant growth close by. As Plutina watched with affrighted intentness, the man finished driving the second stake. He lifted one of the traps, and carried it to the upper stake. With the aid of a stone for anvil, he succeeded in clumsily riveting the trap's length of chain to the ring on the stake. The like was done with the other trap at the lower stake. Then, the man undertook the setting of the traps. The task was accomplished very quickly for both, though the strength of the jaws taxed his muscles to their utmost. Finally, he strewed leaves, and bent grass, until no least gleam of metal betrayed the masked peril of the trail. Plutina sick with the treacherous deviltry of the device, heard the grunt of satisfaction with which Hodges contemplated his finished work. Forthwith, he picked up his rifle, thrust the ax-helve within his belt, and set off up the gulch.

CHAPTER VII

THERE could be no doubt. Those massive traps, with their cruel teeth of steel, meant by the makers for the holding of beasts, had been set here by Hodges for the snaring of men. The contrivance was fiendishly efficient. From her coign of vantage on the cliff top, Plutina could see, on a height above, the brush-covered distillery. A thin, blue column of smoke rose straight in the calm air, witness that the kettle was boiling over hickory logs, that a "run" of the liquor was being made. Plutina recalled that, in a recent raid against Hodges, the still had been captured and destroyed though the gang had escaped. Such loss was disastrous, for the new copper and worm and fermenters meant a cost of a hundred dollars, a sum hard to come on in the mountain coves. Usually, the outfit is packed on the men's backs to hiding in the laurel, afterward shifted to another obscure nook by running water. It was plain that Hodges had grown more than ever venomous over the destruction of his still, and had no scruples as to the means he would employ to prevent a repeti-

tion of such catastrophe. No need now to fear lest sentinels be not alert. The natural path to the still was along the course of the stream. The unwary passer over the tiny stretch of greensward on which the girl looked down, would follow the dim trail of footsteps, and so inevitably come within the clutch of the great jaws, which would hurl themselves together, rending and crunching the flesh between. The victim's shrieks of anguish under the assault would be a warning to the lawless men above. They would make ready and flee with their possessions, and be lost in the laurel once again. Yes, the device was simple, diabolically simple, and adequate. It required only that its executant should be without bowels of compassion.

Plutina, strong-nerved as she was, found herself shuddering as she realized the heinousness of this thing. The soft bloom of the roses in her cheeks faded to white; the dark radiance of the eyes was dimmed with horror; the exquisite lips were compressed harshly against their own quivering weakness. For Plutina, despite strength of body and sane poise of soul, was a gentle and tender woman, and the brutal project spread before her eyes was an offense to every sensibility. Then, very soon, the mood of passive distress yielded to another emotion: a lust for vengeance on the man who would insure his own safety thus, reckless of another's

cost. A new idea came to the girl. At its first advent, she shrank from it, conscience-stricken, for it outraged the traditions of her people. But the idea returned, once and again. It seemed to her that the evil of the man justified her in any measure for his punishment. She had been bred to hate and despise a spy, but it was borne in on her now that duty required of her to turn informer against Dan Hodges. There was more even than the inflicting of punishment on the outlaw; there was the necessity of safeguarding the innocent from the menace of those hidden man-traps. Any "furriner" from down below might wander here, whipping the stream; or any one of the neighborhood might chance on the spot. The Widow Higgins' heifers sometimes strayed; the old woman might come hither, seeking them. Plutina shuddered again, before the terrible vision of the one who was like a mother to her, caught and mangled by the pointed fangs waiting amid the grasses below.

The question as to her right conduct in the affair remained with the girl, as she descended from the cliff, and made her way slowly homeward. She temporized by a precautionary measure. At the widow's cabin, she secured the old woman's promise not to go beyond the clearing in quest of the cattle. But the difficulty as to her course was not

abated. Inclination urged her to advise the authorities concerning the locations of still and traps, and inclination was reinforced by justice. Yet, over against this, there were the powerful influence of her upbringing, the circumstances of her environment, the tragedy of her father's death, the savage resentment of her grandfather, already virulent against her lover—all forces to inspire enmity against the representatives of a law regarded as the violation of inalienable rights. True, there was growing an insidious change in the sentiment of the community. Where all had once been of accord, the better element were now becoming convinced that the illicit liquor-making cursed the mountains, rather than blessed. Undoubtedly, some effect of this had touched the girl herself, without her knowledge, else she had never thought to betray even such a miscreant as Hodges. There was, however, an abiding hate of the informer here, as always among decent folk, though along with it went reprobation of the traffic in moonshine. Plutina felt that she could never justify her action in the sight of her people, should she bring the revenue men into the mountain. Her own grandfather would curse her, and drive her forth. His feeling had been shown clearly in the case of Zeke. So, in her period of uncertainty and stress, there was none of whom the girl could take counsel. But, in the end, she de-

cided that she must give warning to the United States marshal. The task demanded care. On absolute secrecy depended, in all likelihood, her very life.

The trove of honey had come opportunely, since the sale of a portion afforded Plutina plausible excuse for her trip to Joines' store. There, a telephone had been recently installed, and it was the girl's intention to use this means of communication with the marshal. That the danger of detection was great, she was unhappily aware, but, she could devise no plan that seemed less perilous. So, early in the morning of the day following her discovery, she made her way along the North Wilkesboro' road, carrying twenty pounds of the sour-wood honey. At the store, she did her trading, and afterward remained loitering, as is the custom of shoppers in the region. The interval of waiting seemed to her interminable, for trade was brisk. There was always someone near enough the telephone to overhear, for it was unprotected by a booth. But, finally, the customers lessened. The few remaining were in the front of the store, at a safe distance from the instrument which was on a shelf at the back. Plutina believed that her opportunity was come. She knew the amount of the toll, and had the necessary silver in her hand to slip into the box. Then, just as she was about to take down the

receiver, her apprehensive glance, roving the room, fell on Ben York, who entered briskly, notwithstanding his seventy years, and came straight toward her. Plutina's lifted hand fell to her side, and dread was heavy on her. For Ben York was the distiller in Hodges' gang.

The old man had a reputation almost as notorious as that of Hodges himself. The girl felt a wave of disgust, mingled with alarm, as she caught sight of the face, almost hidden behind a hoary thicket of whiskers. The fellow was dirty, as always, and his ragged clothes only emphasized the emaciation of his dwarfed form. But the rheumy eyes had a searching quality that disturbed the girl greatly. She knew that the man was distinguished for his intelligence as well as for his general worthlessness. In the experience of years, he had always escaped the raiders, nor had they been able ever to secure any evidence against him. He was, in fact, as adroit of mind as he was tough of body. He had lived hard all his days, either in drunken carouse or lying out in the laurel to escape the summons of the courts. Where, alas! a holier man might have been broken long ago, the aged reprobate thrived, and threatened to infest the land for years to come. Now, he greeted the girl casually enough, made a purchase, and took his departure. He seemd quite unsuspicious, but Plutina felt that his coming on her

thus was an evil omen, and, for a moment, she faltered in her purpose.

A hand went to her bosom, and touched the tiny leather bag that hung from a cord about her neck inside the gown. Within it was the fairy crystal. The touch of it strengthened her in some subtle fashion. It was as if to her weakness there came miraculously something vital, something occultly helpful in her need, from the distant lover. The superstition, begotten and nourished always in the fastnesses of the heights, stirred deeply within her, and comforted her. Of a sudden, courage flowed back into her. She took down the receiver.

After all, nothing was accomplished. The marshal was not in his office, but absent somewhere in the mountains. Plutina would not risk giving information to any other than the officer himself, whom she knew, and respected. Disconsolate, she abandoned the attempt for the time being, and set out to get a bag of wheat flour from the mill close by, on the other side of Roaring River.

As Plutina, with the bag of flour on shoulder, was making her way back from the mill, across the big sycamore trunk that serves as a foot bridge, a horse splashed into the ford alongside. The girl looked up, to see the very man she sought. Marshal Stone called a cheery greeting, the while his horse dropped its head to drink.

"Howdy, Plutina?"

"Howdy, Mr. Stone," she answered. Her free hand went again to the talisman in her bosom. Surely, its charm was potent!

"All's well as common, at home?" Stone continued. His critical eyes delighted in the unconscious grace of the girl, as she stood poised above the brawling stream, serene in her physical perfection; and above the delicately modeled symmetry of form was the loveliness of the face, beautiful as a flower, yet strong, with the shining eyes and the red lips, now parted in eagerness. The marshal wondered a little at that eagerness. He wondered still more at her hurried speech after one quick glance to make sure that none could overhear:

"I mustn't be seed talkin' to ye, but I got somethin' to say'll he'p ye arn yer pay. Kin ye meet me in an hour by the sun, at the ole gate on the east end o' Wolf Rock?"

The marshal's answer wasted no words:

"Go on, gal—I'll be there."

Wolf Rock, a huge, jutting mass of barren cliff, though tiny beside the bulk of Stone Mountain, which overshadows it, lies between Garden Creek and Thunder Branch, a little to the north of where these streams flow into Roaring River. Its situation, nearly midway between the mill and the Siddon Cabin, made it a convenient point for the

meeting between Plutina and the officer. Its loneliness lessened the element of danger. Both were prompt to the rendezvous. Well under the hour, man and girl were standing together within a bower of newly blossoming rhododendrons. Above them, the naked rock bent sharply, its granite surface glistening in the hot noonday sun. They had withdrawn some score of yards from the old wooden gate that barred the lane here, lest a chance passer-by see them together. Plutina opened her mind without hesitation. The decision once made, she had no thought of drawing back.

"I 'low I kin trust ye, Mister Stone," she said simply, and the sincerity of the lustrous eyes as they met his confirmed her words. "Afore you-all's time in the revenue service, raiders done kilt my daddy. I kain't never fergive them men, but they's out o' the service now, er I wouldn't have come to ye. Gran'pap says they's a better lot o' revenuers now 'n what used to be an' he says as how Marshal Stone don't do no dirt. Thet's why I'm a-trusting ye, so's ye kin kotch the pizen-meanest white man a-makin' likker in the hull Stone Mountain country—him an' his gang an' his still."

The marshal's eyes sparkled.

"I reckon you're talking about Dan Hodges," he interjected.

Plutina nodded her head in somber acquiescence.

"Then you needn't have any scruples about giving information," Stone continued, urgently. "He and his gang are a menace to the peace of the settlement. I'll keep you out of it, of course, to save you embarrassment."

"Ye'd better," Plutina retorted, "to save my life. I don't know's I mind bein' embarrassed so much, but I don't feel called to die yit."

"No, no; there won't be anything like that," the marshal exclaimed, much disconcerted. "I'll see no trouble comes to you. Nobody'll know your part."

"'Cept me!" was the bitter objection. "If 'twas anybody but that ornery galoot, I wouldn't say a word. Ye know that."

"I know," Stone admitted, placatingly.

In his desire to change her mood, he blundered on:

"And there's the reward for getting the 'copper'—twenty dollars for you Plutina. If we get Hodges, I'll give you another fifty out of my own pocket. That'll buy you a nice new dress or two, and a hat, and some silk stockings for those pretty legs of yours."

Plutina flared. The red glowed hot in her cheeks, and the big eyes flashed. The mellow voice deepened to a note of new dignity, despite her anger.

"I hain't come hyar to gas 'bout rewards, an' money outten yer pocket, Mister Stone, or 'bout

my clothes an' sech. I'm an engaged woman. When I wants to cover my legs with stockin's Zeke Higgins' money'll do the payin', an' he won't need no he'p from no damned revenuer."

Stone, realizing too late the error in his diplomacy, made what haste he could to retrieve it. His smile was genial as he spoke. He seemed quite unabashed, just heartily sympathetic, and his manner calmed the girl's irritation almost at once.

"Oh, you little mountain hornet! Well, you are telling me news now. And its the kind to make any old bachelor like me weep for envy. Lucky boy, Zeke! I guess he knows it, too, for he's got eyes in his head. About the money—why, you've a right to it. If Dan Hodges and his gang ain't rounded up quick, they'll be killing some good citizen—like me, perhaps."

Plutina had recovered her poise, but she spoke no less firmly:

"No, suh, I won't tech the money. I kin show ye how to kotch the hull gang, but not fer pay, an not fer love o' no revenuer, neither. Hit's jest fer the good o' this country hyarbout. Dan Hodges has done sot b'ar-traps to kotch you-all. An' anybody might walk plumb into 'em, but not if I kin he'p hit."

Forthwith, she made the situation clear to her eager listener.

"Kin you-all meet me, an hour by the sun in the mornin', on the trail to Cherry Lane post-office jest beyond the Widder Higgins' clearin'? I'll take ye to the place, whar ye kin see the still, an' the traps."

"I'll have to move lively," the marshal answered, with a somewhat rueful laugh. "Twenty miles' ride to North Wilkesboro', and back. But I'll do it, of course. I wouldn't miss it for a good deal. I'll have my men waiting at Trap Hill. If things shape right, I'll make the raid to-morrow night."

CHAPTER VIII

MARSHAL John Stone was a mountaineer of the better sort, who had the respect and admiration of the law-abiding citizens in his district, and the hate of the evil-doers. He stood full six feet in his socks, and he was broad and muscled in proportion. His gray eyes were of the sort to harden to steel against an enemy, to soften wonderfully for a friend. The mouth, half-hidden by the thick mustache, was very firm, yet prone to smiles. To an excellent intelligence had been added a fair amount of education. Since he respected both himself and his work, and had developed a veritable passion for the capture of malefactors, he was more than usually successful. His zeal, tempered with discretion, had won the appreciative attention of official superiors. There could be no doubt that promotion would shortly remove him to a higher plane of service. The fact would have been most agreeable to Stone, but for two things. He desired beyond all else, before going from the mountains, to capture Dan Hodges, who had so persistently flouted the law, and himself, its

representative; the second unsatisfied ambition was to come on the long-lost Burns' still.

The Scottish poet's poverty was almost equal to his genius. On that account, Robert Burns was glad to secure the stipend of fifty-pounds a year to which he became entitled on his appointment as exciseman in 1788. It may be that his convivial habits made his official position particularly acceptable, since doubtless his perquisites included the keeping of his own jug filled. And there were moonshiners among the Scottish hills in those days, as perhaps there are to-day. On occasion, the poet made a gift of a captured still to some discreet friend. One recipient emigrated to America, and bore into the wilderness that has become North Carolina the kettle and cap of copper on which Burns had graven his name, and the date, 1790. Afterward, as the years passed, the still knew many owners, mostly unlawful. It won fame, and this saved it from the junk-heap of its fellows, when seized by the Federal officers. Three times, it was even placed on public exhibition. As many, it was stolen by moonshiners. For years now, it had remained in secret. Marshal Stone yearned to recapture the Burns still. There was no reason whatsoever for believing it to be in the possession of Hodges, yet it might as easily be with that desperado as with another. There was at least the

possibility. The marshal, as he rode north before the dawn next morning, felt a new kindling of hope. It seemed to him almost certain that the opportunity was at hand to satisfy one ambition at least by putting Hodges behind the bars. For the other, it was on the lap of the gods.

The officer was at pains to use every precaution to avoid being observed while in company with the girl, whom he duly met at the appointed place while the sun was yet low on the eastern horizon. The two made their way with what quiet they could through devious paths to Luffman's Branch. The dew lay heavy on the laurel leaves of the thickets, and the breeze was perfumed with the penetrant fragrance of many blossoms. The day was thrilling with the matins of the birds. The balsamic air was a wine of life. The rugged mountain peaks seemed to stand as an impregnable barrier against the confusions and evils of the larger world. But the man and the girl recked nought of these things as they went forward, with cautious steps and watchful eyes. They knew that the tranquil scene masked wickedness close by them, which would not hesitate to destroy. The discovery of the marshal in that vicinity would mean for him the bullet of an assassin from out the screen of leaves, and the same fate—or worse—for his companion. The corpses would be lost in the Devil's Cauldron. Men

would whisper grim surmises, and whisper low lest the like come upon them. And that would be all.

They reached the cliff top overlooking the little cañon, and Plutina pointed out the location of the traps on the strip of dry ground below, and the huddles of brush that disguised the buildings of the still. Then, the girl went her way. She had done her part. The man remained to study the scene above for hours through his glasses, and to map out the night's campaign into the enemy's country.

A delicate moonlight fell over the mountains, when, in the evening, Stone led his men from the rendezvous at Trap Hill. The six were heavily armed and well mounted. Their course at the outset led them along the Elkin road to Joines' store, where they swung into the trail over which Zeke and Plutina had walked the day of their parting. The cavalcade rode swiftly. There was no conversation; only the pounding of hoofs and the jangling of accoutrements. When, at last, they reached the edge of the Widow Higgins' clearing, they turned sharply to the eastward, following the path toward the Cherry Lane post-office. Presently, at a low word of command from the leader, they halted and dismounted. The horses were left to the care of one man in a near-by thicket, and the remainder of the party continued the advance on foot.

The marshal, during his watch on the still that day, had planned his attack in every detail. He hoped to make his capture of the gang without unnecessary casualties, for in this particular he had achieved an enviable record, on which he prided himself. At first, he had thought of ascending along the course of Luffman's Branch, after springing the traps, but had given over the plan as one offering more chance of the raiders being discovered prematurely. Instead, he had decided on taking his men up the mountainside by a round-about route, likely to be free from watchers. His men were already instructed in every point, so now they followed him rapidly and almost noiselessly, as he forced his way through the thick growths of the wooded slopes. The darkness added to the difficulties of the progress, but the posse were inured to hardships, and went onward and upward resolutely. Despite the necessities of the detour, they came surprisingly soon to a height from which they looked across a small ravine to the level space where the still perched by the stream. A few whispered words from the leader, and the company crept with increased care across the ravine. From the ridge beyond, three of the men passed forward to make ambush—one above, and one below, and one on the far side of the still. Stone and a single companion

remained, hiding behind the clumps of rhododendrons.

It was with huge satisfaction that the marshal recognized Hodges himself, plainly revealed by the firelight. The "kettle" was running at full blast. The seasoned hickory logs, in the rough stone furnace beneath the kettle, were burning fiercely, and the blue and gold of their flames lighted all the scene into vivid relief against the background of shadows. Stone, even at his distance, could see distinctly the tiny stream of colorless mountain-corn whiskey, as it flowed out from the worm into the keg placed to receive it. The leader of the gang was seated at ease on a stool just outside the brush enclosure that masked the buildings. The villain was evidently in a mood of contentment, untainted by remorse over the havoc his traps might wreak on any passing through the gorge below. Rather, doubtless, the memory of those sinister sentinels gave him a sense of safety, on which his serenity was founded. In his lap was a banjo which he thrummed vigorously, with rhythmic precision, if no greater musical art, and head and body and feet, all gave emphasis to the movement. At intervals, his raucous voice rumbled a snatch of song. It was evident that the moonshiner was mellow from draughts of his own potent product.

Others of the gang were busied here and there,

bulking grotesquely as they moved about the fire, seeming disheveled demons of the pit. Like some master imp torturing a pigmy over the flames, old Ben York was kneeling close beside the blaze, holding to the coals a hickory stick, which served as spit for the roasting of a squirrel. The brilliance shone full on the frowsy gray whiskers, and, above them, the blinking, rheumy eyes, so intent on the proper browning of the game. None of the outlaws had a weapon in his grasp—a fact noted with satisfaction by the chief of the raiders, who knew that these men would not scruple against bloodshed to escape arrest. There were arms at hand, of course; Hodges' rifle was visible, leaning against a ground pine within his reach. But Stone hoped that the surprise would be such that the gang could not avail themselves of their weapons.

Hodges had just completed a strident rendering of "Cripple Crick," and had thumped out the opening bars of "Short'nin' Bread," when the marshal gave the signal for attack—a single flash of his electric torch. In the same second, the raiders' rifles crashed out. The big bullets struck true to aim in the ground of the open place before the fire. A shower of dirt and pebbles spat back viciously. Some of the flying fragments struck the men, terrifying them with the thought of bullet wounds. Hodges, as the reports sounded, felt the bruise of

stones on his bare legs, and shrieked in panic fear. His instinctive recoil carried him over backward, from the stool to the ground. The banjo jangled discordant triumph over his fall. When, dazed by the suddenness of it all, he would have struggled up, he found himself fast in the clutches of two raiders, who locked manacles on his wrists. Stone grunted joyously as he surveyed the captive. The others of the gang, except Ben York, had contrived to slip away into the laurel, whither it would avail nothing to follow them, save useless risk of being killed from ambush. But the marshal cared little for the escape of the lesser malefactors. He had succeeded in taking prisoner the most notorious criminal of the mountains.

Ben York had failed to effect his usual flight, because of being at a disadvantage on his knees. Before he could scramble up for a plunge into the thickets the enemy was upon him. Yet, even in this moment of shock, the old scoundrel's cunning sought and found a ruse. He stood swaying for seconds, and then tumbled limply headlong to the ground, in a drunkard's fall, familiar to his muscles by experience through three-score years. So he lay inert, seemingly sodden from the kettle's brew. His captors, if resolved to hold him prisoner, would be forced to the arduous task of carying him through the dark, down the rough slopes. It would be

strange, he mused complacently, if in the course of the journey, their vigilance did not relax a little. And a very little would suffice him! Then, though to all appearance in a drunken stupor, he sighed. He was unhappily aware that the revenue men would not be gentle in their efforts to arouse him to consciousness. Whether they believed him shamming or not, they would use no doubtful measures. But, whatever might come, he must endure it for the sake of escape.

The raiders realized the need of haste, for they must be done with their work here, and down the steeps of the mountain into the open road, ere the fugitives should have time to arm themselves, and waylay the posse from the thickets. So, with due watchfulness of the two prisoners, the men set about that task of destruction which their duty required. The fermenters, huge tubs holding the mixture of meal, malt and water making ready for the still, received first attention. Since York had fallen before these, the men rolled him roughly to one side, without arousing him to any sign of consciousness. Stone knew the man to be shamming, since there had been no show of even incipient drunkenness before the moment of the raid. He resolved to try a test at least, for he was alert to the hindrance the limp form would prove in the descent of the mountain. He thrust the body forward with his foot,

close to one of the great "stands" of the mixture, and bade an appreciative assistant apply the ax to the slippery-elm hoops that bound the staves. As the bands fell and the great volume of liquid gushed forth, the raiders leaped aside from the flood. But York never stirred. The down-rushing tide fell fairly on him, engulfed him. He made no movement, no outcry. Even Stone himself was led to a half-remorseful wonder whether he had been deceived concerning the fellow's state. Then, after a few seconds, the bald head rose, glistening from the pool of the "beer." The thin wisps of gray hair hung in dank strings; the jungle of beard seemed strangely thin; there was something curiously unlike Ben York in the lineaments. The marshal guessed that the metamorphosis was wrought by the swirling mess, which had scrubbed the weazened face almost clean for the first time in the memory of living man. As the dilapidated head emerged, it showed the grotesque caricature of a Neptune, whose element was not the waters of ocean, but the shattered hogsheads of "beer." Even now, however, Ben clung to his rôle. Once his face was clear, he continued to sit placidly, though the surface of the viscous pool was at his neck. For better effect, he blinked vacuously, and gurgled. Perhaps, memory of a bath in infancy inspired him. He had had none since. He beat his

scrawny hands in the "beer," and cackled. It was admirable art, but wasted.

The eight fermenters were broken and emptied, the whiskey stores, both "singlin's" and "doublin's," were poured out on the ground, which drank them as thirstily as did ever law-scorning "boomer." Then, the raiders turned to the chief spoils, kettle, cap and worm. Stone and his men took the copper worm from the cooling barrel, removed the cap, drew the fire from the furnace, and finally pulled down the kettle. In the varied excitement of the night, the marshal had almost forgotten his second great ambition, in the accomplishment of his first. Almost, not quite. Now, the memory of it jumped within him. He thrust the cap where the glow of the fire would light it clearly, dropped to his knees, and peered closely. His stern face relaxed abruptly to joyousness.

"By the Lord, boys," he shouted, "it's the Bobbie Burns' still!"

Nevertheless, Stone wasted no time in exultation. He merely ordered his men to carry the copper utensils along, instead of destroying them on the spot. Then, he addressed Ben York, who grinned idiotically from toothless gums, where he crouched in the diminishing puddle. The marshal's voice rasped.

"You're going with us, Ben. It's for you to say how. If we have to, we'll carry you—all the

way. We'll snake you down the mountains without being too almighty careful of that rum-tanned hide of yours, and then we'll sling you across the roughest-gaited horse we've got—face down across the saddle and roped snug. That's the way you'll do twenty-odd miles, Ben, if we have to tote you down a single rod. Make up your mind—now! It'll be too late to change it, in a minute. You're plumb sober, and I know it. Get up, you old fox!"

And Ben York, shivering in his sticky, drenched rags, recognized the inevitable, and scrambled to his feet, snarling curses.

"Hit was thet-thar damned gal!" he mumbled venomously. But none heard.

CHAPTER IX

IT is a far cry from the savagery of the illicit mountain still to that consummate luxury of civilization, an ocean-going steam yacht. Yet, in actual space, the distance between these two extremes was not great. *The Josephine,* all in snowy white, save for the gleam of polished brass-work, and flying the pennant of the New York Yacht Club, glided forth from Norfolk Harbor in serene magnificence on the same day that *The Bonita* chugged fussily over the same course. The yacht was setting out on the second stage of her leisurely pleasure voyage to Bermuda. The skipper had been instructed to follow the coast southward as far as Frying Pan Shoals, for the sake of rounding Hatteras. Afterward, since the weather grew menacing, the craft continued down the coast to Cape Lookout, where anchor was dropped in the Harbor of Refuge.

The island that lies there is a long, narrow, barren strip of sand, dotted thickly with dunes. Only a coarse marsh grass grows, with dwarfed pines and cedars. In this bleak spot live and thrive droves of wild ponies, of uncertain ancestry. It was these

creatures that just now held the attention of two persons on the yacht.

Under the awning in the stern, two girls were chatting as they dawdled over their morning chocolate. The younger and prettier of these was Josephine Blaise, the motherless daughter of the yacht-owner; the other was Florence Marlow her most intimate friend.

"Dad told me I could have the runabout ashore," Josephine was saying, with a sudden access of animation. "We'll go along the beach, as long as the going's good, or till we scare up the ponies."

"I do hope we'll see them digging holes in the sand, so as to get fresh water," Florence exclaimed.

But Josephine was quick to dissent:

"They don't dig for water," she explained, with a superior air. "They dig the holes in the beach when the tides out, and then the tide comes in and fills the holes, of course. When it ebbs, the ponies go around and pick out the fish, and eat them."

Florence stared disbelievingly.

"Oh, what a whopper!" she cried.

"Captain Hawks told me himself," Josephine asserted, with confidence. "He knows all about them—he's seen them wild on the island and tame on the mainland."

"Same ones, probably!" was the tart retort. "I

thought the doctor lied ably, but he's truth itself compared with that hairy-skipper of yours."

Josephine tossed her head.

"We'll run 'em down and observe their habits, scientifically, and convince you."

A glance shoreward showed the car awaiting them. As they descended the ladder to the launch, a yelp sounded from the deck, and a bull-terrier came charging after. Florence regarded the dog without any evidence of pleasure.

"Does the pest go, too?" she asked, resignedly.

Josephine pulled the terrier's ears fondly, as it cuddled close against her skirt.

"Chubbie deserves an outing after the bump he got from that horried man yesterday," she said.

The girls exchanged glances, and laughed over some secret joke. When, presently, they were seated together in the runaabout, with Josephine at the wheel, the bull-terrier squatted in dignity on the small back seat. The level sand formed a perfect roadway, and the car darted smoothly and swiftly between the twin barren spaces of land and sea. As they swept forward, the girls watched alertly for a glimpse of the ponies among the dunes, but there was nowhere any sign of a living thing, save the few hurrying gulls. They had gone perhaps twenty miles, and were beginning to fear disappointment, when, without warning, a drove of

the horses came galloping over the crest of a little rise, a half-mile beyond. As the car ran forward, along the ribbon of sand below the higher ground, the ponies suddenly perceived it, and halted with the precision of a troop of cavalry. Near at hand, now, the girls could note details, and both observed with interest the leader, which stood a little in advance of his troop, at the end near the approaching machine. He was a handsome creature, with lines as suavely strong as an Arabian's. He stood with head held high, tail streaming, a fore-hoof pawing challengingly at the sand. Only the thick, shaggy bay coat showed the barbarian, rather than the thoroughbred. The mares, a score of them in one orderly rank behind him, were crowding and lashing out nervously, as they watched the strange monster racing so fast on the ocean's edge. Some of them nickered curiously. But the stallion rested silent, until the automobile halted, hardly fifty yards away. Then he tossed his head proudly, and blared a great trumpet-note of defiance. Josephine instinctively answered with the horn. The mechanical cry broke harshly, swelled and wailed. The eerie response terrified the mares; it perplexed and alarmed their lord. But he showed no dismay. For a moment still, he remained motionless. His noisy challenge rang forth once again. Since the invader on the sands below kept silence, nor made any

movement toward attack, the leader seemed to feel that his prestige was safe enough; that prudence were now the better part. He sounded a low call, and set off at a gallop along the ridge top. The rank of mares pounded obediently at his heels.

"Oh, after them, Josie!" Florence cried.

In a moment, the car shot forward. The horn clamored again. The fleeing horses looked back, then leaped to new speed before the monster that threatened them with unknown terrors. As the car increased its pace, the ponies strove the harder. Their strides lengthened, quickened. The stunted marsh grass beat on the low bellies. Despite their desperate striving, the runabout drew closer and closer, reached abreast of them. The excitement of the chase was in the sparkling eyes of the girls. The dog, scrambling up and falling in its seat, yelped madly. Here, the beach broadened to a sharper ascent of the ridge. Josephine shifted the wheel. The car swung in a wide curve and drove straight toward the panic-stricken troop, as if it would soar up to them. Fear took pride's place in the leader's heart. He sounded a command. The flying drove veered, vanished from the ridge top. The muffled thudding of hoofs came faintly for a minute against the sea wind. Then, as the car came to a standstill, the girls listened, but heard no sound.

"It was bully fun!" Josephine said. "I'm sorry it's over."

"After that run, they may be thirsty enough to dig for water," Florence suggested, with a laugh. "Let's climb up, and take a look round from the ridge."

But a glance from this point of advantage made it clear that the peculiarities of the ponies in drinking or fishing were not to be explained to-day. They were visible still, to be sure, but a mile off, and the rapidity with which the moving mass diminished to the eye was proof that they were still in panic.

"We might as well get back to the yacht," was Josephine's rueful comment. "There's not another single thing to see, now they're gone." She ran her keen gaze over the dreary waste of the island with a little shiver of distaste. Then her glance roved the undulant expanse of sea. She uttered a sharp ejaculation of surprise.

"There is something, after all," she called out, excitedly. "See—over there!"

Florence looked in the direction marked by the pointing finger.

"It's a canoe," she hazarded, as her eyes fell on the object that bobbed lightly in the surf, two hundred yards from the shore. "I can see the man in it. He's lying down. Funny!"

But Josephine, wiser from much experience on shipboard, now saw clearly, and the sight thrilled.

"It's a life-raft," she declared, with a tremor in her voice; and there's a man on it. It's a—real—castaway. Come!"

With that, she set off running down the steep slope of the ridge toward the sea. Behind her came Florence, startled and alarmed. The dog barked exultantly once, then leaped ahead, only to return and circle the slower playfellows joyfully. They came to the water's edge, and halted, perforce. Josephine saw the raft, as it rode on a breaking wave. It was perceptibly nearer. She dared hope it might be brought within reach. With deft motions, the flannel skirt was tucked within her belt, leaving her legs free. Florence, somewhat reluctantly, made the like adjustment. The bull-terrier, disheartened by this immobility, sat on its haunches, and regarded the two doubtfully, perhaps prudishly disapproving. From time to time the raft showed for a few seconds; only to vanish again behind the screen of spume. But it advanced shoreward, steadily. The body of the man was distinct—prone, motionless. The girls watched and waited in palpitant eagerness. The dog, sensing the tension of the moment, began to hasten to and fro, snuffing and whining. Suddenly, the two cried out in the same moment. They saw the raft floating fast and

smoothly toward them on the crest of a breaker. They dashed forward, knee-deep, to meet the charge. The huge mass of the wave pounded upon them, almost swept them from their feet. The angry waters boiled about them. It was up to their waists now. The flying spray lashed their faces and blinded them. When, at last, their vision cleared, the raft had vanished. They caught sight of it again, presently. It was floating from them, already fifty yards distant.

Nevertheless, the girls, though discouraged, did not give over their hope of rescue. Not even when another wave thrust the raft fairly upon them, so that their hands clutched the tubes, then tore it ruthlessly from their puny grasp, and flung it afar. The dog, accustomed to sporting in the surf with its mistress, rushed to seize this flotsam, but the powerful jaws could find no hold. As the dog approached, swimming, Josephine put her hand to its collar, and so supported it while they waited anxiously for the raft's return.

It came more quickly than before. It was, indeed, as if fate finally relented, for the raft was borne this time on a smaller wave, almost with gentleness, as it seemed. Yet, the gentleness of appearance was only mockery. When the two girls laid hands on it with all their strength it swerved violently, wrested itself from their clutch. Josephine cried out

in despair. She saw the dog, released by her effort, plunging forward. A rope dragged in the raft's wake, a remnant of the lashings. The dog lunged viciously, and its jaws locked on the rope. Immediately, then, the bull-terrier began swimming toward the shore. There was no progress. But the going of the raft was momentarily stayed. Josephine saw the opportunity and shrieked to Florence. The two sprang, and caught the raft again. It rested passively in the grasp of the three. The dog continued swimming, its face set resolutely shoreward. The girls, up to their breasts in water, stepped forward, tugging lustily. The three advanced slowly. The raft moved with them.

It was a struggle that taxed the strength of each to the uttermost. Those three puny creatures fighting against the might of the ocean for the body of a dead man! Dead the man seemed, at least, to the girls, who, after one glance into the drawn and ghastly face of their burden, dared not look again. The undertow writhed about their legs, jerked at them wrathfully. Waves crashed upon them with shattering force. Once, Florence was hurled from her footing, but her hands held their grip on the raft. The wrenching shock was sustained by Josephine and the dog. They gave a little, but with fierce, stubborn resistance. Florence regained her feet. The rout was stayed. The pitiful combat between

pigmies and Titans was on again. There was good blood in the three. A fighting ancestry had dowered them with the courage that does not know defeat when it is met. Their strength was exhausted. Yet, they battled on. A great comber smashed against them. It snatched the raft from the weakened hold of the girls, threw it far up on the sand. The dog shot in a wide arc through the air. They could hear its grunt as it fell. But the jaws were still locked. In the same instant, the beast was firmly set, hauling at the rope. The raft was held for a little by the dog alone, against the waters as they sucked back. Then, the girls tottered to aid. They fell to their knees in the shallows, and clung frantically. The waves hissed away from them.

They feared the coming of a larger breaker to undo their work. Josephine perceived to her astonishment that the man was not fastened to the raft, except by the vise-like gripping of his big hands. And, too, she saw now that he was living. She guessed that he was stupefied by exhaustion, yet not swooning. She shrieked to him to unclench his fingers. It may be that his dulled brain understood in a measure; it may be that he was come to the very end of his strength. Anyhow, as she put her fingers to his, there was no resistance. The grasp that had withstood the sea's fury, yielded at once to the soft pressure of her touch. The two girls

summoned new energy to the task. The dog let go the rope, and, whining curiously, caught a trouser leg between its teeth, and aided. Somehow, the three contrived to roll and push and pull the inert form to a point of safety. Then, they sank down, panting.

Josephine stirred first. With a gasping sigh, she struggled to a sitting position. The dog at once stood up, and shook itself with great violence. The drops splashed over the face of Florence, and she, in turn, opened her eyes, groaned deeply, and sat up, with a wry smile of discomfort.

"What'll we do with the corpse?" she inquired, in an undertaker's best manner.

The funereal suggestion, so sincerely offered, provoked Josephine to a weak peal of laughter.

"Better wait to worry over that till he's dead," she answered briskly, if somewhat incoherently. "And he will be, if we don't watch out. There should be a flask in the motor. Run and get it, Flo.' I'll chafe his hands."

"Run!" the other exclaimed. "If I can crawl it, I'll be proud." Nevertheless, she got to her feet, stiffly, but readily enough. "And sprinkle water on his face," she called over her shoulder. "It might cheer him anyhow, after having had it all over him by the ton. Both girls in the first reaction

from the stress of their war against death were brimming with joyousness, notwithstanding fatigue.

While Josephine rubbed the rough hands as strongly as she could between her own tender ones, the dog drew near. When the girl looked up, she saw that her pet was licking the man's face. She called out in sharp rebuke. At the same moment, the castaway's eyes unclosed. For long seconds, he stared, unblinking. Then, abruptly, his voice sounded in a low drawl of wonder:

"Hit's thet-thar damned man-faced dawg!"

CHAPTER X

THE castaway's gaze went to the girl kneeling beside him.

"An' the furrin woman!" he muttered.

Florence came running with the flask, which was full of brandy.

"Quick!" Josephine urged. "He's better, but he's raving crazy. Thinks I'm a foreigner."

But, as Florence could have filled the cup of the flask, Zeke interposed, with more animation than he had hitherto shown.

"If so be that's likker, an' ye 'lows to give hit to me, if hit don't make no p'tic'lar diff'rence to you-all, I'd like to drink hit right smack outen thet-thar new-fangled bottle, jest as we be a-used to doin' in the State o' Wilkes."

"As you wish, of course," Florence replied, soothingly. "It will make a new man of you."

Zeke promptly sat up and put his lips to the mouth of the flask, and held them there while the rhythmic movement of his adam's apple visibly witnessed thirstiness. The girls regarded him with astonishment, which quickly merged in dismay, for

they could not guess the boomer's capacity for fiery drink. As a matter of fact, Zeke, while he drank, lamented the insipidity of the draught, and sighed for a swig of moonshine to rout the chill in his veins with its fluid flames. He, in turn, was presently to learn, with astonishment, that a beverage so mild to the taste had all the potency of his mountain dram, and more. Chilled as he had been by the long hours of exposure to the night air of the sea, while drifting the fifteen miles from Ocracoke Inlet, and worn in body and mind by the peril of his situation, Zeke found himself almost at once strengthened and cheered by the generous spirit. He was, in fact, another man than the exhausted castaway, as the girl had promised; he was himself again. He was still weak and shaken; but his splendid vitality was asserting itself. The gray, drawn face was colored to golden tan; the clear eyes were shining with new appreciation of the joy of life. He had not thought much after the very first, during those long, racking hours of tossing on the sea. His brain had become numb. His fancies had run to tender memories of moments spent with Plutina. Often, he had felt her presence there with him, in the dark spaces of the sea. But the idea that most dominated his mind had sprung from the lusty instinct of self-preservation; he must cling to the raft. It had been the one thing

that he could do toward safety. His whole will had centered in the clutch of his hands on the tubes.

Seeing the man thus recovered, the girls withdrew toward the runabout to adjust their clothing, and to find some garment for the man, since he wore only shirt and trousers. But the bull-terrier, for a wonder, did not follow its mistress. Instead, it sat on its haunches close to the mountaineer, and muzzled his hand. Zeke pulled the dog's ears gently.

"That thump I gin ye must 'a' struck plumb down to yer heart, an' made a right-smart change in yer affections. Ye wa'n't so dummed friendly when ye tuck thet-thar hunk out o' my pants."

The dog whined an answer, and crept fawningly into the mountaineer's lap, where it nestled contentedly. It was thus that the girls, returning with a rain-coat, found the two, and they stared in surprise, for the bull-terrier was none too amiable with strangers.

"I never knew Chubbie make friends like that before," Josephine exclaimed. She looked in fresh curiosity upon the wholesome face with the regular features, rather stern in repose, but now softened by a smile. "It must be because he helped us pull you out. We couldn't have done it without him. That makes you belong to him, in a way."

Zeke stared at the dog, with new respect.

"The darned son of a gun!" he ejaculated, gravely. "I reckon," he continued after a meditative pause, "the little cuss felt like he owed me somethin' fer sp'ilin' my jeans. That crack I gin him put the fear o' God into his bosom, so to speak. 'The more ye beat 'em, the better they be.' "

Josephine started at his words. Without a hat, the dark curls had given a look so different to the face that, until now, she had not recognized the man of the ferry-boat.

"Why," she cried, "you are the one!" She turned to the bewildered Florence. Her blue eyes were flashing; her voice was hard. "He's the creature that almost killed Chubbie. And to think we troubled to save him!"

"That hell-fired pup o' your'n took a holt on me first," Zeke protested wrathfully, forgetful of his reconciliation with the dog. Then, a plaintive whine recalled him. He smiled whimsically, as he patted the bull-terrier's head, which was lifted toward him fondly. The anger died out of his face, and he smiled. "I've hearn these-hyar dumb critters git things 'bout right by instinct, somehow. Yer dawg's done fergive me. Won't you-all, mum?"

Josephine hesitated. The ingenuous appeal touched her. Only pride held her from yielding.

"An', besides," Zeke went on, "ye was a-sayin' as how the dawg kind o' felt I belonged to him like,

bein' he he'ped pull me out o' the ocean, an' so he had to like me. Thet-thar argyment goes fer you-all, too, mum. So, I 'low ye gotter fergive me—specially kase yer dawg begun hit."

Josephine relaxed with a ripple of laughter. The mountaineer both interested and pleased her. To her inevitable interest in one whom she had helped to save from death, there was now added a personal attraction. She perceived, with astonishment, that this was by no means the hulking brute she had deemed him when her pet had suffered at his hands. The dog's attitude toward him impressed her deeply. Moreover, she saw that he was intelligent, as well as naïve. She perceived that he had humor and quickness of feeling. His responsiveness to the dog's advances pleased her. She was greedy of experience and knowledge, easily bored by familiar things, likely to be vastly interested, for a brief season, in the new and strange. She realized that here, ready to her hand, was a type wholly novel. She felt that it was her prerogative to understand something of the nature of this singular being thus cast at her feet by fate. Certainly, it would be absurd to cherish any rancor. As he had said, the dog's action sufficed. Besides, she must be friendly if she would learn concerning this personality. Every reason justified inclination. She rebelled no

longer. Her blue eyes gleamed with genuine kindliness, as she spoke:

"I'll take Chubbie's word for it." Her voice became authoritative. "Now, if you feel equal to standing up, we'll have this rain-coat on you, and then run you down to the yacht. We'll attend to landing you somewhere after you've rested and had something to eat."

Already Josephine's brain was busy, scheming to her own ends, but of this she gave no hint.

Zeke pushed away the reluctant dog, and rose up stiffly. The stimulation of the brandy stood him in good stead.

"I 'low I'm havin' a right-smart lot of experience," he remarked, chuckling. "What with steam-cars, an' boats, an' wrecks, an' now one o' them ornery devil-wagons. I hain't a-feared none," he added, musingly, "but I hain't a-pinin' neither. I reckon I kin stand anythin' what gals an' a dog kin. I'm plumb nervous or hungry—I don't know which. Both, like's not!"

He rejected the offer of support, and walked firmly enough to the machine, which he eyed distrustfully. Florence took the rear seat, and Zeke established himself beside Josephine, the dog between his feet. After the first few minutes, he found himself delighting in this smooth, silent rush over the white sands. In answer to Josephine's question, he gave

a bare outline of his adventures in the three days of his absence from the mountains.

"I was a-hankerin' arter experience," he concluded, "an' aimin' to make my everlastin' fortin. I been doin' pretty peart, so fer."

"You've certainly had more than your share of experience in the time," Josephine agreed; "though I don't know about the fortune."

"Started right-smack off at the rate of more'n seventy-five thousand dollars a year," Zeke rejoined, complacently. He laughed joyously at the bewildered face the girl turned to him.

"I done figured hit out las' night, not havin' much of anythin' to do on thet-thar raft, 'cept to stick." He gave an account of the capture of the negro outlaw, for which he had received a reward. "I'm only a-jokin', of course," he went on with new seriousness. "I hain't pinin' fer no foolishness. All I want is enough so's not to be hog-pore. An' I got a chance to learn somethin', an' to make somethin', an', arter all, go right on livin' in my own country. An' that's what Plutiny wants, too. An' I'll have enough to buy her straighteners, if she wants 'em, by cracky!"

"Oh—straighteners?" Josephine repeated, mystified. Vague memories of a visit to a hospital suggested an explanation. "Then, this person you speak of, Plutina, is deformed?"

"Deformed!" For an instant, Zeke could only repeat the word, helplessly.

"A curvature of the spine, I suppose," Josephine continued, without interest. She had her eyes on the ribbon of sand now, and guessed nothing as to her companion's disturbance, until his voice came in a burst of protest that made her jump.

"Plutiny—deformed!" he exclaimed, harshly. Then, his voice softened wonderfully, though it shook with the tensity of his feeling. "Why, Plutiny's better'n anybody else in all the world—she is, an' she looks hit. Plutiny—deformed! Why, my Plutiny's straight as thet-thar young pine tree a-top Bull Head Mounting. An' she's as easy an' graceful to bend an' move as the alders along Thunder Branch. There hain't nary other woman in all the world to ekal my Plutiny. Plutiny—deformed! Why, mum, you-all talk plumb foolish."

The girl was too astonished before this outburst to take offense.

"But you spoke about straighteners for her," she protested.

Zeke stared for a moment, then grinned understandingly.

"Thet's what we-uns call 'em," he said. "You-all call 'em corsets."

Yet, the effect of this conversation reached beyond the humorous. In some subtle fashion, it

provoked the girl to keener interest in the young man. She was perhaps, though she would have denied the suggestion hotly, a little piqued by the exaltation with which he praised his rustic sweetheart. Josephine was an exceedingly attractive young woman, and she was accustomed to having men show their appreciation of the fact. It was new to her thus essentially to be ignored, and not quite agreeable. There could be no tender interest between herself and this handsome barbarian. The idea even of flirtation was quite inconceivable. Nevertheless, it was strange that he should be so imperceptive of her charms. Doubtless, his eyes were blind to the refinements of beauty. They should be opened. It would be dreadful if the fellow should grow away from the girl who was waiting for him. And yet— Josephine checked her thoughts, and blushed a little. But a plan matured.

That plan was followed diplomatically when she secured a private interview with her father, after the return on board the yacht.

"Daddy, dear," she said, with a manner as casual as she could contrive, "let's keep this Mister Higgins on board. He's bound for New York, but in no particular hurry. We'll get him there in about ten days.

Mr. Blaise, who was a plethoric, fussy little man, adamant to all the world save his only child,

regarded her now in perplexity, his shrewd eyes a bit mischievous.

"I don't imagine it's to be the stereotyped romance, just because you dragged him out of the sea," he said. "The chap has the makings of considerable of a man in him, and he's good-looking enough to catch a girl's fancy; but he's not your sort. So, why?"

"Besides," Josephine retorted, smiling. "Florence has the same right in him as treasure trove. That would make the romance too complicated."

"Why?" Mr. Blaise repeated.

"I've never met anyone like him," the girl explained, with truth, if not all the truth. "He's unique. I want to study him. Such knowledge is broadening—better than books."

"Bosh!" was the comment. "You mean, he's just a freak to you, and you'd like to look him over a little longer. There's no harm in that, if it amuses you. But don't be silly about broadening yourself." He regarded his daughter critically. "And leave out the deserts. They're too broadening, if you like. You're getting plump."

Josephine accepted this meekly, in her satisfaction over having her way as to the new guest.

"I'll go and invite him, right away," she exclaimed. "He'll liven us up.

But her father wrinkled his brows in doubt.

"What about the effect on the young fellow, him-

self?" he demanded. "It can't do him any good, Josie. That sort of thing's unsettling, you know."

Josephine attempted no reply, as she went on her way. Her father could not see the flush that touched her cheeks.

Through such devious ways did it come to pass that the mountaineer entered a world of which he had never even dreamed. His own complete ignorance of social conditions prevented him from appreciating the marvel wrought by fate in his behalf. In the simplicity of his character, he accepted the change as a perfectly natural event in the world that he had set out to explore. It was this simplicity, which kept him from undue self-consciousness, that carried him safely through what must otherwise have been an ordeal. He accepted what had befallen thankfully, and sought to learn what he best might from the novel environment. His interest was conspicuously in others, not in himself. He was greedy of information, lavish in liking. By a benign miracle, there were no snobs in the yachting party, which included also two young men, and two of the owner's age, besides Josephine's aunt. This chaperon was a motherly soul, and, in sheer kindliness of heart did much to make the situation easy. The informality of the party, too, was a tremendous advantage to the young man, though he never guessed it. On the contrary, he accepted

things as they were enthusiastically, with never a thought of dismay. In flannels loaned him by the largest guest, which fitted too snugly, he presented an appearance so excellent that Mr. Blaise was moved to pinch his daughter's ear, while reminding her of the stereotyped romance.

Such was the cause of Plutina's wearisome waiting for the letter that did not come. Zeke found, to his distress, too late that an interval of a week or more must elapse before a letter posted in Bermuda could possibly reach the mountains. But, beyond that, there was nothing to disturb the girl who loved him. The heart of the lad amid the luxuries of life on the yacht was unchanged in its devotion. It was, indeed, as if he saw all things as a frame for her. He was forever thinking how Plutina would look here or there, in connection with this or the other. The gowns of the three women, were viewed critically in relation to the mountain girl. He would imagine her loveliness enhanced by the sheen of silk, by the films of lace, by the lusters of jewels. Josephine thought once when she appeared in a dainty evening frock, not too daring, that she had penetrated his armor of aloofness, for he blushed hotly as his eyes went to her neck, and his gaze fell. She was deceived. He remembered in that moment. how he had once kissed the soft whiteness of Plutina's throat, where the home-spun gown lay open.

Now, memory of the warm bliss of that kiss sent the blood racing and tingling.

That self-deception was as near as Josephine ever came to triumph.

Florence understood, to some extent, at least, the mood that influenced her friend. A feminine intuition inspired in her a like ambition to pierce this young savage's reserve. Through her own feeling, she readily divined that of Josephine. Thus, the two became unconfessed allies in the employment of their wiles against an unsuspecting victim. It was, indeed, the lack of suspicion on his part that irritated them to the point of exasperation. He was so utterly innocent of their manoeuvers against his peace! Both of the girls were attractive beyond the average. Josephine, a plump blonde, ingenuous of manner, sophisticated, capricious, yet not spoiled, egotistic, but winsome, full of electric vitality; Florence, taller and darker, with an air more sedate, yet doubtless capable of deeper and more enduring emotions. Each possessed excellent features, and the fascinations of radiant health, sufficient culture, and the most exquisite refinements of personal detail. They deserved the humble admiration of any man. They expected tender adulation from most, and from most they received it. At the outset a certain impassivity on the part of this wild mountaineer excited their astonishment, then, quickly,

their dissatisfaction. They were moved to a caprice against his calm, against this indifference that was an affront. They had no wish to work him serious harm, but his disregard was intolerable. Since the heart of neither was engaged, there was no jealously between them in the affair. Since each was secretely ashamed of her motives, there was no confidence between them.

Their failure, in the lazy days and evenings of voyaging and of rambling in the Bermudan islands, was undeniable. It was the more aggravating since the young man patently admired them. Even, his admiration was excessive, almost reverential, at times. Yet, it was altogether impersonal. They came eventually to know that this mountaineer regarded them with warm friendliness, with a lively gratitude, with a devoted respect, with a certain veneration. But that was all. No dart from their quiver of charms touched to the passionate heart of him—nor ever could. From whichever side the shafts were thrown, always they were shattered against a white shield, and fell harmless. That shield was Plutina.

One night, as the yacht neared New York, Josephine and Zeke sat together, watching the scud of clouds across the moon. The mountaineer spoke softly, after an interval of silence.

"The clouds is runnin' thar jest as I've seen 'em lookin' out across the valley from Stone Mounting —with Plutiny." There was a caress in his voice.

Josephine checked an ejaculation of impatience. The savage was incorrigible—quite! Him, and his everlasting Plutina! Perverse curiosity overcame discretion. Perhaps, too, after all, he only needed guidance. She tried to believe, though vainly, that only shyness prevented him from improving an opportunity any other man would have coveted.

"Tell me," she said softly, with a sympathetic lure in her tones, "is Plutina so very beautiful?"

The lure was effective. Zeke turned to her with the hazel eyes darkly luminous in the moonlight.

"Tiny's beautiful," he answered tenderly; and there was music now in the slow drawl. "I 'low she's the most beautiful woman in the world."

"I'm afraid you're prejudiced," Josephine objected, with a disarming laugh. "Of course, you ought to think so, but, really you know, you haven't quite seen all the beautiful women in the world. Now, have you?"

"All I need to," was the confident assurance. "Why," he continued with an apologetic smile for his boldness. "I done seen you-all, Miss Blaise, an'

I reckon you-all are about as beautiful as a woman kin be—'ceptin' Plutina."

The tribute was potent from its very unexpectedness. It eased the chagrin from which vanity had suffered. Evidently, her charms were not disregarded. It was simply that this lover had given his heart, and that he was loyal. The girl sighed a little enviously at the realization. She knew too well that many, perhaps most, in her world were not loyal, even when their hearts were given. She wondered if, in truth, there awaited her the boon of a like faithfulness. Yet she persevered in her probing.

"Out in the world," she said musingly, "where things are so different from up in your mountains, you may change. It may be you won't want to go back, to the hills—to Plutina."

A flush of wrath burned in Zeke's cheeks, visible in the gloom.

"Hit ain't fittin fer you-all to say no such thing, Miss Blaise. But I kin fergive ye, kase ye hain't seen our mountings. They hain't no other place more beautiful. Mister Sutton done told me so, an' he's been all over the hull world. An', besides, hit's home. A man what don't love his home country better'n any other—why, mum, he's jest a plain skunk. . . . An' Plutiny, she's the best part o'

home. There hain't no land so beautiful, nor no woman. No, mum, I sha'n't change—never! I kain't!"

And Josephine knew that it was so, and once again she sighed.

CHAPTER XI

UNCLE DICK, as he was universally known in the mountains, had celebrated his eightieth birthday before his granddaughters, Plutina and Alvira, by leaping high in the air, and knocking his heels together three times before returning to the ground. There was, in fact, no evidence of decrepitude anywhere about him. The thatch of coal-black hair was only moderately streaked with gray, and it streamed in profuse ringlets to his shoulders. His black eyes were still keen; the leathery face, with its imperious features, was ruddy. He carried his six-foot-three of bone and muscle lightly.

As of the body, so of the heart. The springs of feeling in him showed no signs of drying up. On the contrary, they threatened to gush forth in a new flood over the Widow Brown, on whose plump prettiness, hardly dimmed by her three-score years, he looked with appreciative and ardent eyes. Indeed, his conduct justified the womenfolk of his household in apprehensions, for witness to the seriousness of the affair was afforded the morning

after the raid on Dan Hodges' still. He demanded of Alvira that she burn the grease from an old skillet with great care.

"If they's a mite of hit, hit makes a scum, an' floats off the gold on hit," he explained.

The sisters regarded each other in consternation, but forebore questioning. When he had mounted his mare, and ridden away, Plutina spoke with bitterness:

"I reckon Mis' Higgins done hit the nail on the haid 'bout Gran'pap an' the Widder Brown."

Alvira nodded.

"Yep. Hit means business, shore, if he's a-gallavantin' over to Pleasant Valley to pan gold. Hit means he's aimin' to marry her." She waxed scornful, with the intolerance of her sixteen years. "Hit's plumb ridic'lous—at his age."

"Seems like he was 'most ole enough to git sense," Plutina agreed.

"Mebby we're mistook 'bout his intentions," Alvira suggested, hopefully. "O' course, he git's a heap of enjoyment settin' to Widder Brown. But he hain't got to be plumb foolish, an' marry her. I guess as how hit's fer you-all he's arter the gold kase Zeke'll be comin' home by-'n'-bye."

Plutina shook her head dubiously. It was the custom of the lover himself to seek, in the gold-bearing sands of the tiny mountain stream to the

west, for the grains from which to fashion a ring for his sweetheart. Many a wife of the neighborhood wore such proudly on forefinger or thumb. The old man was not fond enough of toil to undertake the slow washing out of gold there unless for a selfish sentimental reason. And her fears were confirmed that afternoon by Zeke's mother whom she visited.

"They hain't nary chance to save him no more," the old woman averred, lugubriously. "Hit's allus been said hyarbouts as how a feller allus gits his gal shore, if he pans her a ring in Pleasant Valley."

"Huh—girl!" quoth Plutina.

Yet this amorous affair was of small moment just now to the granddaughter, though she voluntarily occupied her thoughts with it. She hoped thus to keep in the background of her mind the many fears that threatened peace, by reason of her part in the night's work. She knew that she could trust the secrecy of Marshal Stone, but there was the possibility of discovery in some manner unforeseen. There was even the chance that suspicion against her had been aroused in Ben York. She could not bear to contemplate what must follow should her betrayal of the still become known. It was a relief to be certain that the two men she chiefly dreaded would be in jail, and unable personally to wreak vengeance. It was improbable, she thought, that persons so notorious and so detested could secure

bail. But, even with them out of the way, the case would be disastrous on account of her grandfather's hatred of the revenue officers, and more especially, of those among his own people guilty of the baseness of informing. Should her deed come to his knowledge, it would mean tragedy. She dreaded the hour when he should hear of the raid, and was glad that he had gone away, for in all likelihood he would have the news before his return and the first shock of it would have passed. . . . So it fell out.

Uncle Dick rode briskly toward the little stream that tumbles down the mountain west of Air Bellows Gap, where long ago men washed for gold in feverish desire of wealth. Now, none sought a fortune in the branch grit, where a day's labor at best could yield no more than a dollar or two in gold. Only devoted swains, like himself, hied them there to win wherewithal for a bauble with which to speed their wooing. Uncle Dick chose a favorable spot, and washed steadily until the blackened old copper skillet itself shone like the flecks of gold he sought. When he ceased he had a generous pinch of the precious dust carefully disposed in a vial. He hid the skillet to serve another day, and set out on his return. Before he crossed Garden Greek, a neighbor, whom he met on the trail, told him of the raid. Eager for all particulars, Uncle Dick turned his mount into the high road, and hurried to Joines'

store. The single-footing mare carried him quickly to this place of assembly for neighborhood gossip, where he found more than the usual number gathered, drawn by excitement over the raid. The company was in a mixed mood, in which traditional enmity against the "revenuers" warred against personal rejoicing over the fate fallen on Dan Hodges, whom they hated and feared. From the garrulous circle of his acquaintance, Uncle Dick speedily learned the history of the night. The account was interrupted by the coming of a clerk to the store door. He waved his hand toward the group on the steps to command attention.

"You, Uncle Dick!" he called. "No'th Wilkesboro' wants ye on the telephone."

Wondering mightily at the unexpected summons, the old man hurried to the instrument.

"Hello! Hello!" he roared, in a voice to be heard across the miles.

"Be that you-all, Uncle Dick?" the question came thinly.

"Yep. Who be you?"

"Hit's Dan Hodges. I reckon you-all done hearn 'bout last night."

"Yep. I shore have hearn a heap," Uncle Dick acquiesced, sourly. "I tole ye to quit, the officers air gittin' so a'mightly peart. They hain't no more chance fer a good set o' men to make a run—to say

nothin' of a wuthless gang like your'n. . . . What ye want o' me?"

The reply was explicit enough.

"The hearin' 's to-morrer 'fore the United States Commissioner. Marshal Stone says the bail'll be two thousand dollars, cash or land. They hain't nobody kin put hit up, 'cept you-all, Uncle Dick. 'An', if ye don't, Ben an' me'll have to lay in jail till Fall. If ye'll he'p me, Uncle Dick, ye know Dan Hodges won't never fail ye."

"That's what I'm afeared on," Uncle Dick retorted, glumly. "I 'most know 'twas you-all an' yer gang kilt thet-thar heifer o' mine in cold blood. Now, the ole man ye've treated dirt is yer las' chance. Wall, cuss ye! I'll come down t'-morrer an' bail ye out—not kase I love ye any, but kase I'm again the revenuers. An' listen 'ere! I'm some old, but I'm some spry yit, ye bet! You-all stop round these parts whar I kin keep an eye on ye till Fall Cote. If ye don't, damn ye!—wall, my ole rifle's bright an' 'iled, an' I'll git ye! Jest remember thet, Dan Hodges: I'll git ye!" And with this grim warning, Uncle Dick slammed the receiver on its hook, and stalked out of the store.

On the following day, he journeyed duly to North Wilkesboro', where, despite the protest of his lawyer, he put up his land as security for the appearance of the two malefactors. Uncle Dick was a

consistent conservative. Had the accident of birth made him an English squire, he would have been a stanch Tory, would have held the King's commission on the bench of justices, and would have administered the penalties of the law with exceeding severity against poachers. Having been born in the Blue Ridge Mountains, he staked his property in behalf of two scoundrels, for the sake of an inherited feud against the Federal authority.

Nevertheless, his personal distrust of the men he had thus relieved was made manifest when, immediately after the commitment of the two before the Commissioner, he betook himself to a hardware store, where he bought a forty-one caliber Colt's revolver, with a holster and a box of cartridges. He had given up the habitual carrying of weapons on his seventy-fifth birthday, as unseemly and unnecessary for one of his patriarchal years. Now, he reverted to the use as a measure of prudence.

"The damned dawg's done me dirt, an' he hain't above doin' hit ag'in," he muttered, as he strapped the holster beneath his left arm.

To his womankind, Uncle Dick spoke of the affair casually, concealing his apprehensions. Neither of the granddaughters ventured remonstrance. though Alvira's pretty face was mutinous, and Plutina felt a sickening sense of calamity rushing upon her. It seemed to her the irony of fate that

her own relation should thus interfere to render abortive the effect she had risked so much to secure. She realized, with a shrinking misery, that the sufferers from her act were now at liberty to inflict vengeance upon her, should suspicion be born in them. For the first time in her life, Plutina experienced a feminine cowardice, bewailing her helplessness. There was none to whom she might turn for counsel; none, even, in whom she might confide. It was no mere chimera of fear that beset her. She was far too sensible and too strong for hysterical imaginings. But she knew that her peril was real and grave. In the face of it, she felt suddenly a new longing for the absent lover. Hitherto, her fondness had been tender and passionate, touched with the maternal protectiveness that is instinctive in every woman. Now, a new desire of him leaped in her. She yearned for rest on his bosom, secure within the shelter of his arms, there to pour forth all the story of her trouble, there to hear his voice of consolation, there to be at peace. She touched the fairy crystal that lay between her breasts, and she smiled, very sadly, and very wistfully.

"Zeke will shorely come," she whispered, "if I need him—bad enough."

There was a tremor in her voice, but it was not of doubt.

CHAPTER XII

EARLY in the morning following his trip to North Wilkesboro' Uncle Dick Siddon rode off to Pleasant Valley, there to prosecute his sentimental labors for the pleasuring of the Widow Brown. Alvira fared abroad on some errand to a neighboring cabin. Plutina, her usual richness of coloring dimmed by a troubled night, was left alone. In the mid-forenoon she was sitting on the porch, busy over a pan of beans, which she was stringing for dinner. As she chanced to raise her eyes, she saw Dan Hodges coming up the path. At sight of the evil lowering face, repulsion flared hot in the girl. The instinct of flight was strong, but her good sense forbade it. She felt a stirring of unfamiliar terror in the presence of the man. She scorned herself for the weakness, but it persisted. Her very fear dictated the counsels of prudence. She believed that in dissimulation lay her only possibility of safety. The thought of any intercourse with the moonshiner was unspeakably repugnant, yet she dared not risk needless offense. Nevertheless, the first effect of her resolve was a self-contempt that

moved her to wrath, and made her opening speech more venomous even than it had been otherwise.

"Howdy, my little honey?" Hodges called out as he shambled to a halt before her. His coarse features writhed in a simper that intensified their ugliness. His coveting of this woman was suddenly magnified by sight of her loveliness, flawless in the brilliant light. The blood-shot eyes darted luxuriously over the curving graces beneath the scant homespun garment.

The girl sensed the insult of the man's regard. It, rather than the insolent familiarity of address, provoked her outburst.

"Shet yer mouth, Dan Hodges," she snapped. "I've done told ye afore, ye kain't 'honey' me. If ye wants to pass the time o' day, jest don't fergit as how hit's Miss Plutiny fer you-all."

Hodges gaped bewilderedly under the rebuke. Then he growled defiantly.

"Wall, I'll be dogged! Quite some spit-fire, hain't ye? Reckon I know what's a-bitin on ye. Ye're mad kase Uncle Dick tuk the mounting land ye gals look to heir to, to bail me and Ben." He stared at the girl ominously, with drawn brows. His voice was guttural with threatening. "So be ye mout hev to eat them words o' your'n. Mebby, when I've done tole ye a thing er two, ye'll be a-askin' of me to call ye 'honey.' Mebby, ye'll want to

hover yer ole 'hon,' arter I let's ye know a thing or two 'bout the doin's o' you-all an' thet damned little runt, thet reportin' dawg sweetheart o' your'n —Zeke Higgins."

The girl was stricken. She understood the outlaw's reference. Somehow he had gained certain knowledge of Zeke's part in saving the Quaker-school-teacher spy. She realized that the criminal gang would not hesitate at the murder of one who had thus foiled them. For the moment, she gave no heed to the danger that menaced herself as well. Her whole concern was for her lover. The single comfort came from the fact of his absence. Much as she had been longing for his coming, her prayer now was that he should not return until these men were imprisoned.

With a fierce effort toward bravery in the face of catastrophe, Plutina stood up, and drew herself proudly erect. Her dark eyes flashed wrathfully. She spoke with disdain:

"Ye wouldn't dast say that to Zeke Higgins' teeth. Mebby, he hain't so thick through as you-all, and he hain't so thick-headed, nuther. An' he hain't no runt, as ye'd find quick 'nuf, if so be's ye dast stand up to him, man to man, 'stid o' with a gun from the laurel. He's a man—what you-all hain't. He hain't the kind to layway from the bushes, ner to be a-stealin' his neighbor's cattle an' hawgs. An'

what's more Dan Hodges, ef ye say as how Zeke ever reported ary still, ye're a hell-bustin' liar!"

Her jibes were powerless against the coarse-fibered brute. He grinned malevolently as he jeered at her.

"Thar, now! Hain't it a pity to have a sweetheart what hain't brave 'nuf to stand 'is ground, an' runs off, an' leaves 'is gal to fit fer 'im." Then, abruptly, the moonshiner's expression changed to one meant to be ingratiating. "Wall, now, Miss Plutiny, I shore likes the way ye stan's up fer the pore cuss. But, arter all, hes' done up and left ye. An' he hain't comin' back. Hit wouldn't be healthy fer him to come back," he added, savagely. "An' what's more, ye hain't a-gwine to jine 'im whar he's at. The Hodges' crowd won't stan' fer no sech! He's been writ, Zeke Higgins has, with the sign o' the skull an' the cross—the hull thing. Ye know what thet means, I reckon."

Plutina blenched, and seated herself again, weakly. It was true, she knew the fantastic rigmarole, which made absurd the secret dictates of these illiterate desperadoes. But that absurdity meant death, none the less—death for the one she loved. In her misery, she listened almost apathetically as Hodges went on talking in his heavy, grating voice.

"Zeke Higgins knows as how the Allens give us

the word 'bout 'is crossin' Bull Head with the spy. He knows thet, if 'e shows up in this-hyar kentry ag'in, the Devil's Pot'll have 'im fer a b'ilin'. An' thet's 'nuf fer Zeke's case. Now, we'll jest chin a mite 'bout your'n."

There was a little interval of silence, in which the girl stared unseeingly toward the splendors of the blossoming rhododendrons that fringed the clearing. The apathy had passed now, and she listened intently, with self-control to mask the despair that welled in her heart. It seemed to her that here was the need for that dissimulation she had promised herself—need of it for life's sake, however hateful it might be, however revolting to her every instinct. So she listened in a seeming of white calm, while the flames shriveled her soul.

The man straightened his great bulk a little, and regarded the girl with new earnestness. Into his speech crept a rude eloquence, for he voiced a sincere passion, though debased by his inherent bestiality.

"Plutiny Siddon, I've knowed ye, an' I've craved ye, this many year. Some way, hit just seemed as how I couldn't he'p hit. The more ye mistreated me, the more I wanted ye. Hit shames me, but hit's true as preachin'. An' hit's true yit—even arter seein' yer bare futprint tracks thar on the Branch, alongside them of a man with shoes—the

damned revenuer what got us. Ye showed 'im the place, Plutiny Siddon—cuss ye, fer a spy! . . . An' I craves ye jest the same. . . . An' I'll have ye—right soon!"

At this saying, terror mounted high in the girl. The thing she so dreaded was come to pass. She forgot, for a few moments, the threats against her lover. Despair crushed her in the realization of discovery. Her treachery was known to the man she feared. The peril she had voluntarily risked was fallen upon her. She was helpless, at the mercy of the criminal she had betrayed—and she knew that there was no mercy in him. She shrank physically, as under a blow, and sat huddled a little, in a sudden weakness of body under the soul's torment. Yet she listened with desperate intentness, as Hodges went on speaking. She cast one timid glance toward him, then dropped her gaze, revolted at the grotesque grimaces writhen by the man's emotions.

"Harkin to me, Miss Plutiny!" he pleaded, huskily. "Harkin to me! I knows what I'm a-doin' of. They hain't nothin' ye kin do to stop me. Kase why? Wall, if ye love yer gran-pap, ye'll hold yer tongue 'bout all my talk. Yep! He's done pledged his land to keep me an' Ben out o' the jail-house till cote. If ye tells 'im I'm a-misusin' o' ye, he'd cancel the bond, an' try to deliver me up. I knows all thet. But he wouldn't cancel no bond, an' no more

he wouldn't do any deliverin' o' me up. Kase why? Kase he'd jest nacherly die fust. Thet's why. The land'd be good fer the bond jest the same till Fall. Thet'd give me an' Ben a heap o' time to git ready to light out o' this-hyar kentry. They hain't nary pusson a-goin' to bother us none. They knows hit's healthier a-mindin' their own business. I been dodgin' revenuers fifteen year, an' I'll dodge ag'in, an' take my savin's along, too. An' they's quite some savin's, Plutiny."

Hodges paused, as if to give greater impressiveness to the conclusion of his harangue. His voice as he continued held a note of savage finality.

"So, ye understand, Plutiny, I hain't afeared none arter what I done told ye'll happen, if so be ye talk. I knows ye love yer gran'pap, an' hain't a hankerin' fer 'im to be murdered. Now, I'm gwine to leave ye till t'-morrer, to git kind o' used to the idee as how ye're gwine to leave this-hyar kentry with me arter I pays yer gran'pap the money fer the bail. If you-all is so plumb foolish as to say no, hit'll jest leave yerself an' yer kin in the hands o' we boys to reckon with. Do as I'm a-sayin' on, an' I'll shore fergit 'bout yer reportin' the still. I'll jest 'low to myself as how ye was only a gal, an' used damn' poor jedgment. I hold hit were powerful unkind o' you-all, seein' as how we-uns hain't never wronged ye none. I suspicion ye had

hit figgered out as how Zeke could come back 'ere a'gin if ye had me kotched. Wall, little missy, Dan Hodges air jest a mite too cunnin' fer ye." The boaster gloated over his cowering victim, malice sparkling in his lustful eyes.

It seemed to the girl that she was in truth hopelessly ensnared by fate. Her harried thoughts ran in a circle, dizzily. She could find no loophole for escape from the net. The mesh of the outlaw's deviltry was strong; her flutterings were feeble, futile. She found one ray of comfort in Zeke's absence. She forgot it in distress for the danger to her grandfather. Then, horror for herself beat upon her spirit. But a memory of her first resolve came to her. From stark necessity, she put her whole reliance on an effort to temporize. She felt that her only recourse in this emergency must lie in deceiving the ruffian who thus beset her. Much as she abhorred him, she had no choice. There was none to whom she could appeal for succor. She must depend absolutely upon her ability to beguile him. She must hide the revulsion inspired by his mere presence. She must arm herself with the world-old weapons of her sex, and by wiles blind him to the truth of her feeling, gain time for—something, anything! At least here was room for hope, uncertain, absurd even, yet hope. A little

color crept to her pallid cheeks. If she could but manage the deceit to secure delay until the Fall.

She raised her eyes furtively toward the adversary, an appraising glance, as if to judge his gullibility. The brutish passion of the man showed in the pendulous lower lip, thrust forward a little, in the swinish lifting of the wide-flaring nostrils, in the humid glowing of the inflamed eyes. A nausea of disgust swept over her. She fought it down. Then, with hypocrisy that amazed herself, she met his ardent stare boldly, though with a pretense of timidity. She spoke with a hesitant, remonstrant voice, as if in half-hearted protest,

"Hit's dangerous to talk hyar, Dan," she said! She assumed a pose of coquetry. "If I agrees to save Gran'pap an' 'is land, an' takes ye, have ye got money 'nough fer us to git along among the furriners down below?" A pleased smile showed. "An' could ye buy me purty clo's an' sech-like? Don't ye dast lie to me, Dan Hodges, fer a woman wants plenty o' nice fixin's. An' if ye means hit all, like ye says, I'll meet ye at Holloman Gate t'-morrer at twelve, an' give ye yes er no."

The moonshiner received with complacence this evidence of yielding on the girl's part. He had, indeed, the vanity that usually characterizes the criminal. It was inconceivable to his egotism that he

must be odious to any decent woman. Plutina's avaricious stipulation concerning money pleased him as a display of feminine shrewdness. He was in nowise offended. The women of his more intimate acquaintance did not scruple to bargain their charms. From such trollops, he gained his estimate of the sex. The sordid pretense by Plutina completed his delusion. The truckling of familiars had inflated conceit. He swelled visibly. The finest girl in the mountains was ready to drop into his arms! Passion drove him toward her.

Plutina raised her hand in an authoritative gesture. She could feign much, but to endure a caress from the creature was impossible. Somehow, by some secret force in the gesture, his advance was checked, he knew not why.

"Not now, Dan," she exclaimed, sharply. She added a lie, in extenuation of the refusal: "Alviry's in the house. Besides, I got to have time to think, like ye said. But I'll be at the gate t'-morrer."

Hodges accepted her decree amiably enough. He was still flattered by her complaisant attitude toward his wooing.

"Ye're talkin' sense, Plutiny—the kind I likes to hear. I'll be thar, waitin' fer ye, ye kin bet on thet." Then his natural truculence showed again in a parting admonition: "An' don't you-all try fer to play

Dan Hodges fer a fool. If so be ye does, ye'll wish to God ye hadn't."

With the threat, he turned and went lumbering down the path, to vanish quickly within the shadows of the wood.

CHAPTER XIII

AFTER his day of toil in Pleasant Valley, Uncle Dick Siddon sprawled at ease on the porch, smoking his pipe, and watching with mildly sentimental eyes the rosy hues of the cloud masses that crowned Stone Mountain. His mood was tranquilly amorous. The vial in his pocket was full of golden grains. Presently, he would fashion a ring. Then, heigh-ho for the parson! He smiled contentedly over his vision of the buxom Widow Brown. Her placid charms would soothe his declining years. A tempestuous passion would be unbecoming at his age. But the companionship of this gentle and agreeable woman would be both fitting and pleasant. Really, Uncle Dick mused, it was time he settled down. One should be sedate at eighty. But he sighed.

A horseman appeared over the brow of the hill. The horse traveled slowly, as if wearied by many miles. A single glance at the erect, soldierly figure made known to Uncle Dick that this was a stranger, and he watched intently. As the rider came nearer, he hesitated, then guided his mount toward the

clearing. Uncle Dick perceived, of a sudden, that the left sleeve of the stranger's coat, which was pinned across the breast, was empty. At the sight, a great sadness fell on him. He guessed the identity of the horseman. His soul was filled with mourning over a shattered romance. He fairly winced as the rider drew rein before him, with a cheery, "Howdy?"

There was a curious constraint in Uncle Dick's voice, as he made hospitable answer.

"Howdy, yerse'f, Stranger? 'Light, an' come in."

"I hain't time to 'light," the traveler declared. "Jones is my name. What mout your'n be?"

Uncle Dick descended the steps, regarding the visitor intently. There was a perceptible aloofness in his manner, though no lack of courtesy.

"My name passes fer Siddon. I 'low ye hain't familiar round these-hyar parts?"

"I'm right-smart strange, I reckon," was the admission. "But I was borned forty-mile south o' here, on the Yadkin. My father owned the place Daniel Boone lived when he sickened o' this-hyar kentry, kase it wa'n't wild 'nough. I'm kin ter Boone's woman—Bryant strain—raised 'twixt this-hyar creek an' Air Bellows."

"Wall, say ye so!" Uncle Dick exclaimed, heartily. "Why, I knowed ye when ye was a boy. You-

all's pap used to buy wool, an' my pap tuk me with 'im to the Boone place with 'is Spring shearin'. Thet makes we-uns some sort o' kin. Ye'd better 'light an' take a leetle breathin' spell. A drink o' my ole brandy might cheer ye. An' ye know," he concluded, with a quick hardening of his tones, "hit's customary to know a stranger's business up in these-hyar mountings."

The horseman took no offense.

"I rid up to the balcony jest to make inquiry 'bout a friend what I hain't seed in a right-smart bit, an' who I learnt was a-livin' a lonely widder's life on Guarding Creek. Could you-all direct me to the abode o' one Widder Brown? I hev some private an' pussonal business with the widder. Hit's a kind what don't consarn nary human critter but me an' her."

Uncle Dick sought no further for information, but issued the requested direction, and moodily watched the horseman out of sight. Then, with a sigh that was very like a groan, he moved away toward a small outbuilding, in which was a forge. Here when he had set the forge glowing, he took from his pocket the vial of gold dust, and emptied the contents into a ladle. When the metal was melted, he poured off the dross, and proceeded to hammer the ingot into a broad band. Eventually, he succeeded in forming a massive ring of the virgin gold. But, throughout the prosecution of the task, there was none of that fond elation which had upborne him during the hours while he gathered the material. On the contrary, his shaggy brows were drawn in a frown of disappointment. He cursed below his breath from time to time, with pointed references to one-armed veterans, who dast come back when they hadn't orter. He was still in a saddened and rebellious mood, when he returned to the porch, where he found his granddaughters seated at some sewing. His face lightened a little at sight of them.

"Guess I got my han's full 'nough o' women-folks, anyhow," he muttered. "Fine gals they be, too!" He regarded them attentively, with a new pride of possession. "I 'low I hain't a-kickin' much of any. I reckon like 'nough I be settled down right now, only I didn't know 'nough to know it." He chuckled over this conceit, as he seated himself, and became uncommonly sociable, somewhat to the distress of Plutina, who found it difficult to conceal her anxiety.

Dusk was falling when the horseman reappeared. This time there was no hesitation, as he turned from the road into the clearing. Uncle Dick rose, and shouted greeting, with labored facetiousness.

"Wall, Mister Jones, I 'lowed as how ye mout be the tax-collector, arter the widder's mite, seein'

how long ye was a-hangin' on up thar. Me an' the gals'd feel a right-smart consarn to lose Fanny Brown fer a neighbor, if she was pushed too hard fer her debts."

"Mister Siddon, suh," the stranger answered promptly. "I opine you-all hain't half-bad at a guess. I be a tax-collector, so to speak, a debt-collector. Hit's a debt contracted fifty-year agone. Fanny Brown done tole me as how you-all been good neighbors o' her'n, so I don't mind tellin' ye she's willin' fer me to collect thet-thar debt o' mine." There was an expression of vast complacency on the veteran's face, as he stroked the tuft of whisker on his chin, and he smiled on his three auditors half-triumphantly, half-shamefacedly. "I got cheated o' her oncet by being too slow. I hain't goin' to do no sech foolishness ag'in. T'-morrer, if the clerk's office is open, I'll git the satisfaction piece an' Preacher Roberts'll tie the knot good and proper —amen!"

Uncle Dick sighed audibly at the announcement, but his chagrin was given no further expression as he invited the victorious rival to dismount and partake of his hospitality. Alvira received the news with bubbling delight, which showed gaily in her sparkling black eyes and dimpling cheeks. Even Plutina was heartened by the discovery that her grandfather's folly, as she deemed it, must end,

though there could be no gladness in her by reason of the fear.

It was after the supper was done, when the visitor's horse stood at the door, that Uncle Dick took a sudden resolve.

"Alviry," he ordered, "you-all come hold thishyar hoss, a leetle minute, whilst me an' 'im has a confab."

He led the puzzled veteran to a bench beneath a locust, out of earshot of his granddaughters, who regarded the proceeding curiously, and not without apprehension since they knew the violent temper of the old man when thwarted. They were relieved to perceive that his demeanor remained altogether peaceable.

"Hit's jest this-away, Seth Jones," Uncle Dick began at once, after the two were seated side by side on the bench. "Ye see, I knew you-all, an' yer name an' yer business, soon's I sot eyes on ye. Hit were thet-thar danglin' sleeve o' your'n as ye rid up the path what done hit. I knowed then as how my fate was sealed, s' fur's the Widder Brown's consarned. Fanny done told me about you-all an' yer disapp'intment. She allers said, arter her man died, as how ye'd be a-comin' 'long, though I was hopin' ye wouldn't—cuss ye! Excuse me—no offense intended. The widder an' me has been clost friends, an' I told her from the first as how I respected the

claims of this-hyar Jones galoot, if so be he turned up afore we got hitched. An' now hyar ye be—dang hit!"

The veteran cleared his throat apologetically. His own happiness made him exaggerate the injury thus wrought by his reappearance. He ventured no remark, however. He could not say that the woman in the case was hardly worth troubling over, and, for the life of him, he could think of nothing else in the way of consolation. He discreetly cleared his throat a second time, and maintained a masterly silence. But the garrulous old man at his side needed no encouragement. He quickly resumed his discourse, with a certain unctuous enjoyment, distinctly inconsistent with his love-lorn pose.

"Seth Jones," he announced solemnly, "if you-all an' me was young ag'in, an' fired by the passion o' youth, thar wouldn't be no love-feast hyar jest now like this un. No, sirree! Hit'd shore be war a-twixt we-uns—with hell a-poppin' at the end on't fer one, mebby both. But my blood don't git het up now the way hit use' to did. I'm thinkin' fer the widder's sake hit's good ye're younger ner me, an' got more years to give 'er. So, Mr. Jones, when all's said an' done, I'm glad ye come to Guarding Creek."

Then, Uncle Dick, in his turn, displayed some

slight symptoms of embarrassment, and cleared his throat in a manner to shock a drawing-room.

"An' now I got jest one leetle favor to ax o' ye, Seth Jones. You-all knows as how the gals in this-hyar kentry air partic'lar proud to have a weddin' ring made from the gold washed out o' the soil in Pleasant Valley by their sweetheart. Wall, I talked a heap 'bout hit to Fanny, an', when she showed signs like she'd give in to me, I went an' panned the gold fer the ring. Fanny'd be right-smart disapp'inted not to have a lover-made ring, I reckon. So, bein' as you-all only got one arm, I wants ye to take this-hyar ring, an' wed her proper with the blessin' an' best wishes o' Uncle Dick Siddon."

He offered the ring, which was gratefully accepted, and the two old men parted on excellent terms.

At eleven o'clock the next morning, Uncle Dick was sitting on the porch, when he saw a horse passing over the trail toward the south. In the saddle was the erect, spruce figure of the one-armed veteran, Seth Jones. And, on a blanket strapped behind the saddle to serve as pillion, rode a woman, with her arms clasped around the man's waist. It was the Widow Brown, dressed all in gala white.

It was, indeed, heigh-ho for the parson!

Uncle Dick stared fixedly until the two had van-

ished beyond the brow of the hill. Then, at last, he stirred, and his eyes roved over his home and its surroundings wistfully. He sighed heavily. But he himself would have been hard put to it to tell whether that sigh held more of regret, or of relief.

CHAPTER XIV

WHILE her grandfather was still on the porch, and her sister was out of the house, Plutina possessed herself of the new revolver, with its holster, which, after slipping down her gown from the shoulder, she attached under the left arm-pit. The looseness of the ill-fitting garment concealed the weapon effectually enough. For ready access, the upper buttons to the throat were left unfastened, in seeming relief against the heat of midday. Thus equipped, the girl stole out through the back way, unobserved by her relations, to keep tryst with the desperado.

As she followed a blind trail that shortened the distance between the Siddon cabin and the Holloman Gate to a short two miles, Plutina was torturing a brain already overtaxed in the effort to devise some means whereby she might wreck the projects of the villain, without at the same time bringing ruin on herself, or those she loved. Always, however, her thoughts went spinning toward the same vortex of destruction. She could, indeed, contrive nothing better than the policy of cajolery on which

she had first determined, and to this course, as it seemed to her, she must cling, though her good sense was well advised of its futility. She knew that a scoundrel of Hodges unrestrained passions could not long be held from his infamous purposes by any art of hers. At the best, she might hope perhaps to delay the catastrophe only by hours. In her discouraged state, she admitted that it would be quite impossible to restrain him until the law should come to her aid. She was determined none the less to employ every resource at her command, in order to postpone decisive action. One thing was at once her chief reliance and her chief source of fear: the outlaw's passion for her. In his brutal fashion, the man loved her. That fact gave her power over him, even while it exposed her to the worst peril at his hands.

The presence of the revolver comforted her mightily. From time to time, she moved her right hand stealthily across her bosom, to reassure a failing courage by feeling the stiff leather of the holster under the gown. She was experienced in the use of weapons. Her rifle had often contributed to the cabin larder. Muscles that knew no tremor and a just eye had given her a skill in marksmanship much beyond the average, even in this region where firearms were forever in the hands of the men, and familiar to the women. Once, her moving fingers felt the little bag hanging from its leathern thong about her neck, in which was the fairy crystal. The hardness of her expression vanished on the instant, and in its stead was a wonderful tenderness. A world of yearning shone in the dark lustres of the eyes, and the curving lips drooped in pathetic wistfulness. Her soul went out toward the distant lover in a very frenzy of desire. She felt the longing well in her, a craving so agonized that nothing else mattered, neither life nor death. Had the power been hers then, she would have summoned him across the void. The loneliness was a visible, tangible monster, beating in upon her, crushing her with hideous, remorseless strength. Her man must come back!

It was the mood of a moment, no more. Even as she thrilled with the anguished longing she lifted her eyes, and halted, aghast at the scene before her. There, close at hand to the southeast, Stone Mountain upreared its huge and rugged bulk. It loomed implacable, with the naked cliffs staring grotesquely. It overhung her like immutable fate, silent, pitiless. There was sinister significance in its aspect, for just before her lay the cavernous shadows of the Devil's Cauldron. The girl's gaze went to the verge of the precipice far above. It followed down the wild tumblings of the little stream, fed from lofty springs. It descended in

the last long leap of the waters into the churning pool. And she had a vision of the man she loved, bound, and helpless—dead perhaps, shot from behind—and now thrust out from the verge into the abyss, to go hurtling into the mist-wreathed depths. . . . No, Zeke must not come back. The hardness crept again into her face, as she went forward. She held her eyes averted from that gruesome cavern high in the mountain's face.

The girl came soon to the Holloman Gate, which swung across the trail near the west end of the mountain. Tall poplars and spruce made an ample shade, but a glance toward the sun showed it at the zenith. She was prompt to the rendezvous; it was the lover who was laggard. She wondered a little at that, but with no lightening of her mood. She was sure that he would come all too speedily. She stood waiting in misery, leaning listlessly against the fence, her gaze downcast. The geranium blossoms touched the sward richly with color; the rhododendrons flaunted the loveliness of their flowering round about the spot. A delicate medley of birds' songs throbbed from out the thickets; a tiny stream purled over its pebbled bed in the ravine that entrenched the trail. Plutina gave no heed. She saw and she heard, but, in this hour, she was without response to any charm of sight or of sound. Yet, that she was alert was proven presently, for

her ear caught the faint crackle of a twig snapping. It was a little way off—somewhere along the line of the brush-grown fence, on the same side of the trail. She peered steadily in the direction of the noise. When her eyes became accustomed to the shadows, she made out the figure of a man, crouched in a corner of the fence, behind the screen of a bush. He was no more than three or four rods from her. She was sure even that she recognized him—Gary Hawks, one of the most vicious of the Hodges gang, but notorious for cowardice. She was puzzled for only a moment by the presence of the fellow. Then, she realized that he doubtless was acting under his leader's orders. It was another menace against her own safety. The fingers of her hand went once again for encouragement to the holster beneath her arm.

Plutina gave no sign that she had discovered the lurking man's presence. But, after a minute, she retraced her steps a little way along the trail, until she came to a point where there was a clear space on either side, which was out of hearing from the fence line. She had scarcely reached the place, when Hodges appeared, his bare feet trudging swiftly. His head, too, was bare. In the hollow of his left arm lay the long rifle. He was approaching from the east, and halted at the gate, without having observed the girl beyond it. He whistled a

soft note as a signal if she should be anywhere about.

Plutina called out softly in answer.

"Hyar, Dan!" As he looked toward her, she beckoned him to approach.

Hodges shook his head in dissent, and, by a gesture, bade her come to him. But, when she showed no sign of obeying, he moved forward, scowling, ferociously. The girl seemed undaunted. She spoke curtly in rebuke:

"'Pears to me, Dan Hodges, like ye hain't very prompt, seein' as how I've been a-waiting hyar a quarter-hour fer ye. When a man loves a gal, he gen'rally gits to the place sot ahead o' her. Ye hain't a-startin' right to win me, Dan, an' so I'm a-tellin' ye fair."

"You-all orter have more sense than hang out hyar in the sun. Come back to the gate, under the shade o' the sarvis bushes." He turned away, but paused as the girl made no movement to follow. "What in hell's the matter on ye?" he demanded. angrily. This place in the rud hain't fitten fer talk, nohow."

"Hit's fitten 'nough fer me," Plutina retorted, quietly. A mellow laugh sounded. "Seems to me this-hyar bright sunshine orter warm yer love up some, Dan. We'll stay hyar, I reckon. I'm afeared

o' snakes an' eavesdroppers an' sech critters thar in the shade."

The man was racked by many emotions. He had come swiftly under the hot sun, and the haste and the heat had irritated him. The sight of the girl moved him to fierce passion of desire. He was aflame with eagerness to take her within his arms, there where were the cool shadows. Her indifference to his command exasperated him; her final refusal infuriated him. In the rush of feeling he lost what little judgment he might otherwise have had. He had meant to placate her by a temporary gentleness, to be offset by future brutalities. Now, in his rage, he forgot discretion under the pricking of lawless impulse. He reached out and dropped a huge hand on Plutina's shoulder, and twisted her about with a strength she was powerless to resist. The clutch of his fingers cut cruelly into her flesh, firm though it was, and she winced. He grinned malevolently.

"Git back thar as I done tol' ye," he rasped; "afore ye git wuss."

With a deft twist of the body, Plutina stood free. The face, which had paled, flushed darkly. The eyes blazed. The head was uplifted in scorn. Her aspect awed the man, and he hesitated, gaping at her. Yet her voice was very soft when she spoke. The

tone surprised her listener, rendered him strangely uneasy, for some reason he could not understand.

"Thet ten minutes ye was late was more'n I had need fer, Dan Hodges," she said. "I promised ye yer answer hyar, an' I'm a-goin' to give hit to ye right now."

She lifted an arm, and pointed to where the Devil's Cauldron blotched the cliffs of the mountainside . . . It was her left arm that she lifted.

"Look, Dan! See thet-thar big hole in the wall. I been a-lookin' at hit, Dan. I 'low you-all don't dast look at hit. Mebby ye're afeared o' seein' the bones o' them hit holds—bones o' dead men—what you-all an' yer gang hev kilt an' slid into the pot, to lie hid till Jedgment. Hit's thar ye're aimin' to put my Zeke. Why, a haar o' his head's wuth more'n the hull caboodle of sech murderers as yew be."

She stepped closer to the outlaw, and spoke with unleashed hate. He flinched at the change.

"I was skeered o' ye back thar on the piazzy yist'day, an' I lied to ye, kase I was skeered. I wasn't a-likin' the look in them pig eyes o' your'n. An' I was a-feared o' Gran'pap's hearin' how I reported the still. Wall, now I hain't skeered no more. I promised ye yer answer at the gate. We'll move over thar, an' I'll keep my promise."

Before he could guess her purpose, before he

could shift the rifle from the hollow of his arm, the fingers of Plutina's right hand had slipped within the open bodice. The Colt's flashed in the sunlight. The level barrel lay motionless, in deadly readiness. For the girl, though not yet quite sure, was almost sure that she would kill Dan Hodges.

The idea had not come to her until this meeting. In all the racking hours of thought, this simple solution of the difficulty had never entered her mind. Now, at its coming, she welcomed it with infinite relief. It offered a means of escape so simple and so sure—escape for herself and for those she loved. It was the touch of the man that had wrought the miracle of revolt. She had felt herself polluted by the contact. On the instant, the hypocrisy of cajoling was no longer possible. But there was more in the effect than that. The savagery of the outlaw aroused the savagery in her. She became, in the twinkling of an eye, the primitive woman. There was little in the sentiment of her people to dam the outburst. Her kin had followed the *lex talionis*. They had killed their fellows for the sake of their proper pride. The blood-feud was familiar to her, and she knew no shame in it. Why should she not slay this creature who outraged her self-respect, who theatened her every hope? Her finger on the trigger of the revolver tensed ever so slightly.

The man felt the vibration of her impulse and

cringed. He was in a daze before this violence of attack, where he had expected only supine yielding. In his creed, the beating of women marked manliness. The drabs he had caressed crept and fawned under his blows, like whipped curs. He could not realize this challenge by the girl with his own method of might. But he saw clearly enough through the haze of fear that the blue barrel was trained exactly upon him, that the slim hand held it rigid, and he knew that, in this instant, he was very, very close to death. The red of his face changed to a mottled purple. He felt himself trembling.

Plutina perceived the abject terror of the man. It mitigated her wrath with scorn, and so saved him for the moment. She cried out to him fiercely, her voice rough with abhorrence.

"To the gate fer yer answer, ye cowardly houn'. Move quick, er I'll drap ye in yer tracks, ye murderin' wolf. Do as I say!"

She moved another step toward him. Her voice rose shrill:

"Drap thet rifle-gun!"

The weapon slipped from Hodges' nerveless fingers, and fell on the turf with a soft thud.

"Put up yer han's!"

Cowed, the man thrust his long arms to their length above his head.

"Now, turn round, an' march to the gate!"

There was no faltering in the obedience.

The hulking bully knew that he was in mortal peril. For his life's sake, he dared neither word nor gesture of resistance to the girl's will. His only hope was that the hidden ally might somehow come to his aid. But the hope was feeble. He knew the other's craven spirit.

Plutina, too, knew it. As she drove her captive to the gate, she peered, and saw the crouching figure still in the shadows behind the bush. The Colt's cracked. Even as Hodges shuddered, imagining the tearing of the bullet through his own flesh, there came a shriek of pain from beyond him. The hidden man leaped forth, his right arm dangling clumsily. He scrambled into the cover of the spruces and vanished. The noises of his flight lessened, died.

"I've scotched a snake," Plutina said, malignantly. "Hit's about time to kill the dawg, I reckon. Turn round." Then, when he had obeyed, she went on speaking. "Now, hyar at the gate, I'll tell ye somethin'. You-all 'lowed ye could git me with money. If ye had all they is in the world, hit wouldn't be enough. An' ye thought I tuk money fer reportin' the still. Wall, I didn't. I reported thet-thar still o' your'n kase I seed ye a-settin'

b'ar-traps fer humans, an' hit made me hate ye even wuss 'n I done hated ye afore."

Somehow, the flame of her fury was dying. The girl felt this, and bitterly resented it, yet she was powerless. It seemed to her that with all the strength of her nature she was desirous of killing this enemy. He stood cowering before her in dread. Her finger on the trigger needed only the slightest flexing to speed the death he merited. And, for some occult reason, the will to slay failed her. She was enraged against her own weakness of resolve. Nevertheless, she was helpless. Her mood had reached its climax in the impulsive wounding of the other man. Now, her blood was losing its fever. With the slowing pulse, the softer instincts prevailed to thwart her purpose. Despite an anguished eagerness, she could not kill this trembling wretch. She loathed her frailty, even as she yielded to it. She must let him go unscathed, a foe the more dangerous after this humiliation. Of no use to threaten him, to extort promises. There was no truth in him. He must be left free to work what evil he would. Oh, if only the wrath in her had not died too soon!

"Put yer han's down, an' march up the trail," she commanded, presently. Her voice was lifeless. The man drew new hope from the quality of it. He ventured no resistance to the command, but

went padding softly through the dust. Behind him, Plutina followed, her bare feet padding an echo. Her right hand hung at her side, but it retained the revolver, ready for instant use. As she came to Hodges' rifle, she picked it up, and threw it far down into the ravine. At the clattering noise of its fall, the outlaw started, but he did not pause in his stride, or turn. The girl's whole soul was convulsed with longing that he should make some effort of revolt—anything. Then, she would shoot and kill—oh, so gladly!"

But the instinct to live guided the man. He trudged meekly. There was no excuse against him. So, they came at last near to the Siddon clearing, where a little path ran through the wood toward the house. Here, Plutina paused, without a word. She was ashamed of herself, grievously ashamed of this softness of fiber that had spared a life. Without a word, she watched him pass along the trail, up the slope, and out of sight beyond. Her face was drawn and white, and the great eyes were brooding with bitterness, when, finally, she stirred, and moved forward in the path. She slipped the revolver into its holster. Then, her fingers went to the bag that held the fairy cross to her breast. She fondled it tenderly. She was longing as never before for the giver of the talisman.

CHAPTER XV

PLUTINA had no sleep the night following her encounter with Dan Hodges. Throughout the dragging hours, she was tortured by sinister imaginings. She exhausted her brain in futile strivings for some means of escape from the mesh of circumstance. It was not until the gray twilight of dawn shone through the curtains that a possibility of relief stirred in her mind. It was out of desperation that the idea sprang. She felt herself so utterly forlorn and helpless in her loneliness that the despair was overpowering. It was then, at last, that the inspiration came to her: She would confess everything to her grandfather!

Though she quailed before the prospect, she rejoiced as well. The old man was strong and resourceful. He would know how to meet and overcome the outlaw's villainy. Moreover, now that her decision had been made, Plutina was surprised to find her alarm over such confession greatly lessened from what she had supposed possible. She began to realize that some intangible change in her grandfather himself was responsible for this. She be-

came convinced that the new gentleness had had its origin in the unselfish abandonment of his marital hopes. It was as if that renunciation had vitally softened him. Perhaps, in this strange mood, he would be less intolerant of her fault in turning informer. His prejudice could find no excuse for her treachery, she knew, yet the peril in which she had involved herself, and him, might arouse his pity. Assuredly, he would be moved to instant action for both their sakes. For that reason alone, if for no other, she must tell him her story without a moment of unnecessary delay.

In the course of the morning, Plutina took advantage of an opportunity, whilst her sister was busy in the garden, and went to her grandfather, who was taking his ease on the porch. She was encouraged by the mild and benignant expression on the old man's face, which had been more often fierce, as she remembered it through the years. She seated herself quietly, and then proceeded immediately to confession. There was no attempt at palliation of her offense, if offense it were. She gave the narrative of events starkly, from the moment when she had first seen Hodges descending Luffman's Branch to the time of her separation from him at the clearing, on the yesterday.

Throughout the account, the listener sat sprawled in the big willow rocker, his slippered feet resting

on the porch rail. The huge body was crumpled into an awkward posture, which was never changed, once the history was begun. The curved wooden pipe hung from his lips, black against the iron gray cascade of beard, but he did not draw at it again, after the opening sentences from his granddaughter's lips. Plutina, looking down, perceived that the folded hands, lying in his lap, were clenched so strongly that the knuckles showed bloodless. Yet, he made no movement, nor offered any word of comment or of question. When the girl had made an end, and sat waiting distressedly for his verdict, he still rested mute, until the silence became more than she could endure, and she cried out in pleading:

"Kain't ye fergive me, Gran'pap?"

Uncle Dick turned, and looked reproachfully at the distraught girl. A great tenderness shone from the black eyes, in which age had not dimmed the brilliance. As she saw the emotion there, a gasp of rapturous relief broke from Plutina's lips. The stern restraints of her training were broken down in that moment. She dropped to her knees by the old man's side, and seized his hands, and kissed them, and pressed them to her bosom. He released one of them presently, and laid it gently on the dusk masses of his grandchild's hair in silent blessing.

His voice, when at last he spoke, was softer than she had heard it ever before.

"Why, Tiny, ye mustn't be afeared o' yer ole gran'pap. I thinks a heap o' my kin, an' ye're the clusest. I loves ye gal—more'n anythin' er anybody else in the world, though I wouldn't want Alviry to hear thet. I hain't mindin' what ye done none. I'd stan' by ye, Tiny, if he had the hull cussed Gov'ment at yer back. I hain't got no likin' fer revenuers, but I got a heap less for Dan Hodges."

He paused for a moment and lifted his hand from the girl's head to stroke the gray beard thoughtfully, before he continued:

"I been thinkin' a right-smart lot o' things jest lately. I 'low I'm a-gittin' old, mebby. An' I opine as 'tween the revenuers and Dan Hodges, I hain't so much agin the Gov'ment as I was."

Again, he fell silent, as if in embarrassment over an admission so at variance with the tenets of a lifetime. Then he spoke with sudden briskness:

"But ye'd orter a-killed the critter then an' thar, Tiny!"

"I jest somehow couldn't, Gran'pap. I'm shore sorry." The girl felt poignant shame for the weakness thus rebuked.

"I 'low I hain't likely to have no sech feelin's a-holdin' o' me back," Uncle Dick remarked, drily. "Hit's my foolishness bailin' 'im out got us in the

pizen mess. I 'low I'll cancel the bond. But, fust, I' have to take the skunk to the jail-house, dead er alive. He'll stan' some urgin', I reckon."

"Ye'll be keerful, Gran'pap," Plutina exclaimed anxiously, as she stood up.

"Now, don't ye worrit none," Unce Dick ordered, tartly. His usual rather dictatorial manner in the household returned to him. "You-all run along. I want to think."

The girl went obediently. The reaction from despair brought joyousness. Of a sudden, she became aware of the blending perfumes of the wild flowers and the lilting of an amorous thrush in the wood. Her lids narrowed to dreamy contemplation of the green-and-gold traceries on the ground, where the sunlight fell dappled through screening foliage. Fear was fled from her. Her thought flew to Zeke, in longing as always, but now in a longing made happy with hopes. There might be a letter awaiting her from New York—perhaps even with a word of promise for his return. She smiled, radiant with fond anticipations. Then, after a word of explanation to Alvira, she set off at a brisk pace over the trail toward Cherry Lane.

The girl went blithely on her way, day-dreaming of the time when Zeke should be come home to her again. She stopped at the Widow Higgins' cabin, to receive felicitations over the escape of Uncle

Dick from Fanny Brown. Plutina was not minded to harass the older woman with the tale of Dan Hodges. The outlaw's threats against Zeke would only fill the mother's heart with fears, against which she could make no defense. Otherwise, however, the tongues of the two ran busily concerning the absent one. And then, soon, Plutina was again hurrying over the trail, which the bordering wild flowers made dainty as a garden walk. Once, her eyes turned southward, to the gloomy grandeur of Stone Mountain, looming vast and portentous. The blur of shadow that marked the Devil's Cauldron touched her to an instant of foreboding, but the elation of mood persisted. She raised her hand, and the fingers caressed the bag in which was the fairy crystal, and she went gaily forward, smiling.

Uncle Dick, meantime, was busy with sterner thoughts, and his task was harmonious to his musings, for he was cleaning and oiling his rifle with punctilious care. He did not hasten over-much at either the thinking or the work. The shades of night were drawing down when, finally, he hung the immaculate weapon on its hooks. He ate in solitary silence, served by Alvira, who ventured no intrusion on this mood of remoteness with which she was familiar from experience. The old man had determined to go forth and seize, and deliver

to the custody of the law, the person of Dan Hodges. At the best, he would surprise the outlaw, and the achievement would be simple enough; at the worst, there would be a duel. Uncle Dick had no fear over the outcome. He believed himself quicker and surer with the rifle than this scoundrel of half his years. At grips, of course he would have no chance. But the affair would not come to grips. He would see to that. He went to bed contentedly, and slept the peaceful sleep of wholesome age, undisturbed by any bickerings of conscience.

It was while he was dressing, next morning, that a measure of prudence occurred to Uncle Dick. During the period of his absence, it would be well for Plutina to avoid risk by keeping in the cabin, with her rifle at hand. There was no telling how audacious the moonshiner might become in his rage over the ignominy to which the girl had subjected him.

At the breakfast-table, he spoke sharply to Alvira, as she placed the plate of fried ham and eggs before him.

"Tell Tiny, I'm a-wantin' her."

"Tiny hain't hyar yit," was the answer. "Hit's time she was."

"Whar's she gone!" Uncle Dick demanded, gruffly. He detested any interruption of his plans.

"Tiny stayed over to the Widder Higgins's las'

night," Alvira explained. "Hit's time she come back."

Uncle Dick snorted with indignation.

"She didn't say nothin' to me 'bout stayin' over thar," he said crossly.

"Nor to me, nuther," Alvira declared. "She never does beforehand. When the Widder Higgins kind o' hangs on, Tiny jest stays, an' comes back in the mornin'. She orter been 'ere afore now."

Uncle Dick pushed away the plate of food, half-eaten. Dread had fallen on him suddenly. He tried to thrust it off, but the weight was too heavy for his strength of will. Perforce he yielded to alarm for the girl's safety. A great fear was upon him lest it be too late for the warning he had meant to give. He growled a curse on his own folly in not guarding against immediate attack by the outlaw. It was with small hope of finding his apprehensions groundless that he set forth at once, rifle in hand, for the cabin of the Widow Higgins. There, his fears were confirmed. The old woman had seen nothing of Plutina, since the short pause on the way to the post-office. Uncle Dick groaned aloud over the fate that might have come on the girl. He told enough to give the Widow Higgins some understanding of the situation, and bade her go to his own house, there to remain and to comfort Alvira. For himself, he would first search over the

Cherry Lane trail for any trace of his vanished granddaughter, and thereafter raise the hue-and-cry to a general hunt through the mountains for the capture or killing of the villain, and the recovery of the girl, dead or alive. Not for an instant did the old man doubt that Hodges had done the deed.

Uncle Dick had no more than passed Luffman's Branch on his way over the Cherry Lane Trail, when a joyous hail caused him to lift his eyes from their close scrutiny of the beaten earth. Descending the trail, a little way in front of him, appeared the slender, erect form of the one-armed veteran. The bridegroom moved with a jaunty step, and his wrinkled features radiated gladness. But, as he came near, his face sobered at sight of the other's expression. His voice was solicitous.

"I 'low somethin' air wrong," he ventured.

Uncle Dick in his distress welcomed the note of sympathy. Somehow, he felt curiously drawn to this successful rival, and he was sure that his feeling was returned. Between the two men there was a curious mutual respect, as if each relied on the entire good sense of one who had loved Fanny Brown. The older man craved a confidant; he was avid for counsel and every possible assistance in this emergency. He told the facts as concisely as possible, while Seth Jones, wedded raptures forgot,

listened in growing sorrow and dismay. At the end, he spoke simply:

"I'll take a look 'long with ye, Mister Siddon. I done a heap o' trackin' in my time, out West. Perhaps, I kin he'p ye some."

Uncle Dick put out his hand, and the two palms met in a warm clasp, witness of friendship's pact. Forthwith, they gave themselves to minute examination of the trail for any sign of the missing girl.

For a time, their patient search went unrewarded. But, about a half-mile beyond Luffman's Branch, they came on an area still affected by one of the small showers so frequent in the mountains. Here, the veteran's alert eyes distinguished a footprint outlined in the damp dust.

"Yer gal was barefut, I reckon," he said. He pointed to the imprint just before where he was standing.

"Yep," Uncle Dick answered. There was a little mist over his eyes, as he glanced down. "Yep; hit's her'n."

The veteran went forward confidently now.

"She was a-steppin' plumb brisk," he declared; "feelin' pretty peart, I 'low; feet kind o' springy-like."

Uncle Dick shivered at the words. He had a ghastly vision of Plutina moving at this moment with painfully dragging steps somewhere afar in

the fastnesses of the mountains. But he said nothing of the worst fears to his companion. He only followed on, watching closely lest something escape the other's survey. Almost, he found himself hoping they might come on the girl's dead body. Death is not the worst of evils.

After a mile, or a little less, the area of the shower was passed. Uncle Dick could hardly distinguish any sign of the footprints in the heavy dust of the trail, but he accepted without question the veteran's assertion that they were easily perceptible to the trained sight. Suddenly, Seth Jones halted, and peered intently, stooping low. Uncle Dick, too, bent to look, but the faint markings in the dirt were without significance to him. The veteran moved to the roadside and searched on hands and knees over the yard of grass between the trail and a thicket. When he stood erect again, he regarded his companion inquiringly.

"They seem to be the tracks o' some mighty-big, hefty cuss, what come out o' these-hyar bushes, an' tuk along arter her. Kin ye make a guess who hit mout be, Mister Siddon?"

Uncle Dick's face grew black with a rage that was the more frightful because it had no object on which to vent itself.

"Hit's him!" he mumbled thickly, choking over the effort for self-control. Abruptly, he abandoned

the attempt. His big voice boomed forth in a torrent of blasphemous imprecations. When, finally, he rumbled into silence, and stood panting for breath, the veteran, who had appeared to listen with great interest and perhaps some pleasure, spoke soothingly:

"You-all was shore some eloquent, an' I 'low the ornery critter deserves every mite on hit. An', anyhow, I reckon ye done saved yerse'f a stroke. Ye was a-lookin' like ye'd bust, but ye let off the steam a-cussin' 'im out. Now, let's see." He went back to the trail, and advanced very slowly, for the markings were faint even to his skilled eyes. Uncle Dick, trembling a little from the violence of his outburst, followed faithfully, but he could no longer detect traces of the passing of either man or girl.

Thus, in slow progress, they came at last to the fork of the trail. This is at the extreme easterly slope of Bull Head Mountain, which rises from the north side of the valley as if in sullen rivalry of Stone Mountain below. In the division of the trail here, one branch ascends toward Glade Creek, across the mountain, while the other keeps on straight to Cherry Lane. Within the fork of the trails lies a fallen giant of the coves, a huge yellow poplar, almost hidden along its length by the embowering thickets. Toward this, in an advance

tediously slow, the veteran made his way. When, finally, he was come up to the great bole, he stood quietly for minutes, gazing everywhere round about. Uncle Dick, emulating his companion, peered earnestly, and soon he, too, perceived the evidences that something out of the ordinary had occurred just here. Over a considerable space next the trunk there were signs of a struggle. Broken branches showed on some of the bushes; leaves from the poplar shoots were lying on the grass; the turf was freshly torn here and there. The veteran bent over, and picked up an object from the ground, which he held out. Uncle Dick gave one glance, and uttered a cry of despair. He recognized it as a button from the dress Plutina had been wearing the day before.

The further search of the veteran achieved little. He was able only to make sure that the footprints led off through the forest toward the south. But, now, the impressions were no longer of one following the other. Instead, it was revealed that the two walked side by side. Uncle Dick groaned as his companion told him of this. Plutina had been attacked; she had fought; she had been overcome—and she was still alive!

CHAPTER XVI

WITH the news of the event, a flame of wrath swept through the coves. Everywhere, the men gathered in parties, to hunt, rifle in hand, for some trace of the outlaw. There was none to give him favor, save the outcasts numbered among his dependants. The usual sympathy for the illicit distiller ceased utterly, destroyed by hatred for the criminal's final offense. For the first time in the history of the mountains, there was no voice raised to protest—nor any rifle pointed in the laurel—against the Federal officers, who wandered at will in the wild places. In execration of Dan Hodges for his sin against the peace and dignity of the community, the people forgot for the nonce their ancient enmity against the Government. With one accord, the folk of the mountains joined in abhorrence of Hodges, sullenly anxious to bring about his punishment, to avenge his victim at least, if too late to save her.

Seth Jones turned from the joys of the belated honeymoon to give every aid in his power. His counsel and the comfort of his presence were boons

to Uncle Dick. The veteran had learned from his bride concerning the disfavor in which Zeke was held, and the reason for it. It seemed to him the part of wisdom, in this crisis, to feign ignorance, and he blandly suggested, on the return of the two from the fallen poplar, that they should ride to Joines' store in the evening, there, over the telephone, to dispatch a telegram to Zeke in New York. It was the psychological moment for success. There was not even a flicker of resentment aroused. Uncle Dick remembered that the Quaker school-teacher spy had been saved by Zeke from Dan Hodges. In his new mood, that fact was enough to overcome all rancor against the lad. Moreover, he realized the tragedy of Plutina's fate to her lover, and he was moved to compassion. He accepted the veteran's suggestion without a word of remonstrance.

It was Seth Jones, too, who broke down the old man's last prejudice by persuading him to summon Marshal Stone. Uncle Dick yielded with an odd mingling of emotions—shame and relief: shame over such trafficking with the "revenuers," whom he had consistently fought and despised through three generations; relief that he had gained the strong arm of the law to his side. He had been greatly heartened when Stone answered over the wire that he would set out with a posse at midnight for the Siddon cabin, so that, after a conference there, the

active work of searching could be begun promptly at dawn.

Thus, it came about that, for the first time in history, Uncle Dick Siddon welcomed the sound of hoofbeats pounding up the trail through the dark ness. Where, aforetime, he would have leaped to wind a blast of warning to the moonshiners above against the coming of the "revenuers," the old man now hastened to the cabin door, and flung it wide, and went forth on the porch to give grateful greeting.

When a council had been held, three parties set forth. Seth Jones was the guide for one, which went to the northeast, through the Bull Head Mountain region, whither, in all likelihood, the outlaw would make his way, if he meant to escape out of the country. The marshal, with one companion, skirted Stone Mountain. Uncle Dick led two of the posse to the yellow poplar where the struggle had occurred, after which they would follow the general direction of the tracks. The marshal expected to make a circuit of the mountain rapidly enough to effect a junction with Uncle Dick's party by noon, at the Woodruff Gate. The veteran and his two men, who would have by far the roughest going, were not to report until sundown at the Siddon cabin.

From the poplar, Uncle Dick and the deputies

were able, with great difficulty, to follow the tracks of the outlaw and his prisoner toward the south for a full mile. But at this point, an expanse of outcropping rock baffled them completely. Search as they would, there was no least sign of footsteps anywhere. After an hour of futile questing, they gave up in despair, and hurried to the rendezvous at the Woodruff Gate.

The marshal and his men had already reached the gate, and Stone had wherewith to give the distraught grandfather new hope.

"I came on their tracks a mile below where you lost them," he explained. "They still keep to the south. We followed as far as the sand bar below Sandy Creek Falls."

"Come on!" Uncle Dick cried, fiercely. "Let's arter 'im this-yer minute."

The marshal shook his head at the old man's enthusiasm.

"We're not much better off yet," he declared. "We found the place where he camped last night. 'Twasn't far. I reckon the girl made his going as slow as she could. She naturally would." Uncle Dick nodded somberly. "But the trouble is, the trail ends at the sand bar—ends absolutely."

"We'll find hit ag'in," Uncle Dick exclaimed, stoutly. "We jest got to find hit. Come on!"

The marshal urged the other to rest in preparation for the hard climb—down the ridge, and then up the sharp slopes and ledges of the mountainside. But the old man would have none of it. So, straightway, the two moved off, leaving the others, less hardy, to repose, and in due time they came to the bar below Sandy Creek Falls.

High among the embattled cliffs of Stone Mountain's eastern end, Sandy Creek races in tumultuous course. The limpid stream cascades in vertical sheen of silver from ledge to ledge. It writhes with ceaseless noisy complainings through the twisting ways of bowlder-strewn gorges. Here and there, in some placid pool, it seems to pause, languid, resting from its revels of flight. Such a pool lay at the foot of the longest fall. A barrier of sand circled from the cliff as the brim for this bowl of the waters. To this point, Marshal Stone and Uncle Dick were now come. The tracks were plainly discernible in the sand, along the edge of the pool. There were the huge misshapen outlines of the outlaw's bare feet, deep-sunken from the heavy weight of the man. Beside them showed the slender prints made by the captive, lightly pressed. These tracks followed the curving bar, along the water's edge. They reached to the foot of the cliff, close to where was the outer edge of the cataract. There they ceased.

The marshal, already familiar with the mystery,

and baffled by it, searched again perfunctorily. Uncle Dick hunted hither and yon with feverish activity, at first confidently, then doubtfully, finally in despair. He, in his turn, could find no further clue. He gave over his efforts eventually, and stood silent beside the marshal, staring bewilderedly. About the amphitheatre formed by the pool, pines grew in a half-circle, save where the narrow channel of the stream descended. But between the barricade of the trees and the basin of water lay the smooth stretch of sand, slightly moist from outflung spray of the falls. Upon that level surface, the tracks showed forth—undeniable, inexplicable. They marched without deviation straight to the base of the great cliff. There, within a little space, they gew confused, as from much trampling. But they did not return; they did not go elsewhere. There was a clear distance of a rod over the sand to the rocky ground where the trees grew. On the other side lay the deeps of the pool. Before them reared the impassible wall of the precipice. And there the tracks ended.

Uncle Dick knew the place well, and on that account the mystery was the greater. He could find no possible explanation, however wildly improbable, of that disappearance. The broad sheet of the falls fell close to the cliff's face. The rock was unworn by the torrent, without recess or cavern.

And that precipice, twice the pool's width, mounted sheer a hundred feet, the height of the cascade. The front was unbroken save by tiny rifts and narrow ledges, where dwarfed ground pines clung precariously. With a muttered curse, the old man turned from his vain contemplation of the cliff, and let his troubled eyes rest on the pool. Suddenly, he started. He remained motionless for a moment, then, with nervous haste threw off his shirt, and trousers. Marshal Stone, chancing to look that way, was astonished to see his companion naked, poised at the water's edge. He had time to note with admiration the splendid figure, still supple and strongly muscled despite the four-score years. Then Uncle Dick leaped, and dived. It was long seconds before he reappeared, only to dive again. He paid no attention to the marshal's remonstrances. Only when he was convinced of the uselessness of further search in the pool's depths, did he give over the task, and cast himself down on the sand to rest, panting and trembling a little from fatigue.

"They hain't thar," he said, with grim conviction. Then he voiced the question that hammered in his brain: "Whar be they?"

But the marshal had no answer.

As they made their way drearily back toward the Woodruff Gate, the officer broke a long silence:

"Only a blood-hound can trail them!"

The gloom of Uncle Dick's expression did not lighten.

"They hain't nary one in the mountings," he answered, heavily.

"None nearer than Suffolk, Virginia," the marshal said. "Cyclone Brant has a couple of good ones. But it would cost a lot."

The old man flared.

"Fer God's sake, git thet-thar feller an' his dawgs. I hain't axin' what hit 'll cost. Hit was my money got thet-thar damned cuss out o' the jail-house. I hain't likely to begrudge anythin' hit 'll cost to git him kotched. An' Plutiny!—why, money don't matter none, if I can save Plutiny!"

"I'll send for Brant to-night," the marshal promised, with new cheerfulness. "Let's hope he's not off somewhere. They send for him all over the country. If the dogs start day after to-morrow, they'll still find the scent."

Uncle Dick groaned.

"An' her a-lyin' out with thet-thar wolf all thet while," he mumbled, in despair. "Mebby, this very minute, she's a-screamin'—callin' to her ole gran'-pap to save her. My Plutiny!" He walked with lagging steps; the tall form, usually so erect, was bowed under the burden of tormenting fears. The

marshal, understanding, ventured no word of comfort.

It was late afternoon when the dispirited searchers reached the Siddon clearing on their return from the fruitless day's work. There, they were astonished to see the Widow Higgins come down the path toward them, at a pace ordinarily forbidden by her rheumatic joints. She waved a paper in her hand.

"Hit's a telegraph," she called shrilly. Her voice held something of the awe with which remoter regions still regard that method of communication. But there was a stronger emotion still that thus sent the old woman dancing in forgetfulness of her chronic pains. It was explained in her next sentence, cried out with a mother's exultation in the home-coming of her beloved. Almost, in joy over seeing her son again, she forgot the misery that was bringing him.

"Hit's from Zekie! Zekie's comin' home!"

Uncle Dick could not share the mother's delight. The lover's coming could hardly avail anything toward saving the girl. Nevertheless, he took the sheet of paper, which carried the message sent on by telephone from North Wilkesboro' to Joines' store. He read it aloud, that the marshal might hear:

Suffolk, Va.

Richard Siddon,
Joines' Mill, N. C.,
Via Telephone from North Wilkesboro'.
Arrive to-night with bloodhound.

Ezekiel.

Uncle Dick's voice faltered a little in the reading. The black eyes were glowing with new hope beneath the beetling white brows, as he lifted his gaze to the mountain peaks. For the first time, he felt a thrill of jubilation over the young man whom he had rejected, whom now he accepted—jubilation for the fresh, virile, strength of the lad, for the resourcefulness that this message so plainly declared. The old man's lips moved in vague, mute phrases, which were the clumsy expressions of emotions, of gratitude to Providence for the blessing of another's energy, on which to lean in this time of trial. There had been desperate need of haste in getting the hounds on the trail. Now, they were coming—to-night. Zeke was bringing them. Perhaps, after all, an old man's declining years would know the fond tenderness of a daughter's care—and a son's. Thank God that Zeke was coming!

CHAPTER XVII

ZEKE, in his new life, found little leisure for loneliness, though nightly he fell asleep with an ache of nostalgia in his heart, longing for the mountains of home and the girl who dwelt among them. But his days were filled with various activities that held his whole attention. With a mind keen and apt to receive impressions, and hungry for knowledge, he gave himself joyously to learning the details of Sutton's tree-nail manufacture. The processes were, in fact, simple, and he mastered them with ease. Then, he was instructed more broadly in busines methods, with the purpose of making him competent when he should become a manager of the projected factory in the Blue Ridge region. His time was thus so fully occupied that he had neither opportunity nor inclination for social pleasures.

He spent a week-end in his employer's Long Island home, and surprised that gentleman mightily by the propriety of his manners, which he had acquired on the yacht. On this occasion, Sutton spoke definitely of his plans. The railroad branch north

from the main line was now a certainty, and the construction would soon start. At that time, Zeke would return to North Carolina, and set about securing options on the best available timber. A mill would be built, and the manufacture of tree-nails carried on. Zeke, in addition to an adequate salary, would receive a certain share of the profits. The prospect was one to delight any ambitious young man, and Zeke appreciated it to the full. But most of all he rejoiced that his success should come to him in the place he loved, where the girl waited.

Zeke had a companion, who shared with him the tiny hall-room, and kept at his side in long evening rambles through the city streets. It came about in this wise:

It was one afternoon when he had been in New York for a week, that a visitor entered, unannounced, the office where he was listening intently to Sutton's crisp explanations of business routine. Zeke looked up at the sound of the opening door. Then, his jaw dropped, his eyes widened. Next moment, he sprang to his feet, his face radiant with welcome. His phrases, in the excitement of this meeting, were the mountaineer's idioms, which new associations were beginning to modify in his ordinary speech.

"Why, hit's shorely Miss Josephine!" he cried, as he advanced upon her, with outstretched hand.

He saw the dog, straining toward him on the leash. "An' thet-thar man-faced dawg!"

There was a little interval of confusion, while greetings were exchanged amid the demonstrative antics of the bull-terrier. Sutton was called away presently, and then the girl explained the object of her visit.

"You never noticed it," she said somewhat pettishly; "but one time on the yacht, I came up on deck with Chubbie. You were over by the rail. You snapped your fingers to him. I ordered him to stay with me. He wouldn't mind. He went to you. Well, I decided right then what I'd do."

"Why, shucks, Miss Josephine!" Zeke exclaimed, in much distress. "He jest nacherly didn't mean nothin' by thet."

"He showed something by it, though," was the retort. "He showed that he belonged to you, and not to me. So, here he is." She held out the leash to Zeke, who took it doubtfully, only half-comprehending. As he was about to speak, a gesture checked him.

"I'm not really a bit generous in giving him to you. My dog must like me better than anyone else in the world. That's why I really don't want Chubbie any longer. You're first in his heart, and I'm second. And, though I'm quite selfish about

it, I know I'm doing him the greatest favor in the world—that is, if you're willing to take him."

"I'd shore be tickled to death to have him," Zeke admitted. "But it don't seem right."

"Providence seems to have arranged it that way, anyhow," Josephine declared, airily. "Perhaps, if a surgeon operated on him for the dent you put in his skull, he might cease loving you. But nothing else seems likely to stop him."

The dog, thrusting its cold muzzle against Zeke's palm, whined assent. Josephine regarded her disloyal pet a little regretfully.

"He's a good dog," she aid, softly. "He deserves to be happy."

"Plutiny'll be plumb tickled to see the critter I've wrote sech a heap about," Zeke remarked. His eyes were suddenly grown dreamy.

"You and your Plutina!" she railed. But her voice was very kindly. When she had learned of the young man's prospects and the nearness of his return home, she uttered a remark that puzzled Zeke.

"You don't need to envy anyone." There was a light almost of jealousy in the blue eyes.

"Why, I never thought o' sech a thing!" he answered indignantly. "Why should I?"

"Why, indeed?" Josephine repeated, and she sighed. She sighed again on taking leave, when she

observed that the bull-terrier made no movement to accompany her, but stood steadfastly by Zeke's side.

Into the happy, busy routine of Zeke's life in New York, Uncle Dick's telegram came with the crash of catastrophe. It was merely with innocent wondering that he opened the yellow envelope, which a messenger delivered in Sutton's office on a pleasant summer afternoon. It was the first missive of the sort in Zeke's experience, yet he felt no slightest chill of apprehension. His mood was too firmly joyous to be easily shaken. He merely wondered, and felt no fear whatever, as he pulled out the sheet of flimsy paper, and unfolded it, while his employer sat looking on curiously, himself already suspicious of trouble. Zeke read the typewritten words through stupidly, under the first shock uncomprehending. Then, he repeated the message aloud, as if challenging its meaning.

"Plutina been stolen," ran the summons. "Dan Hodges done it. Need help."

The name of Richard Siddon as the sender in itself told how desperate must be the situation, else Uncle Dick would not have summoned the suitor he had rejected. Zeke stared pitifully at Sutton. His eyes had the pathos of a stricken animal's. For a little, he seemed dazed by the unexpectedness of this evil. Then, very soon, rage mounted blackly.

Sutton, listening, could not repress a shudder before the deadly hate in Zeke's voice.

"I'll kill Dan Hodges!" was the promise. The voice was low and even, but it roared in the ears of the listener. There was something terrifying in the stark savagery that showed in the mountaineer's tones and in the drawn, pallid face.

But, after the one outburst, Zeke maintained an appearance of hypocritical calm. Only in the tremulousness of his voice when he thanked Sutton did he betray the depth of his feeling.

In truth, he had new reason for gratitude in this emergency to the man who already had so befriended him.

"You'll want to start at once, of course," Sutton said.

Zeke nodded assent.

"Well, I think I'll go with you. Perhaps, I might help. It'll be better for you with somebody along."

Zeke offered a protest, but it was disregarded.

"I know Plutina," Sutton said, earnestly, "and I know you, Zeke. I want to help. Now, I wonder—"

He fell silent for a space, thinking deeply. When he spoke again it was with curt decisiveness:

"It's hurrying things a bit, but not too much. I'll have you stay down there, Zeke, and get after the timber as soon as you have Plutina back."

Then, as the young man regarded him in bewilderment, he explained fully:

"I've just heard a rumor that Grearson and Company are going to send a man down there. I'll beat them to it. I meant to start you off in a month or so. But you've learned all you need to here, and it's better to hurry, so as not to run any risk of my competitors getting in ahead. We'll get away on the train to-night."

So it came about that the two reached Norfolk late in the afternoon of the following day, after what had seemed to the tortured lover an eternity of listless crawling toward the mountains. Now Zeke felt no longer dismay over the rapid flight of the train, as in his first journeying, but only a fierce longing to cover the miles more swiftly. For he appreciated how great was the crisis. Plutina had written him of her part in the raid on Hodges' still, and she had expressed in some degree the apprehensions she felt. Zeke was sure that, somehow, Plutina's betrayal of the still had become known to the outlaw, and on this account the man had sought vengeance. The lover sickened at the thought of the form that brutal vengeance might take. Often, Sutton, covertly watchful, averted his glance that he might not see the despair on the mountaineer's face.

The two travelers were on their way to the ferry

in Norfolk, when inspiration came to Zeke: He bethought him of Cyclone Brant, and the stag-hound, Jack. A few words sufficed for explanation of the matter to Sutton, who welcomed the idea of securing such assistance for the search.

"I kin git 'im, if he's home," Zeke declared, eagerly. "He lives in Suffolk, 'bout twenty miles toward Wilkes. I'll try an' git 'im on the 'phone."

In this, he was successful, and he was greatly cheered by the anxiety displayed by Brant to be of assistance. But the detective was distressed over the delay of twelve hours that must ensue before they could get a train to North Wilkesboro'. Sutton removed this difficulty by ordering a special, which should be made up at once, and should stop at Suffolk to take on Brant and his dog. So, within the hour, the three men and the hound were rushing at rocking speed along the tortuous river course that led into the mountains. Instructions had been sent ahead, by Brant's suggestion, to have an automobile and driver in readiness for the arrival of the party at the North Wilkesboro' station.

The three men talked but little during the trip. The tenseness of suspense held them in thrall, and, for the most part, they sat in grim silence, staring out of the windows at the swiftly flitting panorama of moonlit landscape, wherein the fertile level areas changed to narrowing valleys, and these, in turn,

to wild gorges, where the river ran in bellowing riot beneath lofty ramparts of stone. Sutton's thoughts veered from pity for his young friend to keen calculation of profits to come from the locust timber of the slopes. Cyclone Brant mused on his past adventurings in these wilds. From time to time, he pulled at the ears of the stag-hound, which sat on its haunches in the aisle, balancing its big bulk elastically against the erratic joltings of the car, and regarding its master with patient adoration in the reddened eyes.

Zeke, too, had the single comfort of a dog's faithful fondness. The bull-terrier crouched on the seat beside its master. The squat-featured face was thrust forward, with the heavy jaw resting on Zeke's lap. Often, the dog whined, with a soft, whimpering note. It was as if the creature knew its master's grief, and wished to tell its sympathy. There was a curious help to the young man's courage in the eager, caressing thrusts of the cold nose against his palm. And he had need of every help, even the least, for, in this period of inactivity, the spirit within him was near to fainting. Because he knew fully the depraved nature of Hodges, he could not blind himself to the frightful peril of Plutina in the outlaw's power. The girl's plight was one to inspire horror in any decent breast; to the lover, worshiping her as something ineffably holy,

the possibility of her pollution by the brute who had stolen her away was a thing too monstrous for belief, yet not to be denied. He strove to drive the hideous thought from his mind, but, ever, it crept again into his consciousness. The sickness of his soul found its only relief in bursts of fury against the cause of this wickedness. His manhood asserted itself in a primitive lust to torture and to destroy.

There were intervals of softer emotion, when he lived again the sweet raptures of hours alone with Plutina in the mountain solitude. But the moods of retrospection were short, perforce. They weakened him too greatly. The very heart seemed to flow from him like water, as memories crowded. The contrast of the present was too hideous for endurance. Again, the ghastly despair—the black rage, the whining of the dog, and the thrust of the cold muzzle to distract for a moment. Then, once more, the agonizing round.

The grinding of brakes, as the train drew to a standstill at North Wilkesboro', came as a poignant relief to the three travelers. Even the dogs seemed to relax from strain, and a covert hostility, which had marked their first meeting, vanished while they sniffed at each other in inquisitive, friendly fashion.

The automobile was in waiting. Zeke jumped in beside the driver. The bull-terrier was held firmly between his legs. Sutton, Brant and the hound es-

tablished themselves in the tonneau. Within a minute after the stopping of the train, the car was rolling rapidly over the highway toward Joines' mill. The chauffeur made the best speed possible under Zeke's urging, and the run was short.

Beyond the mill, the trail branching off the main road was rough and narrow, traversed only by horsemen and the clumsy vehicles of the mountaineers. No automobile had ever passed over it, and the party had planned to secure mounts at the mill, and to continue the journey on horseback. Zeke, however, realized the advantage in continuing by machine, were this possible, and he suggested it to the driver. The man was doubtful, but, too, he was an enthusiast in his work, and the opportunity of thus climbing the mountains, where no other car had been, appealed strongly to his ambition. In the end, he consented, with a prudent stipulation concerning possible damages. So, without pause, the automobile shot forward past mill and store, and went clambering along the trail toward the northern coves. The driver ran cautiously enough, despite Zeke's impatience, but, at the best, the trip was a strain on the men and on the mechanism that bore them, for the car lurched and bounced over the uneven surface, and more than once was near to being overturned. Their ultimate safety was due, in great measure, to Zeke himself. Familiar with

every foot of the way, he was able to advise the chauffeur of the more dangerous points. Neither Sutton nor Brant had uttered a word of protest against undertaking the perils of this final stage, but both breathed a sigh of relief, when, at last, the car stopped in the clearing before the Siddon cabin, and the journey was safely done.

The wooden wheels of the poplar clock in the cabin were whirring for the striking of midnight, when their noise was overborne by the grotesque, unfamiliar honkings of an automobile horn. With the second of the three blasts, the cabin's door swung open, and in the light of it was silhouetted the tall form of Uncle Dick.

"Zeke!" he called; and his voice was a little broken.

Then, with instinctive delicacy of feeling, he stepped aside, as the young man sprang up the steps, and he stood silent, while mother and son were folded in each other's arms, murmuring endearments. But, when Zeke at last turned to face the old man, Uncle Dick's hand went out to a powerful clasp that told how profoundly he was moved.

"I'm glad ye've come, boy," he said, simply. And Zeke knew that the old distrust and suspicion were gone forever, and in their stead were come affection and faith.

CHAPTER XVIII

ZEKE was astounded when he looked around the living-room and recognized Marshal Stone, together with the members of the posse. He suddenly became aware that the change in Uncle Dick was even greater than he had supposed. There had been a radical readjustment of the old man's attitude toward life, which disposed him not only to acceptance of Zeke with affection and confidence, but also to toleration of, and alliance with, the "revenuers," whom he had so consistently hated through a long lifetime. Zeke refrained however, from any open expression of his amazement, and at once joined the other men in devising a plan of operations to be begun at dawn.

It was decided that Uncle Dick should accompany the marshal and Brant, with the stag-hound, to the tracks of Hodges and Plutina on the north face of Stone Mountain, near Sandy Creek, where the dog could take up the scent, in the hope of solving the mystery that had baffled the human searchers.

Then Uncle Dick interposed a suggestion that suited Zeke well.

"If so be," he exclaimed abruptly, "as how Dan Hodges is atop thet-thar mounting, an' he gits the dawg nigh the precipice, he might throw the critter over. He's powerful strong, Dan is, an' desprit."

"Yes, the fellow's capable of it," Stone agreed.

"I'm a-thinkin' as hit mout be well fer Zeke to git atop the mounting fust off," Uncle Dick continued, "an' watch out fer Hodges. Hit's pretty open up thar, and easy to layway a body."

"I'll go," Zeke declared, with eagerness.

The marshal directed the men of the posse to scatter to various points on the railway lines.

"Hodges'll probably try to get out of the country, the minute he hears the hound after him," Stone explained. "All of my men have seen him, and they'll be able to stop him, if he manages somehow to cover his scent from the dog, and get off."

Sutton, much against his will, was forced to remain inactive at the cabin as he was not physically fitted for the hard tramping over the mountains.

Zeke was the prey of emotions too deep to permit much interest in a stranger, but he had a friendly, if wan, smile for the veteran, whom he remembered from their single meeting. He attempted a display of attention on hearing of the marriage so recently achieved, but the effort failed pitifully. Seth Jones, however, took no offence, since he understood how great must be the young man's misery. On the contrary, his sympathies were deeply stirred, and he essayed a few words meant to comfort.

"An' I reckon I'll go 'long with you-all, Zeke, in the mornin'," he concluded.

But Zeke shook his head at the offer.

"I got to cross over home fer my rifle-gun," he explained, vaguely.

"I clean fergot to tell ye," Uncle Dick cried. "Yer rifle-gun's hyar, Zeke. I done fotched it over fer ye."

"Thank ye, Uncle Dick," was the grave response. But the young man did not rescind his refusal of the veteran's company.

Uncle Dick offered a share of his bed to Brant and the marshal, but it was refused by both. There were blankets spread for the men on the floor of the porch, where the smoke gushed from a smudge kettle to keep off the mosquitoes. There, presently, the company stretched themselves for the brief dreamless sleep won by the day's fatigues.

Even Zeke fell into a sound slumber, with the bull-terrier nestled at his breast. He had not thought to sleep, only to lie quiet for a little rest, and then, long before the dawn, to issue forth alone. Nevertheless, his repose was profound for two hours, or more. Perhaps, the stirring of the dog awoke him; perhaps, his own determination, subconsciously

exerted. Anyhow, he straightened up suddenly, and stared about him stupidly, reluctant to believe that he had actually slept thus, while Plutina cried out for succor. He was relieved when he perceived that there was not yet even a trace of dawn in the east. He realized that it was as well, for though he had lost little time, he felt vitally refreshed, with new vigors to battle in behalf of the girl he loved. It was but the work of a minute noiselessly to possess himself of his rifle, and to descend the steps. The bull-terrier kept close at his heels. With the dog still following, Zeke, pressed forward through the darkness toward Stone Mountain.

The other sleepers were aroused by Uncle Dick as the first gray light was flushing to the rose of dawn over the eastern mountains. There was some astonishment at finding Zeke already gone, but it subsided quickly, for all understood how great must be his anxiety. The men of the posse duly took their departure for the railway points designated by the marshal. Seth Jones set out in pursuit of Zeke. Stone, with Uncle Dick and Brant, made ready for the actual hunting of the outlaw.

"I've seen Jack more than once pick up a cold trail three days old," the hound's master declared, with a manifest pride in the creature's prowess; "and run down his man. Can we get hold of something

to give him the scent—an old shoe, or cap—anything?"

"Got jest the thing fer ye," Uncle Dick replied, leading the way from the cabin toward one of the out-buildings. "Hit's an ole coat. Dan left hit one hot day when he stopped in at my forge, to tinker the rivets to the cap o' the still. Hit was dum hot thet day, an' he left 'is coat. 'Twa'n't wuth comin' back fer. I 'low the smell's about all thet's left to hit."

Brant showed the tattered garment to the stag-hound, and bade the animal smell it. The dog sniffed obediently a few times, sneezed as if in disgust of the odor, regarded its master understandingly, and then walked away.

"That's all that's necessary," Cyclone Brant declared. "The dog and I are ready."

Forthwith, the three men, with the hound, set forth toward the southeast, to cut the track of the outlaw near Sandy creek. They followed the trail to a point some distance beyond the Woodruff Gate, and then left it to ascend the precipitous slopes near the eastern end of Stone Mountain. They were not far from Sandy Creek Falls, when the marshal halted, and pointed out the remains of a camp-fire.

"This is where Hodges stopped to cook his supper the first night," he explained. "I followed the

tracks on to the creek, and up it to the falls, where I lost them. Now, it's up to the dog."

A growl from the hound caused the three to look up, startled. There was an exclamation from Uncle Dick, and the rifle leaped to his shoulder.

"No, no—don't shoot!" Stone ordered. He, too, had seen and recognized Garry Hawks, as the fellow, evidently disconcerted by their presence there, slipped stealthily into the laurel. "He'll be more useful to us alive presently," he explained to Uncle Dick, who had obeyed protestingly.

"Thet's so, likely," the old man conceded grudgingly. Then he chuckled harshly, for the first time since Plutina's disappearance. "Got his right wing slung up! Did ye see hit? Tiny done hit—pore gal! Purty peart at shootin', Tiny is. Thet-thar—"

"There's a fresh track here made by Hodges," the marshal exclaimed, interrupting. He pointed to a plain imprint on the dirt covering of a flat rock.

Brant brought his dog to the spot, pointed to the footprint, and slipped the leash. The hound lowered its head, snuffed at the ground, and gave tongue. In the same second, it was off at speed, running with muzzle low, with the continuous whining yelps that told of a warm scent. It did not vanish into the coverts as all had expected, but followed through the open place that led to the northward, skirting

the wood. As the men hurried after, they caught a final glimpse of the dog two hundred yards beyond, just disappearing over a ridge. They followed the sound of its baying with what haste they might, yet slowly, by reason of the difficult going. The dog's cries guided them, much to the surprise of Uncle Dick and the marshal, straight toward Sandy Creek Falls, whither the first tracks of the outlaw and the girl had led, and where they had been so mysteriously lost. As the three scrambled up a steep ascent, scarcely a hundred yards from the sand-bar, there came to their ears from the hound a high, melancholy howl.

"It means that Jack is at fault, somehow," Brant explained in answer to a grunt of inquiry from Uncle Dick. "Something puzzling him for a minute."

The two listeners looked at each other with grave faces. Was it possible, they wondered, that the hound would be baffled, even as they had been, there at the pool? But their expression lightened the next moment, for two sharp, harsh barks came from the dog, which was evidently still in the neighborhood of the falls, and its master interpreted:

"Jack's treed his game, sure's you're born!"

The three topped the ridge, and broke into a run down the slope, their rifles at the ready. Within the minute, they leaped from the thicket into the

open place below the falls. Then, with one accord, they stopped short and stood staring bewilderedly.

The hound continued its deep-chested baying. It stood erect on its hind legs, almost to a man's height. It was supported by its fore-paws extended as far up as they would reach against the wall of the precipice, a little to the left of the waterfall. As it barked, the dog held its muzzle pointed straight upward. There could be no doubt, if the sensitiveness of the brute were to be relied on, that its quarry had, in some incomprehensible fashion, contrived to mount the sheer surface of the cliff. That the hound was sure, was made plain by the rigidity of its posture, by the fierce, challenging ululations, which pealed forth incessantly.

The three men went forward presently, their gaze wandering aloft from the dog, over the inaccessible expanse of vertical cliffs. They came down to the sand-bar, and followed it around the pool, still in silence, and still with their puzzled eyes roving hither and yon for some clue to understanding of this thing. But, of a sudden, Uncle Dick shouted:

"I see how 'tis! I shorely kotch on. Looky thar!"

The marshal and Brant followed the direction of his pointing arm, but they saw nothing to make the matter clear—only a tiny ledge, fifty feet above them, along which grew a few bushes and clumps

of ground pine. It offered no hiding-place for a child even, hardly footing for the outlaw's heavy bulk. But Uncle Dick shook his head to rebuke their lack of comprehension, then explained:

"Dan's a keen un, all right," he said, with grudging admiration. "But this-hyar time he's done left 'is mark fer my ole eyes to see. Now, you-all jest throw yer eyes o' vision up the side o' the cliff ag'in. If ye looks cluss, ye kin see a streak o' dampness on the rock. Hit's jet as if a mounting rattler mout 'a' dove down the rock right thar. But 'twa'n't thet. Thet-thar streak is the mark of a wet rope—er mebby a grape-vine. Thet's the way them devils git up an' down. I'll bet every stick o' my mounting timber them cusses got a cave up thar, offen the ledge. P'rhaps Garry Hawks jest got up, since we-uns seen 'im. An' the rock hain't had time to dry from the rope, er vine, a-gittin' wet in the falls. Dan Hodges thought he had a mighty cute place to lay out in. But he's kotched jest the same—damn 'im! . . . Good dawg!" The change in Uncle Dick's voice as he spoke the last two words was startling.

The two listeners accepted the old man's solution, but they did not share his enthusiasm. On the contrary, they were very grave, for the task before them appeared formidable, if not impossible, of achievement. As they continued silent, gazing up-

ward with frowning faces, Uncle Dick regarded them at first in perplexity, then in rapidly-mounting apprehension.

"What's a-bitin' on ye?" he demanded, at last.

The marshal replied.

"There's no way of getting them out of there. They're armed and not particular about murder. They can hold that fort till kingdom-come. Dan could alone. There's nothing for it but to starve 'em out—if they're there."

"And the trouble about that is," Brant added, "that they've got the girl for hostage. It seems to me that this Dan Hodges has the whip-hand."

For a little, Uncle Dick, who had paled under the tan, stood silent, looking helplessly from one to the other of his companions. Then he groaned aloud. But in the next instant, he straightened to his full height. His face grew convulsed with rage, as he faced the cliff, and his great voice volumed above the clamor of the cataract:

"God A'mighty damn ye, Dan Hodges! Damn ye—damn ye!"

And then again:

"Damn ye, Dan Hodges, ferever an' ferever!"

CHAPTER XIX

PLUTINA'S treatment of Hodges had had a curious effect on that lawless character. The humiliation to which he had been subjected had indeed filled him with vicious rage, but, too, it had inflamed his passion for the girl. Her scorn and her fierce mastery of him had made her more than ever desirable. He was fascinated by the strength and courage she had displayed. Brutal and evil as he was, Hodges was strong physically, and, in his own wicked way, strong of will. Because he was stronger than his fellows, he ruled them. Strength was, in fact, the one thing that he could admire. The revelation of it in Plutina at once set her apart from all other women, and gave to his craving for her a clumsy sort of veneration. But that veneration was strangely modified by resolve to be avenged for the insult she had put upon him. Thus, it had come about that he planned to satisfy his varied feelings toward the girl by the abduction. He swore to master her, to change her insolence to fawning submission, to abject fondness.

Hodges wasted no time. His sluggish brain began its scheming the moment a turn in the trail hid

him from view, after the ignominious march from the Holloman Gate. At sunrise, next morning, he was lurking on the borders of the Siddon clearing, spying on the movements of the family. He even witnessed Plutina's confession to her grandfather, of which he guessed the purport, and at which he cursed vilely beneath his breath. When Plutina set forth for the Cherry Lane post-office, he followed, slinking through the forest at a safe distance from the trail. He was not quite certain as to where or when he should attack the girl, but he meant to seize the first favorable opportunity, whether it came sooner or later. It came, as a matter of fact, very soon, and it was given by Plutina herself.

There at the fallen poplar, the girl found a comfortable nook on the big trunk, where her back was supported by a limb. The serenity of the scene soothed her over-wrought nerves. The sense of relief that had come from confession to her grandfather was less vivid now. In its stead was a blessed peacefulness. She watched lazily the visible details of forest life around about her. Her attention centered finally on a yellow-hammer, which was industriously boring the trunk of a dead chestnut. From the nest near-by, the callow young thrust naked heads, with bills gaping hungrily. Then, in a twinkling, birds and forest vanished, and

she was standing on the mist-strewn steeps of Stone Mountain, and Zeke's arm was about her, and her hand was clasped in his. So, she slept, and smiled a little in her dreams, for the touch of the breeze on her cheek seemed the caress of her lover's lips. From his lair in the laurel, Dan Hodges, watching, knew that his opportunity was come. The outlaw laid down his rifle, and drew from a pocket a stout leash of cowhide, a yard long. Glancing from time to time at his intended victim, to see that she still slept, he hastily fashioned a slip-noose at either end of the thong. This done, he began moving forward with the utmost caution, taking advantage of the cover, that he might remain invisible should the girl awake. He held the leash in his two hands ready for instant action. A slight detour brought him around the stump of the poplar, just behind Plutina. Advancing with even increased carefulness now, he approached until the girl was easily within his reach. As she reclined on the tree-trunk, her left hand hung at length on the side next to him. The right arm was bent along the supporting branch, and the hand pillowed her cheek. After a moment of doubt, Hodges decided that he would attempt to secure the free wrist in a noose of the leash without awakening her. It would be easy then to catch and bind the other wrist. In the confusion of sudden rousing from sleep, she would

make no effective resistance. The capture would be very simple.

It was, in truth, tragically simple, yet not so simple as the outlaw had anticipated. From dreams of tenderness, Plutina was suddenly started to hateful realization by the scarcely perceptible touch of this being so repugnant to her every instinct. She was confused, indeed, but not too confused for frantic resistance. It needed no more than recognition of the man's brutal face so close to hers to inspire her. She fought him with every ounce of her strength. The left hand was useless, held down by his on the thong, with the noose drawn taut about the wrist. But the outlaw, though he contrived to get the other noose over her right hand, failed somehow to tighten it at once. She was able to strike at him again and again. Her blows fell on his face, and they were sturdy blows. Hodges made no effort to avoid them, nor struck back—only busied himself with the effort to tighten the noose. It was evident that he disdained her attack. A certain virile pride forbade defense against this onslaught of a girl. Finally, he brought his left hand to aid in adjusting the second noose. In the few seconds of liberty, Plutina abandoned blows, and resorted to savage clawing at the evil face. Her ten nails streaked the coarse features with blood. But still he seemed absolutely indifferent to such wounds

as she could inflict. Then, the noose slipped to tightness. The girl's hands were brought close together behind her back, where she stood beside him. He knotted the slack of the leash, and holding the loop, grinned triumphantly at his captive. His bloody face was a mask of malice.

"Ye damned little wildcat," he growled, yet with an unmistakable note of admiration in his voice, "if I sarved ye 'cordin' to yer earnin's, I'd shorely tap ye over thet-thar purty haid o' your'n, an' pitch ye over into the Devil's Kittle, to wait fer yer runt lover to come arter ye." He twisted her about viciously. Despite her strength, unusual in a woman, Plutina was powerless in his grip. Holding her close, face to face, he contemplated the girl's pitiable distress with gloating eyes in which there was no faintest suggestion of pity. The prisoner met the malignant gaze for an instant. Then, her eyes fell, and she stood trembling. She was panting, partly from terror, partly from the violence with which she had struggled. Hodges chuckled, well content over the impression he had made. He would show her how a woman should be tamed! But the thing must be done in full accord with a plan he had made. Now that the captive had duly learned her first lesson in submissiveness, he might relax a little from his severity for a time. Besides, too much fright might leave her helpless on his

hands, which would be highly inconvenient, since there was a rough journey on foot before them. When he next spoke, he tried, without much success, to make his voice conciliatory.

"Thar hain't no call fer ye to be so dum skeery—leastways, not yit. I hain't a-hurtin' ye none—not yit—only jest a-tyin' yer han's to keep 'em out o' mischief. But I reckon as how ye'll hev to eat them words ye spoke to me at the gate yistiddy. I 'low ye done forgot the warnin' I gin ye 'bout playin' Dan Hodges fer a fool. Ye're lookin' mighty sorry ye ever tried hit." He chuckled again, as he meditated a humorous effort: "Ye know thet pore feller what ye winged yistiddy?" He shook his head reprovingly. "You-all shore hadn't orter never 'ave done no sech thing. Garry wa'n't a-bitin' on ye none. He's hurt bad, Garry is, an' he needs a nuss the worst way, Garry does. An' so I come an' got ye." He guffawed over his wit. "If ye'll behave I'll let loose o' ye a mite, an' we'll stroll along a matter of a few mile to whar Garry's waitin' awful impatient."

Suddenly, unreasoning fear surged up in Plutina, brimmed over in a torrent of pleading words. She knew the uselessness of appeal to this callous wretch. But the instinct of terror in her horrible situation mastered the girl, so that she forgot pride, and besought his mercy. She was ghastly pale, and

the dilated eyes were almost black, with a stricken look in their clouded depths. Her voice was shaking.

"Lemme go Dan—lemme go. Ye've done got even with me now fer yistiddy. Lemme go—I ax it of ye, Dan. I done ye dirt yistiddy, 'cause I was scared o' ye. An' I'm scared o' ye now, Dan. Lemme go home, an' I won't never tell nobody how ye kotched me."

She had raised her eyes beseechingly. Now, as she saw the smug mockery on her captor's face, she fell silent. The futility of any pleading was too plain. Her eyes shifted to the ground again. But the first wild fear was past, and she began to think with some clearness. At once, it occurred to her that she must guard her strength jealously. She had already wasted too much in vain physical struggling and in vainer emotional outbursts. She must save her energies henceforth both of body and of mind, that she might have wherewith to contrive escape and wherewith to accomplish it, or wherewith to fight against a lustful brute to the very death.

Hodges spoke approval.

"Ye're gittin' sense. Better save yer breath to cool yer porrich, stid o' wastin' hit a-whinin' to me. But I shore admire fer to hear ye squawk. Ye hain't quite so damned uppitty as ye was yistiddy."

"I 'low I must do what ye says," Plutina agreed, listlessly. She felt very weary, now that the reaction was upon her. At whatever cost, she must have an interval in which to recover from this weakness.

"Thet's the ticket!" Hodges exclaimed, with a jovialty meant to be winning. He went behind her, and loosened the knot he had last tied, so that her wrists, although still fast bound, had a little play. The length of the loop allowed him to move by her side with it over his arm. "You-all jest mosey acrost to thet-thar birch clump," he directed, pointing. "I got a rifle-gun yender, what I kain't noways do without."

Plutina walked obediently at his side in the direction indicated, and stood passively while he picked up the weapon. Then, in response to his command, she set off with him through the tortuous forest paths to the southward.

For the time being, Plutina's dominant emotion was a vast depression. It bore down on her like a physical burden, under which she had hardly the power to go forward with slouching steps. It was as if the end of the world were come, with the loss of everything good and clean and happy. The only reality was this foul creature to whom she was bound, from whom there was no escape, who had but to speak and she must obey, who had the authority to compel obedience. She was sick with horror of the man's nearness. She felt defilement from the avid eyes, which moved over her in wanton lingering from head to foot, and back again. But she had no resource against him. She could only endure for the present, awaiting the return of strength. She could see no glimmer of hope anywhere. Yet, she strove numbly against this enveloping despair. She told herself again and again that, somehow, relief would come before the dreaded crisis. The words were spiritless; they brought no conviction. Nevertheless, she kept repeating them mutely to herself, as she trudged drearily beside Hodges toward Stone Mountain.

"I'll git clar o' him somehow—I will, I will! Gran'pap'll kill 'im! Zeke'll come! He will!"

It was incredible that her lover could come, that he could even know of the evil, until too late to save her. Yet, the thought of his coming subtly cheered her. It persisted in defiance of all reason. And the affrighted girl clung to it with desperate tenacity, as a drowning man to the life line. She kept repeating to herself, "Zeke'll come! He will, he will!" as if the phrases were a spell for the soothing of terror. She wished that her hands were free to touch the fairy crystal in her bosom.

The outlaw, after uncouth efforts at conversation, which met with no response, relapsed into sullen

silence, and he mended the pace until the girl was hard put to it to keep up with his stride. On the first slopes of Stone Mountain, he halted, evidently at a spot where he had camped on other occasions, for presently he produced a skillet and coffee-pot and materials for a rude meal from their concealment in the bushes. But his first care was to place the prisoner on a log, where a sapling at her back served for attaching the loop of the leash. He then busied himself with making a fire and preparing the food, from time to time jeering at the helpless girl, who watched him with smouldering hate in her eyes.

"Hit's you-all orter be a-doin' these-hyar chores," he declared, with a grin. "An' they's a good time a-comin' when ye'll be plumb tickled to death to wait on yer Danny boy. A good time comin', cuss ye!"

He devoured his food ravenously, washing it down with the coffee. Finally, he brought slices of bread and bacon to Plutina, and laid them in her lap. He loosened her right hand and so permitted her to feed herself. It was her impulse to refuse the offering, but she resisted the folly, knowing the necessity of food, if she would have energy for the ordeal before her. So, she gulped down the bread and meat, and drank from the dipper full

of coffee. Then, her bonds were tightened again, and the two renewed their march.

The going was harder here, up and down the rock-strewn slopes. Fatigue lay very heavy on Plutina, after the strains of the two days. Only her hate of the man at her side bolstered up pride, so that she compelled herself to keep moving by sheer force of will. It was already dusk, when, at last, they issued from the wood and went forward over the shore of the pool at Sandy Creek Falls.

"Wall, hyar we be!" Hodges cried loudly. There was satisfaction in his voice.

That satisfaction aroused Plutina from the apathy into which she had fallen, during the last half-mile of difficult scrambling, made more toilsome by the constraint of her bound wrists. Now, puzzlement provoked interest in her surroundings. She had expected that the outlaw would bear her away to the most convenient or the most inaccessible of the various secret retreats with which rumor credited him. But here was neither cave nor shack—only the level space of sand, the mist-wreathed pool, the rushing volume of the falls, the bleak wall of the cliff which towered above them where they had halted at its base. She knew this place. There could be no cavern at hand. Her eyes searched the space of the inclosure wonder-

ingly. Then, they went to the man, whom she found regarding her bewilderment with a smirk of gratification.

"Hyar we be, right on the door-step, so to say," he bellowed. "If ye kain't see the door-step yit, ye will mighty quick, unless thet pore feller ye shot has gone an' died a-waitin' fer you-all to come an' nuss 'im. . . . Yep, he was a-watchin', all right," he added briskly. "Hyar hit comes!"

Plutina's eyes followed her captor's and, far ahove, she made out something that dangled from the slight break in the cliff. It descended slowly and jerkily, with haphazard gyrations. As its end drew closer, she perceived that it was a rudely constructed rope-ladder, with wooden rungs. She watched it fascinated, shivering with new fears.

When the flimsy means of ascent hung at its full length, Hodges bade the girl climb. Unnerved as she already was, the ordeal of such a progress to the mysterious height above seemed too terrible. She refused mutely, shaking her head, and cowering away from the outlaw as far as the thong permitted. But the man had no pity for her timorousness.

"You-all kin jest nacherly crawl up thet-thar ladder," he announced, "or we'll sling ye on the end of a rope, an' h'ist ye. Thet 'll tumble ye round an' bump ye agin the rocks quite some. But

ye're the doctor. If ye'll climb up, I'll leave yer han's loose, an' foller cluss behind ye, so ye kain't fall. Hit's shore wobbly, but hit's safe. Dan Hodges hain't aimin' to git his neck broke—ner to let the law break it fer him!" he added, in a lower tone to himself.

But Plutina caught the words. She made nothing of them at the time; afterward, she realized their significance, and thanked God for them.

In the end, the prisoner yielded to necessity and ventured to mount with reluctant slowness. She found, to her intense relief, that the strength was returning to her body. She no longer felt the pervasive lassitude. The physical improvement reacted on her mind to restore confidence in her powers. She realized that probably the only danger lay in her own faltering, and she resolved to overcome her natural dread, to bend all her energies to a safe performance of the task. Despite her hatred of the man, she found unspeakable comfort in the sight of his great hairy hands clutching the ropes on either side of her at the height of her waist. But, as she mounted, the space beneath grew fearsome to her, and she raised her eyes and held them steadily on the distance above, as she had learned to do in clambering with her lover.

Somehow, now, the thought of Zeke heartened

Plutina. Swinging dizzily in the abyss, with the arms of her jailer about her, there flowed into her soul a new courage. It was without reason, an absurdity, a folly, but, oh, what a solace to her spirit! Under the stimulus of it, she ascended more rapidly. The pinched, ugly face of Garry Hawks, glowering down at her from the ledge, did not dismay her, even though the thought flashed on her brain that now this man whom she had wounded could hurl her to destruction by a touch. She had no fear of him; only pressed upward steadily. In another moment, her head passed above the level of the ledge. She took the hand Garry Hawks held out and climbed upon the narrow support, where she shrank back against the cliff, after one glance into the gulf yawning at her feet. The level space was a scant yard in width here, and lessened on the side away from the falls, until it ceased entirely. In the other direction, it ran, broadening a very little, to where a tiny cleft showed in the precipice. Plutina guessed that this marked the entrance to a cavern. Despite the bravery of her changed mood, the eerie retreat daunted her by its desolate isolation. Then, Hodges climbed upon the ledge, and she heard his shout, coming faintly to her ears above the roar of the cascade which fell just beyond the cavern's mouth.

"Welcome, home, Honey!" he bawled, with his

detested jocularity. "They hain't nobody a-goin' to butt in on our love-makin' up hyar."

Tittering and leering, he seized the girl by the arm, and led her, unresisting, to the cranny that was the door of the cave. A glance over her shoulder showed Garry Hawks on his knee, hauling up the ladder. She knew that with its disappearance there would remain nought by which the searchers could guess whither she had vanished, or how. Once again, courage went out of her. In its place was despair.

CHAPTER XX

THE cave into which Plutina now entered was a small, uneven chamber, some three yards in width at its highest point. It extended back for a little way, but the roof sloped downward so sharply that only in the central space could the girl stand upright, and even there Hodges had to stoop. On the far side was a hole in the rocky wall. It was hardly a yard in height, but the faint glow that marked it was proof that it reached to the daylight outside. At the best, it could serve as a passage-way only to one creeping on hands and knees. So much Plutina perceived in the first curious survey of her prison. The inspection was rendered possible by the murky light of a tallow candle, fixed in its own grease to a fragment of stone near the center of the cavern.

As the outlaw released his hold on her arm, the girl sank down listlessly on a part of the wall that projected like a bench near the entrance. She leaned back against the cold stone, and her eyes closed. She felt a terrifying weakness, against which she battled with what strength she could summon. She

dared not swoon, and so leave herself wholly helpless within the power of this man. She was white and trembling, but by force of will she held herself from falling, though her muscles seemed fluid as milk, and blackness whirled before her eyes.

Nevertheless, Hodges was not minded to have a fainting woman on his hands. His prisoner's appearance alarmed him, and he hurried to a corner of the cave, whence he quickly returned with a cup half-full of whiskey. This he held to Plutina's lips. She accepted the service, for she could not lift a hand, so great was her weakness. She swallowed a part of the draught, and the strong liquor warmed and strengthened her. She was so far restored soon as to understand Hodges' closing sentence, for he had been mumbling at her.

"Ye hain't so damned skittish as ye was yistiddy," he jeered.

Plutina had no spirit to reply. She could only sit in abject lassitude, content to feel the glow of the stimulant creeping through her veins. For a time, her thoughts were stilled by the bodily torpor. She welcomed the respite, glad to rest from the horror of her plight. She heard the raucous voice of the outlaw booming in her ears, but she paid no heed. She saw Garry Hawks come into the cavern, waddling under the burden of the rope-ladder, which he carried clumsily by reason of the wound in his

arm. She observed that the outlaw said something to his minion, putting his lips close to the fellow's ear, lest he be overheard. But she felt no curiosity as to the purport of this secret utterance, nor did she take interest when, immediately afterward, she beheld the wounded man get down on all fours and crawl out of sight through the hole in the opposite side of the cave.

Little by little, the prisoner's forces came back to her. Of a sudden, she aroused with a start, as though she had been asleep, albeit without any consciousness of having slept. She felt a new alertness now through all her members, and her brain was clear. Along with this well-being came again appreciation of the dreadfulness of her case. She grew rigid under the shock of dire realization, tensing her muscles, without volition, as if to repel attack. Her eyes went fearfully to Hodges, who sprawled at ease on a heap of spruce boughs across the cavern from her. The man was puffing lazily at a corncob pipe. The rank, acrid smell of the tobacco-smoke came to her nostrils, strangely home-like in this weird prison cell, aloft within the crags. She perceived, with infinite relief, that for the moment he appeared absorbed in his thoughts, disregardful of her presence. At least, she would have opportunity to fortify her spirit against the fear that beset her. She must ape bravery, even though she

sickened with terror. Thus only could she hope to daunt the creature that threatened her. She had only moral strength with which to resist him. Physically, she would be as a child in his grasp, notwithstanding her quick, firm muscles. In a bodily contest, there could be but the single issue, her vanquishment. It would be hardly more than sport to him, the utmost of her frenzied strugglings. She saw the bloody marks of her fingers on his face, and remembered his stolid seeming of indifference to her fury. He had scorned her strength then. So, he would continue to scorn it—with reason, since it could by no means avail against him. No, she must have recourse to strength of will rather, to awe and intimidate him. She knew the folly of such means against the brutal desire of the man. But she clung to it as a meed of hope, because she had naught else to which to cling. Without a hope, even the falsest, she must have gone mad.

One thing seemed favoring for the time. The man was evidently sober. Plutina wondered at that, for Hodges was not often sober, and excess of liquor was an accustomed part in all his pleasures. His abstinence now puzzled her, but it relieved her, too, since it promised some postponement of his worst advances. Thus encouraged, she set herself to review the situation in detail, in forlorn attempt to come on a way of escape. But a half-hour of

effort left her distraught. She could devise nothing to suit her need. Only one thought remained for tragical comfort in her wretchedness: In her last extremity, she might cast herself from the cliff. Better a thousand times clean death than defilement. . . . Plutina remembered her grandfather's regret over her having spared the outlaw. Now, with her finger on the trigger, there would have been no faltering, only joy and thanksgiving.

The defenseless girl watched furtively. When, at last, Hodges stirred from his indolent sprawl, knocked the dottle from his pipe, and looked up at her, she shrank visibly. The blood rushed back to her heart in a flood, leaving her pallid, and she was trembling. Even in the feeble light from the guttering candle, Hodges could perceive her disturbance. It gratified him, and he laughed, in sinister glee over her emotion.

"I 'low ye're gittin' some tame since yistiddy," he exclaimed. He got to his feet slowly, whereat Plutina looked toward the entrance cleft, ready if the need came, to fly from him to the more merciful abyss. But Hodges moved toward the back of the cave where he brought out a stone jug from its niche, and returned to the bed of boughs. Seated again, he filled the tin cup full of spirits, and drank it down. With the pipe recharged and burning, he continued to sit in silence, regarding the girl with

an unswerving intentness that tortured her. At short intervals, he replenished the cup and quaffed it thirstily. He was rapidly compensating for his earlier abstinence. Plutina, studying him covertly, noted the beginnings of drunkenness and its various stages. There was gruesome fascination in her scrutiny; for she knew that her honor rested on the hazard of a sot's whim.

Suddenly, the girl knew that the peril was very close upon her. Hodges was staring at her from his reddened eyes with a rampant lustfulness that was unmistakable. Again, she measured the distances, to make sure that the last desperate means of escape from his embraces lay open still. She meant, in the final crisis, to spring to the crevice, before he could approach within reach of her. There, with the verge of the cliff only a step away, she would make her plea, with death in the gulf as the alternative of failure, the ultimate safeguard of honor.

There could be no doubt concerning the imminence of the danger. The usually red face of the outlaw was mottled purple, congested by the stimuli of liquor and passion. The thick underlip hung slackly, quivering from time to time in the convulsive tremors of desire that ran over him. A high light fell on the man's neck, where the open shirt left it bare. Plutina's gaze was caught by the

slight rise and fall of the flesh above the artery. The movement was made distinguishable across the cavern by the effects of light and shade. The girl found herself mechanically counting the throbs. The rapidity of them amazed her. They witnessed the fever raging in his blood—the fever that clamored for assuagement from her. The galloping pulse enthralled her with horror. It made visible the vile fires raging in him. So swift the rhythm grew that a hideous hope sprang up in the watcher—hope that an apoplexy might stretch the man dead at her feet.

Hodges reached for the jug, and poured from it into the cup, and drank. The girl perceived that, in the few seconds, his mood had changed utterly. The purple of his face was dingy with gray. He was trembling now. His eyes moved restlessly, as if fearful of something to issue from the darkness. Not once did they rest on her. She remembered the racing pulse in his throat, and looked for it. To her astonishment, it was no longer to be seen, though the light fell on the place as before. She knew then that the fever had died, and she marveled mightily. But she recognized more, for she was unharmed still. The changed mood of her enemy promised immunity, for a time at least.

Yet once again, the outlaw drank. Then, without a word to the prisoner, or so much as a look in

her direction, he got down on his hands and knees, and crawled out of sight through the hole in the wall.

For what seemed to her ages, Plutina waited for his return, dreading a new, obscene mood. But the time dragged on, and there was no sign of his coming. The candle flared and smoked, went out. The girl huddled in the dark, listening now, for her eyes could not pierce the blackness. The roar of the waterfall filled her ears. The noise dismayed her, for it must inevitably cover all lesser sounds, even those close at hand. Any evil might leap on her without warning, out of the darkness. She felt her helplessness multiplied, intolerable, thus blinded and deafened. She longed to shriek, pitting shrill clamor against the bass thunders of the cascade. She began to fear lest madness seize her if she remained longer thus supinely crouching amid the terrors of this place. Obeying a sudden impulse, she got up, and gropingly, with shuffling, cautious steps, moved across the cavern. When she reached the opposite wall, she got down on hands and knees, and crawled until her searching fingers found the emptiness of the hole through which the men had passed. Then, she drew back a little, and sat with alert ears, sure that none could issue into the cavern now without her knowledge.

The relief afforded by the action soon waned.

Terrors crowded on her again in the second period of waiting. In desperation, she determined to explore the hole itself. She tried to examine the project carefully and found nothing to stay her purpose. Joy leaped in her at the thought that a way of escape even might be ready to her hand. She believed it more likely, however, that the passage led merely to another chamber in the cliff. If such should be the case, and either or both of the men were sleeping there, she could probably ascertain the fact readily without being herself discovered, since here the sound of the falls was muffled. Forthwith, she crept slowly within the opening.

The progress was snail-like. The rough rock of the floor cut into her knees cruelly, but she disregarded the pain, and went forward. She tested each inch of the way by feeling over the stones with her hands, on either side and along the floor. The narrowness of the passage, which was hardly more than its height, rendered thorough examination easy. She found no lateral openings, nor did the space grow perceptibly larger. It suddenly occurred to her, after having advanced steadily, though very slowly, for five minutes, that she could not turn around. To return, she must back out. The idea appalled her, and she meditated retreat. Then, while she was yet undecided, the hand groping in front of

her touched on stone above the floor level. A short investigation proved that here the passage was barred. She could feel space between the edges of the tunnel and the mass of stone that closed it. Since there was no other point of egress, both men must have passed through. Afterward, the opening had been closed by rolling a heavy rock before it. She put her strength in pressure against the stone, without avail. It was too heavy for her muscles. She realized that by this simple means she was shut within her prison. It was almost with relief that she began to creep backward—to be astounded by the shortness of the way. It was scarcely a minute before she was in the chamber again. To guard against surprise in the darkness, she pushed the couch of boughs a little way along the wall, so that it projected across the mouth of the tunnel. This done, she seated herself on the branches, assured that no one could enter the cavern without giving her warning. Even should she sleep, the thrusting away of the boughs from the orifice must surely awaken her.

Nevertheless, Plutina did not expect the boon of sleep, though she longed for it with aching intensity. In spite of this temporary respite, she could see no way of escape from the outlaw's power, except by death. The vagaries of a drunken mood had saved her to-night: they could

not save her for long. And, then, even while she mourned the hopelessness of her case, oblivion fell on her, and she slept the reposeful, dreamless slumber of utter exhaustion.

A violent shaking of the bed of boughs startled the prisoner back to consciousness. For the fraction of a second, her mind was chaos. Then remembrance came, and rending fear. But there was one comfort—day had dawned: she could see. There was no one with her in the chamber. The moving branches warned that the intruder was still in the tunnel. There was time for her to gain the crevice, where she could forbid any approach, where if her command failed, she could throw herself from the cliff. She darted across the width of the room, and stood in the cleft, strained back against the rock, her eyes staring affrightedly toward the opposite wall. All her woman's terrors were crashing upon her now. She felt Death clawing at her over the brow of the ledge, fierce to drag her into the depths. One of the hands clutching at her bosom touched the fairy crystal, and she seized it despairingly, and clung to it, as if the secret spell of it might hold her back to life.

Abruptly, a broken cry of relief fluttered from her lips, for she saw the shock head of Garry Hawks thrust from the tunnel's mouth. Toward him, she felt no fear, only contempt. In the reaction, she trembled so that she could hardly stand, and for a few moments her eyes closed. Only the rock against which she leaned saved her from crumbling to the floor. The weakness passed very quickly, however, and she was again mistress of herself by the time Hawks had scrambled to his feet.

The fellow had little to say, answering surlily the questions put to him by Plutina. He plainly cherished animosity against the girl who had wounded him, which was natural enough. As plainly, he did not dare vent his spite too openly against the object of his chief's fondness. He brought with him a bag containing bread and a liberal allowance of cooked slices of bacon, and a jug of water. His information was to the effect that Hodges would not return until nightfall He left in the fashion of his coming, by the tunnel. Plutina immediately replaced the boughs, and, when she had eaten and drunk, again seated herself on the rough bed. From time to time, she went to the crevice, and stared out over the wild landscape longingly. But the height gave her a vertigo if she stepped forth upon the ledge. For that reason, she did not venture outside the crevice after a single attempt, which set her brain reeling. She remained instead well within the cleft, where she was unaffected by the height, while able to behold the vast reaches of sunlit

space before her. The area about the foot of the precipice was, however, cut off from her vision. So it came about that, though she went twice to the crevice and looked out during the intervals while the marshal, first with his men and afterward with her grandfather, was searching about the pool, she knew nothing concerning the nearness of aid. She could not see the men, and the din of the falls covered their voices.

Occasionally, the girl lapsed into a quietude that was half-stupor and half-sleep, the while she reclined on the boughs. These were blessed periods of rest for the over-strained nerves, and she strove to prolong them—always in vain. For the most part, she hurried about with febrile, aimless movements. She found herself wondering often if today were to be the last of her life. She could see no other issue. The night would bring Hodges, and the crisis of her fate. She could not hope for a second escape through a drunken vagary. There would be only the leap from the ledge to-night. As she stood in the crevice, and looked out on the smiling sylvan glory of the scene, as the soft summer breeze caressed her cheeks, and the balsamic air filled her bosom with its gently penetrant vigors, she realized as never before the miracle of life, its goodness and sweet savors. She cried out against the hideous thing that was come upon her. The

every fiber of her being flamed in revolt against the idea of death. Every atom of her clamored for life and love. And there were only shame and death for her choice. She took out the fairy crystal, and prayed to the sacred sign it bore, beholding it dimly though scalding tears. But faith flickered and went out. Her soul sickened. . . . For her, there was nothing else—just shame and death. No—only death.

Plutina would have tried escape by the rope-ladder, but she found its weight too much for her strength, so sorely over-tried by racking emotions. Even had she been able to carry the burden it would have availed nothing, for the dizziness attacked her whenever she drew near the verge. In her desperation, she even crept the length of the tunnel a second time, on the faint chance that the exit might now be less secure. She found the rock barrier immovable as before, though the rim of light showed that here was, in very truth, the way to freedom, and she pushed frantically at the obstacle until utterly exhausted.

It was when evening drew down that, at last, there sounded the noise of a writhing body within the tunnel, and, from her point of refuge close to the crevice, she saw the outlaw crawl out of the passage, and stand before her like a demon of the darkness, leering at her fatuously.

"You-all is shore makin' quite a visit," he remarked, with heavy sarcasm.

"An' it kain't he'p ye none, Dan," Plutina retorted. "I hates ye, an' yer keepin' me hyar hain't goin' to do ye no good. If ye goes fer to lay a finger on me, I'll go over the cliff. I'm worse scairt o' yer touchin' me than I be o' the rocks down thar, Dan." Her voice was colorless, but an undertone of finality ran in it.

The outlaw regarded her sharply from his inflamed eyes. It may be that her sincerity impressed him. Yet, he betrayed no feeling as he answered, carelessly:

"Hain't no call fer ye to be so damned ornery. I hain't a goin' to tech ye—yit. We'll be together quite a spell, I reckon—till I gits sick o' havin' ye round. If I wanted ye I could jump ye easy from hyar. I'm some spry, if I be big. But ye needn't be skeered, I'm tellin' ye. I hain't a-goin' to tech ye —yit."

The final monosyllable was charged with sinister import, but the man's assurance of her present safety was, somehow, convincing, and she accepted it with the emotional gratitude of one sentenced to death who receives a reprieve. She sank down on the stone bench near the crevice, and watched her jailer with unwavering attention, while he produced a candle from his pocket, and lighted it, and

had recourse again to the stone jug of whiskey, which had remained by the bed of boughs.

To-night, the fiery drams made him garrulous, and he discussed his affairs, his hopes, and plans, with a freedom that showed how complete was his expectation of retaining the girl in his power. Thus, Plutina learned of the search being made for her, which was now the active cause in changing the outlaw's purpose in the immediate disposal of his prisoner.

"I was aimin' to lay low with ye right hyar," he explained, after his fourth sup of the spirits. "But I reckon hit's a goin' to be a heap safer to skedaddle. I ain't a-wantin' no damned dawgs fer to chaw me up. So I'm goin' to mosey over Bull Head t'-morrer. You-all 'll go 'long, nice an' peaceable—er ye'll be drug." He spoke with a snarl now. "Ye'll know hit, when I once git ye cross the state line—cuss ye! Ye'll find I hain't so damned shy, arter all!"

Plutina cowered before the savage threat in the words. There was no mistaking the expression in the lustful eyes burning on her. His regard was in itself contamination. It was the prophecy of worse, of the final wickedness, to come. The afflicted girl thrilled with loathing before the satyr-like aspect of this man, foul of flesh and soul. But, along with abhorrence of the creature who held her

in his keeping so ruthlessly, there was another emotion—that recurrent wonder concerning such delay in the base gratification craved by his passion. She could not doubt the fierce longing that seethed in his veins. It was like a visible thing flaming from him; and tangible, for she felt the impact of those brutal desires thronging against the white shield of her own purity, powerless to penetrate, yet nauseating her by the unclean impact. What, then, interposed to check him? What hidden force held him back from working his will against her? She could make no surmise. Certainly, here was no physical restraint to stay him. As certainly, no moral reason would be of effect. The thing was altogether mysterious. So, she marveled mightily, and was curious to understand, even while she thanked God for the further respite. And now, too, hope began to burn again. Surely, if she were to accompany him on the trails as he had said, there would come the opportunity for escape. He could not be on guard ceaselessly. Vigilance must relax on accasion. It would not be then as here in this dreadful cavern, perched 'twixt earth and sky. .....She broke off to listen, for the outlaw, having filled his pipe and drained a deep draught of the liquor, was become loquacious again. This time, thanks to the drink, he waxed confidential, intimate even.

"I kin git away from hyar, an' no damned dawg kain't foller my tracks, nuther. Er if he does, he'll drap inter the Devil's Kittle. But I knows my way 'bout in these-hyar mountings. An' ye needn't be afeared o' losin' me, Honey. I'll hang onto ye good an' tight. When I git ye over the line, I'll have a parson, if ye want. I hain't a-keerin' one way, or t'other. But I got to have ye, willin' or not willin', parson or no parson. I'd hev ye t'-night if 'twan't fer jest one cussed thing. Hit's a'mighty hard to hev yer blood a-b'ilin', till ye're like to bust jest 'cause of a slip of a gal, what ye could smash in yer two han's—an' her so high an' mighty!" The querulous voice ceased, while he had recourse again to the stone jug.

When next he spoke, it was evident that his mood had changed. He was no longer harshly self-assertive, vainglorious, or brutally frank concerning the passion that consumed him. He was, instead, strangely reminiscent, with involuntary revelation of the weakness that preyed upon him. The girl was grateful for the change in him, but her bewilderment increased.

"I seen a feller hung once," Hodges said. His guttural, awed tones were hushed almost to a whisper. "They pulled a black cap down over 'is face, so's he couldn't see nothin' 'bout what he was up ag'inst. An' his han's was tied together behind

'is neck, with the knot up under his ear—'is left ear, I 'member hit was. I 'member partic'lar."

The speaker's gaze had been downcast; not once had he looked at Plutina. It was as if he had forgotten the girl's presence there with him, and communed aloud with his own gristly memories of the death-scene he had witnessed. His huge bulk seemed somehow shrunken—a physical shriveling in response to the craven fear in his soul. That gray, mottled purpled of his face showed again. Plutina wondered, if, indeed, this same memory had been in his thoughts the night before. But, if so, it only made the thing the more inexplicable. Why should a hanging, long-past, thus haunt him? He was no nervous weakling, to be tortured by imaginary fears. Yet, now, he displayed unmistakable signs of terror, in his voice, his eyes, his whole mien, in the shaking haste that spilled the half of the drink he poured out.

"I seen 'im hung," he repeated, abjectly. "They let the trap drap from under his feet—an' 'im all tied, an' thet-thar black cap pulled down over 'is face to blind 'im. Hit were plumb awful fer to see 'im drap. An' then the rope stopped 'im right in the air. Hit were a dreffful yank he got. They say, hit broke 'is neck, so's he didn't feel nothin' more. But I dunno. Hit looked like he felt a heap, fer he kicked an' squirmed like hell. Hit weren't

purty fer to see. I've seen a big bull-frog what I've speared kick an' squirm jest like 'im. No, hit weren't purty. I'd shore hate fer to have my neck bruk thet-thar way. Damn the law, anyhow! They hadn't orter treat no white man thet-thar way. Hit must feel awful, a-standin' up thar, with thet-thar cap down over ye, shuttin' out everythin'—ferever; an' with thet-thar noose round yer neck, an' the knot a-ticklin' yer ear—yer left ear. I 'member specially. An' a-knowin' the noose is a-goin' to tighten, an' cut off yer breath—fer always. An' a-standin' on thet-thar trap, an' a-knowin' hit's goin' to drap—a-knowin' the bottom's a-goin' to drap right out o'—everythin'! I don't never want my neck bruk no sech way's thet. Hit hain't right."

Plutina, staring wide-eyed, saw to her stupefaction that tears trickled from the eyes of the maudlin man; she heard him whimpering. Once more, he poured himself a drink. He mumbled unintelligibly for a little. Then, of a sudden, his voice rose in a last flare of energy, before he rolled on the boughs in sodden slumber.

"Damn the law in this-hyar state! Hit hain't right, nohow. Jest 'cause a feller loves a gal—to hang 'im! I hain't afeared o' nothin' else, s'fur's I knows, but I'd hate fer to have my neck bruk like his'n was. I hain't a-takin' no chancet o' thet. I'll

wait till I'm over the line. But hit's hell to crave a woman!"

Raucous snores told the girl that the man slept, that again she had passed through the ordeal in safety. And now, at last, she knew the cause of her escape thus far. The mystery that had baffled her was a mystery no longer. Out of the creature's own mouth had come the explanation. Driven on by gusty passion as he was, a yet stronger emotion triumphed over lust. Of imagination he had little, but he had seen a man hanged. His memory of that death had been her salvation, for such is the punishment meted to the violator of a woman in North Carolina. In Dan Hodges, that master emotion, lust, had met a mightier—fear. Because he was a coward, he had not ventured even the least caress, lest passion seize him and make him mad—forgetful of how that other man died so horribly. She had been spared because between him and her a scaffold loomed.

CHAPTER XXI

THE full-throated baying of a hound. Men, far in the valleys below Stone Mountain, looked up, and listened, wondering. But those on the mountain heard and understood: Dan Hodges was being run to earth.

The clew offered by the wet place on the cliff had sufficed for the three men who accompanied the stag-hound. They had marked the spot carefully in memory by its distance from a certain stunted pine growing above it and a rift in the precipice to one side. Then they had ascended a furlong to the north, where the ascent was gradual and broken. When they had made sure that they were at the proper level, they searched for an approach to the desired ledge. The dog found the scent by the tunnel, but Brant did not loose the animal. Stone's eyes caught traces of where a bowlder had been moved. A little more searching revealed the opening covered by the stone, which they rolled aside.

"But he's not there, now," Brant declared, as he restrained the eager dog. "Jack is wild to be off, and he wouldn't take a back track.

Uncle Dick, eager to make sure, would have attempted the passage, but Stone interposed.

"I'll go," he declared. "It's my right—my prisoner, you know. Anyhow, it'll be a snug-enough fit for me, and I'm smaller than you, Uncle Dick."

The old man grudgingly admitted the fact, and made way for the marshal. In five minutes, Stone was back.

"Nobody there," he announced.

"Then it's up to Jack," Brant exclaimed, and slipped the leash.

The hound shot forward in full cry. The men hurried after at top speed. Almost immediately, the dog vanished among the thickets. There came a clatter of sliding stones, as the big beast went galloping up the rise toward the crest of the mountain. The men followed as best they might, guided by the baying. Uncle Dick listened with bloodthirsty hopefulness for the crack of Zeke's rifle, which he would recognize.

The fugitive himself heard the hound's sonorous summons, and wasted breath in cursing. He cursed his potations over-night, which had led him to sleep beyond the sunrise. But for such drunken folly, he would have had the trailer hopelessly at fault. Now, at best, it would be a close race—and there was the girl to hamper and hinder. She was running at his side, obedient to the pressure of his

hands. He had replaced the cowhide thong, with her hands in front of her, and with play enough for free movement. So far, she had made no resistance to his commands. But the barking of the dog would warn her. If she should turn balky—

What the outlaw feared, came to pass. The hoarse baying sounded to Plutina's ears like sweetest music. The first note told her that friends were at hand for a rescue from the monster by her side. Her heart leaped in the joy of it. A new courage surged in her—courage to defy this creature that held her in thrall.

They were come already across the most of the plain of naked rock that is the top of the mountain. They had rushed without pause through the little grove of dwarf pines that grows near the Devil's Slide, above the Cauldron. They were come, indeed, to the very edge of the Slide itself before Plutina acted. After all, it was not the new courage, but a newer fear, that forced her. She had one swift glimpse of the valley spread a thousand feet below, the giant trees like tiniest saplings, so far away—that dear, adorable valley, where were home and peace and love. But, between her and it, the precipice fell; between her and it, the Devil's Pot boiled; between her and it was this man, who drove her with curses. She looked away from the beloved valley into the loathsome face, and she saw the fear

in his eyes—fear, and something else that terrified her. She realized suddenly that she was on the very verge of the Slide, where none might venture and live. There, just beyond, was the darkened surface of the rock where the shallow stream went slithering down into the Cauldron. An hysteria of fear gripped her, as he dragged her forward, out upon the sloping stone that dipped toward the abyss. She believed that he meant to hurl her from the height. Thus, there would be left no evidence of his crime. His passion for her was nothing now—only his passion for life.

"Quick, damn ye!" Hodges rasped. "I know the way in the dark. Ye needn't be skeered none with me."

He meant it; but the girl did not believe. She thought it a ruse to get her closer to the edge. She shrieked in despair, and sprang away from him. His clutch on the thong checked her. He jerked her back to him, hardly pausing in his stride. She struck at his face furiously, but he dragged her on toward the brink, mouthing at her with foul oaths. She fell to her knees, and hung, screaming, a dead weight. The baying of the hound sounded closer. Hodges threw a glance over his shoulder, and saw the dog charging from the grove. He would have fired, but the girl was in the way. With a final blasphemy, he dropped his rifle, and struck at her—

full in the face. She sank down limply, unconscious. Her body slid away slowly, yet with a quickening movement, toward the gulf.

Hodges gave not even a look to his victim. He heard the challenge of the hound, now fairly upon him. There was no time to shoot. He used cunning instead. A mighty jump carried him over the moist surface where the stream flowed. He alighted on the dry rock. His bare feet clutched and held on the sloping surface. . . . No instinct warned the hound. Its leap brought it down in the wet run-way. Its feet shot from under. The force of its rush finished the work. The outlaw turned just in time to see the hound disappear over the cliff.

Before he had time for exultation over this victory, before he could look to see how fared the girl whom he had struck down so ruthlessly, before he guessed the new peril, another enemy was upon him.

Zeke, too, had heard the baying of the hound. Trembling with eagerness, where he lurked behind a screen of bushes at the south of the grove, he knew that the dog was hot on the trail. He went racing toward the sound, with the bull-terrier at his heels. He had just entered among the trees, when he saw the hound careen past him. He followed, and, as he issued into the open, saw the man

and the girl struggling on the edge of the precipice. He sickened at the spectacle, but there was no faltering. With every atom of energy in speed, he darted down the slope. He saw the blow that crumpled Plutina to the rock. He saw it through a veil of red. What he did not see was the low, stealthy, yet quickening, slide of her body toward the brim of the abyss. So, all unconscious of that peril to the one he loved, he sprang to attack his enemy. He saw the hound's fate, and understood the cause of it. He, in turn, cleared the treacherous wet surface by a mighty leap. That leap brought him full on the outlaw's back. The two men went down togethe.

The crash of Hodges' head on the rock had well been enough to crack an ordinary skull. But his was strong, and the unkempt thatch of hair cushioned it, so that he got no serious hurt. A little dazed by the blow, and by the unexpectedness of the onslaught—nothing more. And he had the bravery of triumphant physical strength. In the instant of attack, he fought back viciously, with blind thrust and clutch. A long, powerful arm writhed around Zeke like a band of steel, and held the assailant immovable. Lying there on his back, the outlaw looked up into Zeke's face, and recognized it, and cursed this unexpected foe obscenely.

Zeke wasted no energy in words. He was mad

with rage against the man he hated. His one desire was to kill. He twined his fingers in the tangled hair, and beat the head upon the stone floor again and again. But the leverage of his arms was cut down too much. He could not even stun the outlaw, much less kill. He could not reach his rifle, which he had dropped when he sprang to the attack. He could not draw his revolver by reason of the encircling arms. He could only hammer his enemy's head on the rock, with a cruel lust for slaughter that availed nothing except to madden him by its futility. His strength, great though it was, was not enough against the man he fought.

Hodges proved the fact presently, for by a tremendous effort, he turned, and pinned Zeke underneath. The force of the impact under the outlaw's heavy weight laid the lad unconscious. The fingers unclenched from his adversary's hair; he lay limp. Hodges rose to his feet, with shambling haste. But, if he meant to kill, fate thwarted him. One foot was placed on the treacherous dampened rock. It slid from under him. He was thrown from his balance, and sprawled at length. He scrambled on all fours toward the other side of the run-way with desperate haste. He did not attempt to rise. A moment later, he slipped slowly over the brow of the cliff.

Seth Jones, just issuing from the grove, saw the

vanishing of the outlaw, but, at the distance, he could not distinguish the man's identity or that of the other, lying motionless on the sloping rock. For the instant, however, he gave no heed to either for sheer horror of something else he saw—the unconscious girl, moving so inexorably to her doom. He shouted in despair, as he raced toward her. But he knew he must be too late. He was powerless to stay her fall—as was the bull-terrier, which had seized her skirt and still clung, only to be dragged down with her into the void. Before he was come to the beginning of the Slide, girl and dog had traversed it—had shot out into the emptiness of space.

CHAPTER XXII

THE veteran gazed down at the sloping expanse of stone that curved to the sheer drop of the precipice. He was absolutely helpless in the face of the catastrophe he had witnessed. A man, a girl and a dog had gone to their death in this frightful place within the minute. Already, the corpses were stewing in the Devil's Pot half-a-thousand feet below, he reflected grimly. There was nothing to be done for them now, or ever. He felt a whirl of nausea within him, but fought back the weakness. He shuddered, as he thought of the man behind him, lying senseless on the edge of the Slide. Was it Hodges whom he had seen plunge into the depths, or was it—Zeke? It was with fearful apprehension that he turned at last to learn as to which remained.

A little cry of relief escaped him, for at a glance he recognized Zeke. He sprang forward, and, in a moment, had assured himself that the young man was not dead, was not even seriously wounded. He guessed that a fall on the rocks had merely stunned. As best he could with one hand, he got out his

pocket-flask, and finally managed to force a little of the liquor between the clenched teeth. Presently, it took effect. The color came back into Zeke's face, and he stirred, and groaned. Then he sat up, resting against the veteran's arm.

Before there was time for any interchange of words between the two, a shout aroused them to look toward the grove. They saw the marshal dashing down the slope. Close behind him ran Cyclone Brant. Uncle Dick lagged a little, the burden of years pressing too heavily at last. The three came swiftly and gathered about the two on the edge of the Slide. Dismay was writ large on their faces. The silence of the hound, Zeke stricken and alone with the veteran, aroused their suspicion of disaster.

"Where's Jack?" Brant demanded. His heart was in the question. The fate of the others was of less concern to him than that of the animal he loved.

Zeke answered, strongly enough, for now energy was flowing back into him.

"The hound went over," he said, regretfully. "I saw him. He slipped an' fell, an' was gone like a flash."

Brant turned away to hide his distress.

But in Zeke recollection welled. He clutched at the marshal, and drew himself to his feet, where, after an instant, he stood firmly. His eyes went

searchingly over the barren surface of the Slide. They dilated. Fright lined his face—then, horror. He stared wildly, his gaze roving over all the mountain-top, once and again—and again. When words came, they were broken, surcharged with the horrid fear that was on him.

"Whar—whar is she—Tiny?"

His look went to the four men in turn, piteously pleading. Each of the three met the look and answered it by a shake of the head. But the veteran could not endure the anguish in the lover's eyes. His own dropped. He did not shake his head. Zeke strove for courage.

"Whar is she?" he demanded, at length. His voice was more composed now, but his eyes were flaming.

The veteran answered very softly, but without any attempt at evasion.

"I saw her go, Zeke—over the cliff. Thet little dawg o' your'n had a holt on her skirt. But he hadn't the heft to keep her from goin'. The dawg did the best he knew how. But 'twa'n't no use, an' he went, too. I was too fur off to grab her. I reckon she fainted. She didn't scream, ner move none to save herself."

There was a little period of silence. These men were schooled to the concealment of deepest emotions. There was no frantic outburst from the

bereaved lover, from the afflicted grandfather. There was not even comment or further questioning. Of what avail? The thing was done. The girl was lost forever, dead. But the other men looked away, lest they see the agony in Zeke's face.

Abruptly, the young man started walking down the slope. He wore shoes, and they slipped a little on the smooth stone. Straight down toward the brink he strode. The curve of the dome made every step more perilous. It was a natural, an irresistible impulse to look on the precise place where the loved one had perished, but it appeared as if he walked to his death. Indeed, his danger was grave, for he had forgotten the shoes he wore. . . . Or, perhaps, he did not care! Uncle Dick uttered an oath, and leaped in pursuit. It was only a matter of seconds to overtake the young man, seize him, turn him about and march him back with fierce expostulations that were a welcome vent to emotion.

Zeke obeyed readily, aware of his momentary folly. Then, as he rejoined the group, hate flared again. Memory of the fight was confused by the blow on his head. He questioned Seth Jones harshly, with a single word:

"Hodges?"

The veteran permitted himself a faint smile. The

cruelty of the soldier, accustomed to violent deaths, was in it. There was, too, a curious smugness, a secret complacency.

"I 'low yer wits are some shook up yit, bein' as how ye disremember," he remarked easily. "Ye trun Hodges over the cliff, Zeke, jest as ye went down. Hit were nip an' tuck atween ye, an' ye bested 'im." The kindly veteran believed the lie would be a life-long source of satisfaction to the lad, who had been so fearfully despoiled. Now, his belief was justified by the fierce pleasure that showed for a moment in Zeke's pain-drawn face.

"I kain't seem to remember," he said, perplexedly. "But I'm shore glad I killed him."

Then, again, silence fell. There could be no triumph really over the death of Hodges, because it had involved the destruction of Plutina as well. The five men stood about awkwardly. The solemnity of death lay like a pall over them. In the stress of suffering, Zeke had moved on from youth to the full stature of manhood. Uncle Dick had added a score of years to his apparent age. Brant grieved much, if less seriously. Only the veteran and the marshal had escaped personal loss, though they, too, mourned deeply. None ventured to suggest leaving the doomed spot. It seemed as if a sinister spell held them there, vaguely expectant, though wistful to flee.

Rather, perhaps, it was their sadness that made seem sinister a spell actually benignant. For, of a sudden, while they still stood mute, Brant raised a hand to command attention, and pointed toward the verge of the precipice.

"Hark!" he commanded.

They listened intently. Then, all heard a faint, tremulous, whimpering note, long drawn-out, querulously appealing. Zeke started and stared in the direction of the sound with an incredulous frown. Brant shook his head sorrowfully: it was not the voice of Jack. The others were merely bewildered by this unexpected development.

The whining continued, grew louder. Came a plaintive yelp. Out of the abyss was thrust a clinging paw, another. The squat face of the bull-terrier peered at them from over the top of the cliff. Next instant, the dog had scrambled safely on the Slide. It raced to Zeke with shrill cries of delight, leaped high to its master's breast, where it was caught and held closely. The slavering tongue lavished caresses. Zeke felt a warm glow of comfort in the creature's return. Yet, it did but render more frightful the loss of that being so infinitely more precious. He hardly heard Uncle Dick speaking.

"Hit's dum curi's," the old man said, lowering

on Seth Jones. "I thought as how ye said the pup was a-hangin' on to Tiny's dress."

"It was so," the veteran answered. "I 'low the dawg must 'a' let loose when hit got in the air."

"Hit's dum curi's," Uncle Dick repeated, and turned to regard the bull-terrier with bent brows.

Zeke himself put a term to the mystification that had gripped him as well as the others. He raised a hand to the dog's throat, to restrain the too eager demonstrations of affection. At the collar he felt something unaccustomed. He looked, idly enough, and saw that a leathern thong had been tied firmly in the ring. To the thong was attached a little leather bag. The things were strange to him, yet they moved him profoundly. He found himself trembling—why, he knew not.

He fumbled at the draw-strings of the pouch, loosened them. He thrust a finger within the opening, and touched something smooth and hard. It seemed to him that he already knew what this thing must be. He turned the bag upside down over his hand. In his palm lay a small coffee-colored piece of stone. It bore in darker shade the clear tracery of a cross. Zeke, looking down, saw the sacred symbol subtly effulgent, a holy promise of safety for her whom he loved. He lifted a radiant face to the others, who had crowded about with marveling exclamations.

"Hit's the fairy cross I give Tiny," Zeke cried. His voice was joyous now, though throbbing with anxiety. "She hain't dead. She's kotched somehow thar on the rocks. She kain't climb up. So, she sent the cross by Chubbie, to show she was alive. I'll go down fer her."

The listening group readily understood the wonder that had befallen. Whatever her present peril, whatever her injuries, Plutina still lived. The blessed fact stirred them to joy and to orderly action.

"Ye kain't he'p Tiny none by fallin' into the Kittle yerself," Uncle Dick declared, with the voice of authority. "Jest hold yer hosses, an' we'll he'p ye git 'er up safe an' sound. They's grape-vines 'nough in the grove. I suspicion she hain't so fer down. Mebby we could hear 'er if the wind wa'n't blowin' to the no'th."

They dared not take time for descent into the valley after rope. Moreover, Uncle Dick was confident that his knots would hold securely the weight of a single person. With all speed, strands of vine were brought and spliced most carefully. In a surprisingly brief time, there were some seventy-five feet in readiness. More would be added, if this length should not suffice. When the rope was completed, an end was securely fastened about Zeke's body with knots that would neither tighten nor slip.

The young man had removed shoes and stockings, and now walked boldly down the sloping surface toward the brink. Behind him went Uncle Dick, who was to advance as far as his foothold should be secure. On the level above the Slide, the three other men held the rope, ready to pay it out, or to haul it in. Uncle Dick's duty was to save it, so far as might be, from being frayed on the rocks. It was to be let out to its full length, or until the lightened weight showed that Zeke had found support. It was to be pulled in, in the latter case, after three tugs on it by him. Zeke went boldly, it is true, but now, since he had appreciated Uncle Dick's warning, he went with painstaking carefulness as well. He realized that on his care might now depend the life of the girl he loved. So, he moved downward with increasing slowness, as the curve of the rock grew more pronounced. At each step, he made sure that his feet still clung. Then, when still two yards from the edge, he found the footing too precarious for further walking, even with the rope. A glance over his shoulder showed that Uncle Dick had halted a rod above. He looked closely and saw that the brim of the cliff was smooth a little to the right. To save the rope as much as possible, he moved in this direction, Uncle Dick above making the like change. Then, he seated himself on the

rock and, while the men above paid out the vine, he went gently sliding downward toward the abyss.

Presently, his feet reached the brow of the cliff, passed beyond it, hung in space. The men watching from above, let the rope slide still more slowly. Now his middle was at the brink. He held to the rope with his right hand. With his left he fended himself from the cliff. He looked down. For an instant, accustomed though he was to the high places among the mountain crags, his senses reeled before the impression of unsubstantial vastness. Out beyond him was nothingness for what seemed endless distance. Straight below was the sheer wall of the precipice, with hardly a rift for five hundred feet. There a ledge showed dimly. Then, again, a half-thousand feet of vertical rocks to the valley.

But the vertigo passed in that single instant. His vision cleared. And he saw her. He heard her, too, in the same moment. Here, the cliff was not quite perpendicular. She had slid, rather than fallen, to a resting place. She was not seriously injured. It was hardly a score of feet from the top of the cliff to the tiny shelf of rock on which she lay. This was less than a yard in width. A bit of pine shrub jutted from it courageously, held by its roots burrowing in secret fissures of the rock. A log, rolled down by some amusement-seeker on the crest, had lodged on the outer edge of the shelf. The miniature pine held one end of it; the other was wedged in a crack of the precipice. The log lay like a paling to the narrow shelf. Within that meager shelter, Plutina crouched. Beyond her the ledge narrowed, and ascended to where the cliff was broken. Thus the dog had mounted.

The girl's face was uplifted, pallid, with burning eyes fast on the lover who descended to her. Her expression showed rapture, but no surprise that this rescuer should be her beloved. The fairy crystal was competent to work any wonder. Zeke, spinning slowly with the twisting vine, thus swinging in the void between heaven and earth, felt, nevertheless, the thrill of passionate adoration. She was even more beautiful than he remembered her.

The shelf, though narrowing, ran toward him. Soon, his feet touched it. At the relief from his weight, the rope was no longer paid out, though held taut. With its aid he traversed the ledge, and reached the shelf where the girl knelt. He knelt beside her, and, without a word, their lips met and clung. There, amid the perils of the precipice, they were in heaven.

For that matter, little speech passed between them afterward. There needed none. Zeke adjusted the rope about her, kissed her, and gave the signal to haul away.

With his heart in his eyes, he watched the sway-

ing form rise, and was inexpressibly relieved when he saw her clear the brim safely. There was a short interval. Then the rope came dangling down, and drew him back to safety. Again the lovers were in each other's arms. The terror and the agony were forgotten. The bliss remained.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MARSHAL Stone and Brant were to return together to North Wilkesboro' where the latter would take the train for home. Uncle Dick had offered them horses for the ride. The two men, somewhat in advance of the remainder of the party after the descent of Stone Mountain, had come near the Higgins' cabin, when the marshal spoke with a display of embarrassment:

"I've got to go a little out of our way. It's a chore I oughtn't ever to have put off for a minute, but I plumb forgot it."

"What is it?" Brant asked indifferently.

But his interest was aroused as the marshal hesitated before answering, and exhibited an increasing confusion.

"I'm right ashamed to tell of it," Stone said, finally. "There's no excuse for such carelessness. Plutina got into all this mess because she was afraid something dreadful might happen, and it might have—on account of my forgetfulness."

"What's it all about?" Brant demanded, now distinctly curious.

"It's bear-traps!" was the morose answer.

"Bear-traps?"

The marshal nodded.

"Those infernal traps Hodges set along Thunder Branch—that made Plutina turn informer. . . . Well, I just naturally forgot all about 'em."

Brant uttered an ejaculation of dismay.

"You mean, they're still there, and set?"

Stone nodded.

"Just that. I took Hodges and York down another way. "I've never thought of the traps since, till to-day."

"Risky, of course," Brant admitted. "But nobody got caught, or they'd have been missed," he added comfortingly. "Nobody in the neighborhood's disappeared, has there?"

"Not that I've heard of," Stone replied. "But it's luck, not my deserts, if no harm's been done."

"I'll go along with you," Brant offered. "We'll have that trouble off your mind in a jiffy."

So, the two men turned, and took the trail past the Higgins' clearing and on until they came to Thunder Branch, where Plutina had made her discovery. They followed the course of the stream upward, the marshal in the lead. As he came to the bend, where the rocky cliffs began, Stone turned and called over his shoulder:

"They're just beyond." Then, he went forward,

with quick, nervous strides, and disappeared beyond the bend. A moment later, a great cry brought Brant running.

It was, in truth, a ghastly scene that showed there, lighted brilliantly by the noontide sun. In the midst of the little space of dry ground bordering the stream, where the lush grass grew thick and high, the body of a man was lying. It was contorted grotesquely, sprawling at length on its face, in absolute stillness—the stillness of death. Brant, himself horrified, looked pityingly at the white, stricken face of the marshal, and turned away, helplessly. He could find no words to lessen the hideousness of this discovery for the man through whose fault the tragedy had come.

Then, presently, as Stone seemed paralyzed by the disaster, Brant went closer to examine the gruesome thing.

The victim had been caught by both traps. Evidently, he had stepped fairly into the first. Then, as the great jaws snapped shut on his leg, he had lurched forward and fallen. His arms were outspread wide. But his head was within the second trap. The jaws of it had clamped on the neck. The steel fangs were sunk deep into the flesh. Blood from the wounds was caked black on the skin.

"He didn't suffer any to speak of," Brant remarked, at last. He observed, with some surprise,

that his voice was very thin. He was not a squeamish man, and he had seen many evil sights. But this—

With repugnance, he set himself to the task of releasing the trap that held the dead man's head. He had the delicacy not to call on his distressed companion for aid. The task was very difficult, and very gruesome, for it required harsh handling of the head, which was in the way. Finally, however, the thing was accomplished. The savage jaws were freed from the flesh they had mangled, and were locked open. Then, Brant turned the body over, and gazed curiously, with strong repulsion, into the ugly, distorted dead face.

"Providence picked out somebody who could be spared," he mused grimly.

There came another cry from Stone. In it were wonder, incredulity, relief.

Brant regarded the marshal in amazement. The man was transformed. The motionless figure of desolation was become one of wild, quivering excitement. The face was suffused with blood, the eyes shining fiercely.

"What the devil!" Brant demanded, aghast.

Stone looked toward his questioner gravely, and nodded with great emphasis. His voice was low, tense with emotion.

"It is the devil!" he answered solemnly. He paused, clearing his throat, and stared again at the dead man. Then, his eyes went back to Brant, as he added:

"It's Hodges."

There was a little silence. Brant could not understand, could not believe this startling assertion flung in his face.

"But Hodges was thrown over the precipice," he said, at last.

The marshal shook his head. There was defiance now in his aspect—defiance, and a mighty joy.

"It doesn't make any difference about that," he announced. "This is Hodges!"

Then, his exultation burst in words:

"Hodges caught in his own traps! His neck broken, as it should have been broken by the rope for the murders he's done! It was my carelessness did it, yes. But I don't care now, so long as it's Hodges who's got caught. Hodges set those traps, and—there he is! . . . I read about something like that once in a story. They called it 'poetic justice.'"

"He don't look like a poem," Brant remarked. He turned from the gory corpse with a shudder of disgust.

"Thank God, it was Hodges!" the marshal said,

reverently. "Anybody else would have haunted me for life. But Hodges! Why, I'm glad!"

* * *

The affair was easily explicable in the light of what Plutina had to tell. Hodges, undoubtedy, had knowedge of some secret, hazardous path down the face of the precipice past the Devil's Cauldron, and on to the valley. He had meant to flee by it with Plutina, thus to escape the hound. By it, he had fled alone. Perhaps, he had had a hiding-place for money somewhere about the raided still. Or, perhaps, he had merely chosen this route along Thunder Branch on his way to an asylum beyond Bull Head Mountain. What was certain was that he had blundered into his own pitiless snares, Naturally, he would have had no suspicion that the traps remained. In his mad haste, he had rushed heedlessly upon destruction. The remorseless engines of his own devising had taken full toll of him. By his own act, he paid with his life the penalty for crime. There was propriety in the marshal's reference to poetic justice.

A certain vindictiveness showed in Plutina's comment concerning the death of the man at whose hands she had so suffered.

"His bein' so afeared o' thet-thar thing kep' 'im from hurtin' me," she said, reflectively. "He was

shorely sot ag'inst havin' 'is neck bruk, an', arter all, thet's jest what he got." She smiled, contentedly. For Plutina was a primitive woman, strong in her love, and strong in her hate.

* * *

It was a day of early autumn. The timber rights had been secured to the satisfaction of Sutton. The tree-nail factory was being built. Zeke was become a man of importance in the region.

The lover's wedding-day was less than a month distant. To-day, Plutina had been for a visit to the Widow Higgins, and now Zeke was walking home with her. They paused at the place where had been their meeting on the morning of the lad's first adventuring into the world. Memories flooded them, as they looked across the valley to the bleak cliffs of Stone Mountain, which rose in aged, rugged grandeur, softened in this hour by the veils of haze, warmed with the lambent hues of sunset.

In answer to Plutina, Zeke shook his head perplexedly.

"I kain't quite stomach thet-thar yarn o' Seth Jones's," he said. "As I remember, Dan Hodges threw me—hard!" He grinned wryly at the recollection. "I don't see how I could have thrown him off the Slide."

"But of course you did!" Plutina asserted, with

great spirit. "Pooh! Ye could lick Dan Hodges any day in the week. An' Seth saw ye—that settles hit!"

'I suppose so," Zeke conceded. "But Dan Hodges was a powerful fighter. After all, I didn't do anything much for ye, Tiny" he added, with regret in his voice.

The girl was all indignation.

"Why, Zeke!" she cried. "The idea! Ye did hit all. Ye banged the love o' ye into thet-thar dawg, what hung on to me an' brung up the fairy cross fer a message." Chubbie, as if understanding, leaped to lick her hand. "An' ye give me the cross, Zeke. Mebby, thet's what saved me, all the time—thar on the precipice, an'—an' back thar—in the cave—with him. An' then ye threw Dan Hodges right offen the mounting. Seth Jones seen ye do hit!"

It seemed to Zeke that he must perforce accept the heroism thrust upon him, though a doubt still lingered. Still, his memory of the fight was confused. Perhaps, after all, he had—.

Zeke broke off, and drew the girl close. Their lips met gently, tenderly, with the clinging of passion. What mattered the history of evil days? They were past. Before them lay the future, radiant with rosy promise. In this blessed present, they were together. Love thrilled exquisitely on their

lips; more exquisitely in their souls. That love was, and it would remain, a noble and precious thing, great and very beautiful, as mighty and firm as the mountain looming yonder in immutable serenity and strength, as loyal, as enduring. . . . They walked on together, infinitely content.

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